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**Warning**

My stories are graphic. They are gritty, dirty, raw. The shocking moments that will linger for the rest of your life, making you question what you think you know about human nature. We’ll dig in deep on every page, and some days, you won’t make it back out at all. You’ll wallow in my world, then question why you have to return to reality. I’ll challenge your preconceived notions of a modern author. By the end of the ride, you’ll either love me or hate me for it. If you believe you can stand the heat, I promise to deliver. But please don’t expect a quick fix. This is a long book, in a long series. If you aren’t ready for the ride, you don’t have to buy a ticket.

All that being said, please don’t let your child read any of my books. ***Mature audiences only.***

**Notice**

This series was first published in 2010-2014. It contained numerous errors. After years of myself and others ripping it apart, multiple editors, renumbering, and updated copies that still missed too much, the series has finally been rereleased in its full, polished glory. I apologize for all those first copies. Please, forgive me? I took your awesome suggestions, and I studied to learn what I was doing wrong, so I wouldn’t keep repeating the same mistakes. That never would have happened without all your supportive and sometimes harsh words. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

-Angela White

## Copyright

**The Survivors**

A Novel

by

**Angela White**

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Life After War Book 1

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Part One:

**The Survivors**

December

# Chapter One

**Our Kind**

**A close up of a flower

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The Northern US

**Samantha**

**1**

**“W**here are you taking us?” Samantha’s vivid blue eyes encouraged the grim soldier to answer. He hadn’t responded to any of the other terrified civilians crammed into the government chopper.

“We’ve been diverted to NORAD. The Essex Compound is being evacuated.” The soldier frowned at her; the rifle in his hands came up. “I’ll toss you out.”

Samantha paled. “It was just a question.”

“Your file indicates otherwise.”

Samantha shrank back into the seat as she understood. *He knows what I am!* “I can’t do anything with people.”

The rifle didn’t lower. “Your kind evolves. Stop talking now.”

Samantha had no idea what he meant by that, but his threat had been clear.

The big bird lurched. Its loud blades struggled to cut through the windy Wyoming haze.

Samantha stifled her scream, but not a low groan when it happened again.

The other Seattle civilians aboard the struggling chopper echoed her noise of near panic. They’d been relocated from their jobs at the Environmental Protection Agency by soldiers carrying clipboards and guns. After witnessing a coworker shot when he ran, none of them had rocked the boat despite being abducted by their own government.

Samantha brushed a quick glance over the other well-dressed, lucky few onboard. She recognized the same dawning terror in their expressions, but she could have been alone. She didn’t have a connection to them. *I’m different.*

Samantha fingered the badge around her neck, almost wishing she didn’t have it. If her severe weather alarm hadn’t worked, the former president turned terrorist traitor–Robbie Milton–would have been killed by a tornado in Nebraska. *If he’d died four years ago, none of this would be happening. Does that make it my fault?*

The chopper lurched again, bringing her back from the past. She stifled another sound of misery as a city rolled by. *That* *can’t be my country down there tearing itself apart.* Shootings, fires, assaults, murders. And bodies were everywhere–in cars, on streets, even on playgrounds! *Where are the police? The ambulances? Why aren’t those fires being put out?*

She gaped as an unending line of destruction rushed over the city below them.Power lines lit up, sparking; gas lines exploded. Homes and cars disappeared beneath the advancing gray avalanche of death that was nearing the military transport chopper. *We’re out of range, aren’t we?* “Go higher!”

Even as Samantha finished the shout, the blades above them slowed. Her ears registered the sudden, deafening silence, and then they plummeted toward the earth in a sickening blur of pain and screams.

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

Samantha groaned. Her hurting body checked in as ready to hide but otherwise uninjured. The lack of noise, not even a whimper now, told her the rest of her traveling companions hadn’t been as lucky. Sam moaned again, dazed. *I hope someone called 911.*

“Told ya it’s a woman!”

The confident voice released her tears. *Help’s here!* *In a few minutes, I’ll be bundled onto a stretcher and be on my way to the emerg–*

“I’ll hold her while you go first this time, but pull her away from the glass.”

Hands clamped around her slender ankles like iron bands.

Samantha began to scream.

It perfectly matched the sounds of the dying country around her.

**Kenn**

The Southern US

**“D**amn!” Kenn ducked as gunshots rang out, pushing the muddy hardback as fast as it would go over the rocky terrain. Fort Defiance was under siege. Furious citizens were trying to get through the ten-foot electrified fence surrounding the seventeen-mile compound. It sounded like a giant bug zapper as poles, cars, furniture, and even people, were used to try to break the hot perimeter. The fence was holding, but it wasn’t keeping the bullets out.

The popping grew steadier, rhythmic. *Someone out there is firing an assault rifle.* Kenn pulled his Marine cover on tighter; his grip on the wheel tightened. *I have to save Charlie!*

Choppers swarmed over the base, trying to evacuate Marines and draftees; violent wind made landing difficult. In the past, the weather was the worst challenge the pilots had to handle here. Now, it was the least of their worries. Arriving and leaving birds were being blown out of the smoky sky before they could reach safety; twisted metal debris showered the screaming mob lining the fences. Soldiers shouted orders, rioters screamed, guns fired and gust after violent gust of stomach-churning wind pushed against the truck, slowing it. The sky above the base roiled in thick clouds that dropped black flakes in heavy layers. It was mayhem.

*Hang on, boy! I’m coming for you!* Kenn flew by bodies, not looking at the few fathers and sons who had refused the draft. Some of the men on base for the annual competition had lived nearby, but the government hadn’t let them go to their families. Most had submitted to orders, but a few had tried to resist.

There were also suicides. The news was informing everyone of bomb hits in other places. Some people hadn’t been able to go on without their loved ones. Only Kenn’s rank had allowed him to keep moving freely, but that would change once the rest of the lower ranked men were loaded onto the choppers. *When I get Charlie from the officer dorm, we’ll have to evade capture.*

The barracks came into full view through the thicket of trees. Dozens of portable dorms had been set up for the visiting competitors. He and Charlie were off today, so he should have been there, studying. *He has to be there! I can’t lose him!*

Kenn looked up. The huge, close shadow of the chopper wasn’t what drew his attention, but the silence of its engines. He stared in shock as the big bird spiraled toward him.

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

*Charlie! No!*

Orange flames and black smoke billowed upward.

The screams from people outside the fences grew louder, hungrier.

Kenn had frozen in grief and pain. If the boy had been in there, he was dead. *I just lost my only hold over his mother. Now, she’ll run from me.*

**Angela**

Mid US

**“D**id hesay Fort Defiance...?” Angela dropped the stained scrubs she’d just changed out of; she gripped the chair. Oblivious to the gunshots and screams outside, and to the pains tearing through her rounded belly, she stared at the CNN report on the plasma TV. The reporter was informing everyone of an impact over twelve hundred miles from her Cincinnati home.

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

“Charlie?” Angela slid to her knees on the plush carpet of the two-bedroom apartment; the agony in her chest was worse than the bands of pressure clamping around her stomach, pushing down.

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

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

“It can’t be!” The cell phone slid from Angela’s hand. Liquid suddenly oozed down her thighs and swollen legs as Christmas lights flashed mockingly in place of emergency blinkers.

“I would know!” She doubled over. “Show me my son!”

Angela tried to draw on a power she had locked away over a decade ago.

The door in her mind rattled... She was weak; the magic remained shut.

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

*“Please hold and the next available operator will assist you. 911 estimated wait time is two hours, fourteen minutes. The system is currently experiencing heavy call volume. If this is not an emergency, please hang up and try your call again later. Service outages can be expected in some areas. Please continue to hold…”*

**Marc**

The Eastern US

“*Standby for an important message...*”

Sergeant Marc Brady didn’t reveal his frustration as the radio broadcast restarted for the thirty-fifth time; he wished the driver of the Greyhound bus would shut it off.

*This is an alert from the emergency broadcast system…* “My fellow Americans, this is your President, Carter Heins. I have grave news. Let me start by asking you to care for each other in this time of crisis. We’ll get through it together.”

Marc stiffened as the hair on the back of his neck rose. The sense of danger coming his way was unmistakable. He sent his military mind out to search for trouble. His grid came back empty, but he knew that first instinct wasn’t wrong.

“Two hours ago, a terrorist was able to gain access to our nuclear arsenal by introducing a virus that shut down security. The terrorist immediately initiated launches; the missiles did not respond to our abort codes. Ten minutes ago, these stolen weapons began reaching their targets.”

Marc tried to ignore his fury and fear of what was happening. He couldn’t do anything about the coming war except survive it. He’d never thought it would happen here in America.

“Despite our frantic messages, other countries have retaliated, believing we’ve declared war. We predict the United States will take five nuclear hits. Direct targets are Washington, Houston, Lansing, New York City, and Los Angeles. Leave these areas immediately.”

Marc scanned the traffic jam around the bus. They weren’t near one of those places, but they’d still been stuck for hours. Few people would get away from the ground zeroes in time.

“I have declared Martial Law nationwide. Curfew is an hour before sunset. Looters will be dealt with harshly. Our southern border has been closed. All air traffic has been grounded; prices are frozen across the country. And finally, under the authority given to me by this declaration of a nationwide emergency situation, I have activated our Selective Services program. All males, ages 14-50, must surrender to the convoys of trucks on their way from bases across the country. Those who resist the draft, flee, or follow the trucks with harmful intentions will be considered treasonous and handled accordingly. Everyone else, stay in your homes, do what the soldiers tell you, and pray for your fellow–”

*Connection has been lost. We will now return to scheduled programming…*

“All males will surrender to the draft! If you resist or run, you will be shot!” The faint bullhorn woke those who’d been dozing in the uncomfortable seats of the Greyhound.

A fresh ripple of tension went through Marc. He stayed sitting as other people stood, muttering.

A dozen jeeps and trucks of armed soldiers rolled up to a cargo van idling a few vehicles behind them. They were followed by an unending line of transport trucks already half-filled with terrified male citizens. The soldiers immediately started dragging people out of the van.

“Hey! He’s too young!”

“They just hit an old guy!”

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

*We’re trapped...* “Everybody out!” Marc used his military voice to be heard over the din of growing panic. “Make room!”

The other people stuffed into the cold bus obeyed; they panicked, shoving and yelling.

Marc’s survival instinct kicked in. He stepped onto the vinyl seat and lowered the window. He dove out as a volley of gunshots and screams exploded from the surrounded van.

People poured from vehicles all around the bus, fleeing toward the shadowy buildings of Wytheville, Virginia.

The soldiers followed, firing M16s at citizens who refused to surrender. Few of them bothered with the bullhorns or their aim. Specifically selected for draft collection duty, these men didn’t react to begging, excuses, or bribes.

Marc rolled through the slush, getting under the bus. He stayed there as chaos got closer, arms and ankles locked around the greyhound’s icy frame. The war had cancelled his leave to attend his mother’s funeral and collect Dog, but he was still going. These enforcers would shoot him for desertion. Marc stayed locked around the bus frame as the citizens he was sworn to protect were gunned down.

The air shifted, thickened... Marc buried his head against his arm as the sky lit up and the sun fell on all of them.

**2**

“Help!”

“My God!”

“Ahhh!”

Marc stared at the people stumbling by the bus. Soldiers and civilians alike, faces bloody, stumbling blindly.

“Help!”

“No!”

The screams were horrible, and there were other noises under that, ones that made Marc want to vomit, but the gunfire was the clearest to his trained mind. He eased away from the walking corpses who were firing out of reflex, mowing down others like themselves.

Marc scanned for even one other survivor.

*Danger!*

He swiveled.

“Uuhh!” Marc threw himself away from the outstretched fingers of a Private tightly gripping a pistol in his other hand. He tripped over a bloody pile, landing hard on his ass.

“Do you know what happened?” The soldier’s sockets dripped blood. It ran over his cheeks in small torrents. His eyes were dead orbs that reflected nothing back.

Marc was almost overcome with his first ever case of panic. *This isn’t a foreign land. It’s America!*

“I can hear you breathing, you know,” the Army man stated almost casually. Scarlet drops rolled in slow motion, sliding down his cheeks to hit the dirt.

Marc blinked. “W-war… A bomb.”

“But where? North or south?”

Marc watched a muscle in the blind man’s jaw twitch while he waited for the answer. “South.”

“I thought so.” The soldier’s voice was emotionless now. He lifted the gun to his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Blood sprayed across Marc’s face.

He took off running, moving away from the houses and neighborhoods that were suffering the same fate. *This can’t be happening here! I’m in America!*

Adrian

The Western US

“Is it true? Former President Milton was your father?!”

Adrian opened his mouth to confirm the lethal secret. He snapped it shut as a neighborhood siren began to wail.

“This is Cynthia Quest, coming to you live from Southern Texas, where a nuclear explosion has devastated another American city...” The radio crackled under the reporter’s shocked voice, drawing attention from the Greenpeace members gathered in the finished basement. “This has been unlike anything our generation has ever experienced. All around the country, we’re watching in horror as each of these bombs hit and…it’s so ugly! Huge fireballs create gaping craters around the point of impact, blasting all those buildings, cars, and people into the sky. As it rises, it forms an enormous toxic mushroom cloud that immediately starts spreading with the wind.”

Rapid gunshots overwhelmed the reporter for a few seconds. Adrian wasn’t sure if it had come from the street outside this house or from the broadcast.

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

The station faded into a national anthem as the local tornado siren reached a peak. The earsplitting noise overwhelmed the other horrible sounds going on outside the small San Bernardino home. Adrian’s heart bled for people he didn’t know. The powerful secret he’d held for so long seemed tiny in comparison. But it was the reason the world was ending.

The radio on the basement steps went quiet. The siren outside stopped, leaving a thick silence.

Adrian stepped under the protective planks next to his Christmas tree as the dozen angry men pushed closer.

“Your family caused this, you bastard!”

Adrian concentrated, letting out a thick sleep charm.

Half of the men dropped; the rest kept coming.

“You traitor!”

“You spied on us at every meeting!”

“I came here today to warn you!” Adrian was glad most of those who’d come for this secret meeting had left at the first report of a bomb hitting Washington, but even this dozen was too many to fight unarmed if things got ugly. *Good thing I’m packing. How did they find out?*

“Who are you?!”

“Tell us the truth!”

Adrian used the last of his energy to charm them again. Magic hit the group.

One more man fell, knocked out.

*I’m rusty*. Adrian retreated.

“Make him tell us!”

The furious men advanced. The plastic tree and presents went flying when Adrian tried to use them as a shield. He had no other gifts, and no one knew where he was.

“We’ll beat it out of you!”

“Did you know the war was coming?!”

“Did you help him do it?”

Again, Adrian started to answer, but he was cut off by a vicious rumbling. Dust from the stairs fell over everything as danger pounded toward them through the rock and stone.

Adrian had been in enough hot landing zones to recognize the threat. He threw himself to the tiled floor, putting a hand on the gat in his pocket.

Some of the men followed his lead. Others lunged his way, thinking he was trying to escape.

“Get him!”

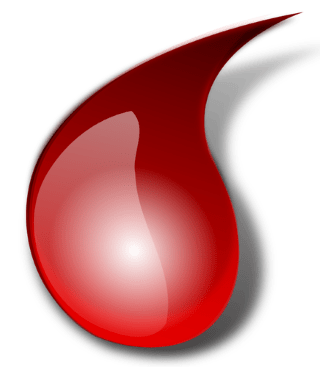
Adrian ducked their swipes, squeezing his lean body under the base of the steps. “Incoming! Get down!”

The walls directly above them disappeared, blown away like brittle leaves in the fall...

The small, neat house crumbled, burying them alive.

# Chapter Two

**Samantha**

****

Nine days after war

**09AW**

**1**

“**I**t might storm soon.” Samantha braced for a bad reaction to her warning.

“Tell me something I don’t know. It’s rained every day since you geniuses blew us up!” Melvin glowered from his seat.

Samantha ducked her head, hiding her hatred. Instead of arguing, she poked at their reluctant fire with her once expensive shoe, hating the cold, creepy darkness of the highway overpass around them. The clinking echo of the heavy chain on her ankle made her quit before Melvin could yell about it.

Samantha had never hated anyone as much as she did the two drunken brothers sprawled in lawn chairs behind her. They were warm in their long johns under paint stained overalls while she shivered in the same torn, reeking clothes she’d been wearing when the chopper went down.

Samantha wanted to be out of the icy Wyoming wind and in their rusty van where she could search for something to use as a weapon. The two males liked to wait until she was nearing frostbite before climbing in behind her to take what they wanted. It didn’t stop her from fighting, but it did slow her down.

The notion of sex while bodies rotted in cars around them made her stomach lurch. It was supposed to be Henry’s night. He was the younger of the Cruz Painting Company brothers, but Melvin was making shot after shot of Wild Turkey disappear. When he got like this, Samantha and Henry gave in to keep him from getting bent out of shape. Melvin was mean when he was sober. He was a violent drunk.

*Instant dick.* Samantha scanned vague shapes of farms at the other end of the overpass. *Just add alcohol.*

The brothers believed she’d been a politician. Her badge had been lost in the crash. She’d told them she was a secretary, but they’d known better. Sam wished she had another gift. Predicting the weather wasn’t going to save her.

The wind blew harder, bringing the sounds of dogs yapping in hunger, thin, distant screams, and loud bangs she couldn’t identify. Their tiny fire was the only speck of light in the darkness. Samantha tried not to think about the horrors she couldn’t see. The two behind her were enough.

“Where we gonna go, Mel? It’s all trashed.”

Melvin took a swig from the dirty bottle, then dug at the filthy crotch under his large stomach. “Nah, man. Not south. We’ll stock up, go to Mexico. Take over like the A-Team.”

“Don’t hafta go on no boat, do we?”

“Prob’ly.” Melvin’s bloodshot eyes lingered on the pale leg showing from under Samantha’s grimy skirt. His thumbprint glared from her calf.

“Ain’t goin’ on no boat.” Henry let out a hard belch.

Melvin gestured toward Sam, cruel smile showing yellow, broken teeth. He threw a rock.

Both men laughed when she cried out.

Samantha let their laughter wash over her. She listened to the angry earth around them instead, resisting the urge to rub her stinging hip. The two abusive pigs keeping her captive, passing her like a bottle, assumed she meant a rainstorm, but it smelled like snow. It might even be a Blue Norther. About the weather, she was never wrong. Her predictions had earned her a pass to safety and given her this hell instead, but she didn’t try to tell them again. The scruffy, thirty-something painters liked to hurt her as punishment. She was covered in bruises. Keeping her mouth shut was a hard lesson to learn.

*Get away. Try again!* The wind blew harder as if to reinforce the mental demand.

Samantha shivered. The wounds from her first attempt were healing, but the damage to her self-respect never would. She’d used up all her energy for it. Not that she had time for trivial things like health or self-respect. Only survival mattered now.

The trio tensed at a loud gunshot from the west.

When a second shot didn’t come, the drunks went back to their bottle and their complaints.

Samantha resumed her desperate plans. She needed to stack the battle.

Samantha inhaled, concentrating... *Snow*.

A storm would usher in the new year. Could it help? *Maybe, if I manipulate things.* Right now, the brothers were drinking heavily. Set to stay up late and wake even later, what would they do upon rising to half a foot of snow on the ground?

She frowned*.* The brothers would wait out the weather, though they were only an hour from pushing aside the last vehicles blocking the road into Bonneville. *They’ll go back to the other end of the overpass, to the deserted farm we stayed in last night.*

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

*You know how to set that up, don’t you?* She shuddered, drawing in a deep breath. *Yes, but I don’t want to.* She couldn’t stand being the one who started it, let alone having to participate or pretend she was enjoying it. *It’ll be easier to kill them. I need a weapon*. Sam ached to think of possible help at the Essex Compound being so close–

*Pop-Pop-Pop!*

The sound of tires squealing followed the gunshots, echoing from the southern darkness.

“Shit! They’re back!”

“Henry, get that fire out!”

Samantha climbed into the van as fast as the clinking chain around her ankle would allow, as eager for the tepid warmth as for the hiding place.

She slid onto the bed in the rear of the van. She wasn’t allowed in the front.

They were plunged into darkness as the brothers piled in, slamming the door. Sam sneered when Melvin pulled her between them, but she didn’t resist.

The males cleared spots on the dirty windows.

Samantha kept her chin down. She would be shoved away if she tried to look, but she could imagine the group now nearing the overpass where they were hiding. There would be lights, and gunshots. Then dirty, muddy, rusted trucks full of killers. There would be cruel shouts and mean gestures; scared, abused women would cower in the floorboards. Their futures were grim, short. All of it would be accompanied by dangerous driving, shooting at anything that caught their attention, and a complete disregard for all the death around them.

Danger filled the air as the noises got louder. Slugs slammed into the overpass. Bullets hit the cars around them, then the van.

Sam bit her wrist to keep from screaming.

The gang drove by slowly, lights glaring off debris-covered glass and metal.

They were all glad when the gang avoided the jammed overpass from Interstate 26, traveling below it instead. They were going into Bonneville, where desperate survivors on the CB had been calling for help, for American assistance.

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

As the last of the noises faded, the van began to rock. Gently at first, it became violent.

A scream echoed.

Light, freezing rain fell over the broken ground.

**2**

An hour later, the brothers were passed out in the back. Samantha was in the front passenger seat, as far away from the men as the rawhide leash around her neck would allow. Full of cold depression, she yearned for even a cup of charbucks as she shivered and hurt.

Samantha wiped away a tear. Two weeks ago, she’d been at a warm table with a steaming cup of coffee, and her car and driver idling. *What a difference from this hell!*

Samantha had been alone before the war, but content. Her needs were met by the butler and servants, and then by agency staff when she’d taken over her parents’ work. They had died together while trying to measure a tropical storm during hurricane season. A year into that wild ride, she had predicted a supercell in Nebraska during the Democratic National Convention, and so saved President Milton’s miserable life. Samantha was used to being cared for, but thankfully, she was also able to confront her terrors. It made her a formidable opponent; she didn’t fear death, just the pain. Being a government storm tracker like her parents had been as natural as breathing.

*And useless! What good is a tracking power when I have no defenses?* Sam now wished she’d asked more questions about the other descendants. If she ran into one out here, she didn’t know how to defend herself from them either*.* Her parents had stayed solitary, and loyal to the government, for protection from their kind. *I want to be back with the government, where I was safe from all these dangers!*

Samantha had been with the abusive brothers for nine days now. She’d turned twenty-eight in captivity. For Samantha, who knew where two government compounds were, it was beyond awful. She’d begged them to take her to either bunker. She had even promised to get them passes. A lie, of course. She’d hoped to get the evil brothers shot, but it hadn’t mattered. They weren’t going to release the slave who’d literally dropped from the sky into their laps.

Samantha shivered. That first night had been life changing. No one had helped her. Not the convoys of draftees and soldiers as they rolled by, and certainly not the terrified citizens fleeing ahead of them. It had taken hours to stop calling out for help, days before she had realized the police with all their training hadn’t stood, hadn’t even been able to save themselves. In most of the places she’d been dragged through, the uniformed dead outnumbered civilians. She’d seen old men shot, women beaten, kids left lying where they’d been run over. *We’ve lost everything*. *It’s all gone, and I’m stuck in the middle of the aftermath with alcoholics who know I was one of the chosen few valued by the government.*

The aching woman lit one of her reward cigarettes, studying the darkness through the dirty window. They would be on her in an instant if she attacked them while they slept, or if she tried to run. *I have to be patient.*

The rain splatters faded to light gray sleet, covering the dying world around them. Samantha ignored her pain, calculating. The next twenty-four hours would be hard, but if she was careful, if she picked just the right moment, she would be free.

Sam glanced over her bruised shoulder, eyes now glowing vivid red. *And you two bastards might be dead.*

**3**

Samantha didn’t know if it was the icy cold or the bands of pain wrapping around her stomach that woke her to day ten of captivity. She came alert all at once, mind returning to the plan she’d been working on as she fell asleep. She had decided she wouldn’t go to the Essex Compound. On the chopper, the soldier had told her it was being evacuated. That was also the direction radiation victims were coming from. Plus, the brothers knew to follow her there. She couldn’t take the chance they would hunt her down. If they did, she wouldn’t get another opportunity to run. This was her last try.

Samantha took a deep breath, preparing herself to follow through no matter how ugly it got.

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

“What...uh? What’re you doing?” Melvin elbowed Henry.

Samantha struggled to act normal as the wipers cleared a vision into a wintery hell. She was surprised the weather had muffled the sounds. *We slept through it*, she thought sickly, hoping the gang had traveled on during the night. Bonneville was in flames–all of it.

The sight firmed her decision. Today had to be the day. *I’m not going in there. Anyone who ventures into that warzone isn’t coming back out.*

“The city is on fire.” She didn’t tell them it was also snowing. She slid onto the floorboard, out of the way.

Her words got Melvin up. He shook Henry awake.

Samantha worried her freedom might come at the cost of innocent lives. *Did I make it happen? Am I responsible?*

Her grieving mind insisted she knew better. They had hidden from that gang before. They were attacking towns, trying to… *What? Eliminate survivors?* That fit. Samantha’s heart cried in protest at the loss of people she hadn’t known.

“Get dressed!” Melvin shoved Henry onto the floor, bringing groans. “We came up here for Gail. She needs me!”

Henry struggled to pull on his pants, not arguing.

Melvin glared at Samantha, but he didn’t say anything about her being in the front of the van. *I’ll punish her later.*

Melvin yanked on his boots and then his coat, peering through the dirty windows for a view of the burning city.

Henry finished dressing, then waited for orders. He was very hungover.

Melvin unlocked the door and opened it. “You walk the area while I scan with the binoculars.”

Henry’s somber face fell into resentment; he still didn’t protest. He couldn’t beat Melvin in a fight on a good day, and this wasn’t one of those. *I feel like I might die.*

Melvin and Henry stepped outside and slammed the door.

Samantha started searching the front for anything she could use as a weapon. This was the first time they had left her alone in the van. She was quiet.

“No way is your girl still there, man. It’s all on fire.”

Melvin scanned the city, then the clouds raining ashy flakes over everything. “Gail’ll be there. I told her to stay.”

“I don’t know, man.” Henry stared at the roof of the farmhouse behind them. It wasn’t his girlfriend; he didn’t want to go where there was obvious danger.

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

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

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

“Yeah, I guess.” Henry scanned the rotting corpses in many of the cars.

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

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

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

Samantha tried to sound prissy. “In the snow?”

She could hear them snickering as she pulled the keys from the ignition and stuffed them under the dash. Hopefully, the jumble of wires would hide the keys long enough to buy her a head start if fate gave her the chance to run…although she hesitated to do that now. *I’m holding too much hatred to just scurry away and pretend none of the abuse happened.*

“Yes, in the snow! Come on!” Melvin opened the door.

Samantha yanked on her ruined flats.

“Get out here.” He leaned in.

She tried to control her voice and pounding heart. “I’m in a skirt. I’ll freeze.”

“Find us some clothes in them cars. For you too, but only dresses or skirts. My women don’t wear the pants. I do.”

Samantha nodded obediently. She held her leg out for him to clamp the hated tow chain over her bruised ankle.

Sam sighed in relief when he lifted the rawhide leash from her neck. She forced a small smile. Melvin was the one she might *have* to kill to get away. It would be best if he thought she was accepting her fate so she would have an element of surprise.

Samantha exited into half an inch of gray flakes, shoe landing on a slick piece of wrapping paper with a smiling Santa. She slipped, crying out as the van door caught her hip. The rusty metal tore through her rotting skirt as she hit the wet ground.

The two painters laughed; Henry doubled over.

Samantha’s anger grew colder.

“Get shoes too.” Melvin kept laughing. “Dumbass woman.”

Samantha picked herself up, rubbing her throbbing hip. She wanted to scream that she had been thrown onto a government chopper; she hadn’t been planning to travel in the snow or anywhere else. She turned away before she could. *Fighting back now is not part of the plan.*

Samantha’s feet turned icy as she stomped to the farthest car she could reach, thankful the brown, dented wagon was empty of human remains. She ducked into the front, tugging her chain.

Her anger flared hotter as her fingernail caught on the heavy metal and ripped off in a hot flash of pain. *I’m almost at my limit. This may be the last sane hour of my life.*

**4**

Samantha was still searching the wagon. At least ten minutes had gone by. She darted a quick glance at the two men struggling with the truck. They weren’t paying attention to her. She took the unobserved moment to evaluate what she’d found. A fanny pack, a lighter, two Bic pens–one of which she slid behind her ear and covered with her dirty hair. Half a pack of smokes and one unopened can of Diet Coke completed the stash. She shoved it all into the fanny pack before switching to the rear. This vehicle was crammed with bags, suitcases, boxes; it was a wonder there had been room for a driver.

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

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

She sought, and found, the symbol for a charged battery. The cold edge of hatred sank into her heart. *I now have the power of electricity...* Samantha deemed it enough as Melvin jerked her around.

“What are you–”

Sam hit the button.

A vicious blast of electricity slammed into Melvin’s chest.

“Uuhhh!” He jerked, letting go of her.

She held the button in.

Melvin stumbled, teetering.

The instant she let go, he thumped to the wet, snowy ground, twitching. His eyes rolled back in his head, nicotine stained fingers landing on her foot.

She kicked his hand away. “Shoulda been nicer, Mel.” *That felt good!*

She tossed the weapon and its jumble of wire darts into the wagon’s rear seat while Melvin’s body continued to twitch like he was touching a live wire. Sam waved at Henry. “Hey! Something’s wrong with Mel!”

Henry came on the run. He dropped to his knees in the snow next to his brother, who was trying to talk, to warn him.

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

Melvin’s lids shut, body stilling.

“What is it? What happened?” Henry stared up at Sam in helpless fear.

Sam shrugged, trying to block his view of the Taser with her body. “A seizure? Make sure he doesn’t swallow his tongue.”

Henry looked back down.

Sam swung from the hip, leaning all her weight into the blow.

The pen plunged into Henry’s neck with little resistance. It made an awful sound. She jumped backward as his body stiffened.

Blood squirted around the pen now protruding from his Adam’s apple.

“Ug!” Henry’s arms jerked; blood rained down his shirt in furious streams. He collapsed across Melvin’s chest.

Sam sucked in a ragged breath, glorious in her victory… *I can’t just stand here and wait for Melvin to recover! He’s more dangerous than Henry.*

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

Sam clenched her teeth against a surging stomach as she pushed Henry’s bloody body over. She used the dead man’s bootlaces to bind Melvin’s hands and feet, shivering in the snowy wind. In this setup, he wouldn’t be able to stand, let alone run after her. That was good because he wouldn’t take her body for this. It would be her life.

The coldness inside now had little to do with the wind or snow. *I’m a killer. I can never go back.*

Satisfied with Melvin’s bonds, Sam used icy slush to scrub her hands as she considered where to go. She already knew she would avoid the burning city, and the Badlands to the northwest. She wasn’t going anywhere she’d already been or anywhere Melvin might think of. She had no chance of traveling the Rocky Mountains littering her hazy view to the southeast, at least not on foot, but taking the van was also out of the question. She couldn’t squeeze it through the abandoned traffic by herself and Melvin could probably track it.

To the west, more smoke was rising, backdropped by distant purple mountains. She shivered. *Yellowstone*. *Terrible things are happening there.* That only left due east or south. Samantha pushed off the wave of fear waiting to overwhelm her. *NORAD is south. I can make it that far.*

“Ugh…” Melvin began to regain consciousness.

Sam stayed out of his range as she went back to the snowy wagon. Dirty flakes fell in heavy sheets; the wind gusted as she retrieved the suitcase of clothes and set it on the hood.

Behind her, the trussed man came alert, twisting and groaning. “What the...? Henry! What’d ya do to Henry?”

Samantha ignored him, hated ankle chain rattling while she dug through the suitcase.

“You killed him!” Melvin glared, struggling against his bonds. “I got the keys, bitch! Come get ‘em!”

Sam paused, choosing his fate. Did he *need* to die? That was the only kind of death she was okay delivering.

“Come on!”

“It won’t take long to get the Taser ready again. I’ll *come on* after your heart attack.” She sat on the icy seat. Her teeth chattered in loud clicks as she began to feed the wires back into the small box. Samantha wasn’t sure if the weapon could be reused this way. She thought it needed a new cartridge or something, but the asshole at her feet wouldn’t know that. Sam smiled at him. Then again, she didn’t know for sure it wouldn’t work. *If not, if he pushes me, I have another pen.*

Melvin scooted backward as she paused to give him a furious smile of anticipation. “Wait! Okay! We’ll trade. Let me go, we’ll split up!”

Sam worked faster as the captive man pushed himself backward through the slush.

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

Sam shrugged. “I can’t say the same.”

Melvin finally began to beg, sounding sincere. “I’m sorry, lady.”

His voice got louder when she stood.

“Please don’t. Please, lady!”

Fury burned in Samantha’s heart. “You don’t even know my name!”

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

Melvin cringed as Sam dropped to a knee.

She shoved the box against his crotch. “It might not kill you, but you’ll wish it had. Be a good dog now, Mel. Don’t even breathe.”

He kept pleading as she sent a rough hand into his pocket and came up with her freedom.

Sam jumped out of range of his kicking feet, then unlocked the hated chain. It fell to the dirty snow.

“I should lock you to the bumper and leave you here!” She landed a vicious kick to his knee before stepping over him. She stripped, revealing dozens of bruises, and blood crusted to her thighs. She used the grimy skirt to clean up, then threw it in his direction.

Sam pulled on a pair of warm sweats. “Who wears the pants now, you piece of shit?” She kept track of his backward progress as she got what she needed from the weathered wagon.

“What’re you gonna do?”

Sam snapped the fanny pack around her waist. “Henry always carried that knife, the one he used to cut off half my hair! Use it and stay away! Don’t make me kill you.”

Melvin spat at her. “Just ‘cause you have a gift that don’t mean you’re worth shit out here in this world! I hope it haunts you that we went right by the compound!”

Samantha left without responding to any of his taunts, threats, lies, or frantic pleas. She would watch out for him. Melvin deserved to die. That was the only way she would feel safe, but she couldn’t, not unless it was needed. One premeditated murder was enough. It was…heavy, as if the chain that had been around her ankle was now clamped to her soul.

Samantha traveled fast, glad when the snow became thicker and the wind blew harder. It muted Melvin’s screams and covered her tracks. It also might kill her if she waited too long to take shelter, but Sam didn’t stop yet. She went by house after warm, empty house to keep her enemy from finding her. Sam wished she could drive one of the vehicles she was climbing around, but they had spent the first few days after the war hunting for something quieter and easier on gas than Melvin’s van. She’d been forced to tell them about EMPs; they’d been lucky the van had even started. Almost anything that ran on electrical components in a damage zone was now junk.

Samantha blinked away tears as the wind stung her, lungs aching from the cold. She ran a damp sweater sleeve across her dripping nose and curled her numb fingers tighter into the wet material as she caught her balance and pushed on.

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

“By and by, Sammi.” She lowered her chin against the wind. “One foot in front of the other.”

**5**

The snow was blinding. Travel through it was no longer possible on foot. Samantha chose a house behind a thick row of trees; her hands, feet, and face were burning.

She filled a bag of treasures from the home–blankets, a man’s heavy trench coat, a pair of gym shoes, peanut butter, and a loaf of bread with only a little mold on it. She was tempted to enjoy more of the old comforts, but she made her feet take her to the small tool shed behind the house instead of staying there.

The shed held a small, green riding mower and three bales of inviting hay. The gusting wind tried to pull the door from her numb fingers as she shut it. Sam frowned at the little latch. It wouldn’t keep anyone out, and enough time had gone by for Melvin to have gotten free. He would have his rage to drive him through the storm. *If he finds me, one of us won’t walk away.*

Samantha hung her wet shirt over the window to dry, and to block her shadow. She wasn’t afraid of the darkness or the unfamiliar room. Her terror walked on two legs.

Sam made a bed in the warm, scratchy hay. After two peanut butter sandwiches and the icy Diet Coke, she dozed, covered in blankets and stiff garden bedding. She held a sticky kitchen knife tight in her grip and rested easier than she had in ten days.

**6**

Melvin didn’t find the knife. He hadn’t checked his dead brother’s boots. The windblown snow covered him, dropping his body temperature. Just before dawn, the painter dreamed of falling into the icy pond behind their childhood home in southern Michigan. The frigid water was suffocating, but Henry wasn’t there to pull him out this time. As his heart stopped beating in the dream, Melvin went into cardiac arrest under six inches of drifting snow. He didn’t wake up as he died.

Five miles away, Samantha’s eyes snapped open. They glowed vivid red in the darkness of her den.

Sam waited to feel worse or better, but nothing changed in her heart.

*I feel dead inside. I’m free, but I didn’t win. Their ghosts will haunt my dreams forever.*

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

# Chapter Three

**Kenn and Charlie**

New Mexico

**1**

“**W**ho’s in here?” LCpl Kenn Harrison stepped into the barracks, scanning footlockers and scattered contents. *Someone was hunting for food.*

The base was empty now, looted. Only a lucky few had escaped the draft or been overlooked. Kenn was hoping his boy had been one of those. Half the buildings behind the chopper crash had survived. Kenn was searching them as the flames cooled. This dorm was one of the few without damage.

“Come out. That’s an order!” Kenn winced as his sharp tones bounced back from the thin walls. His hand dropped to the 9mm on his hip. Instinct said he wasn’t alone.

“Charlie?” Kenn called the name as if they were at home, ignoring the gunshots outside. He was rewarded by a small shuffling noise that made him tighten control over his emotions.

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

“Come out.” Kenn forced himself to be patient. He would not have been in the past, couldn’t, but the war had already begun to change him.

Two filthy hands emerged from under the bunk on his right.

Kenn grinned. *The boy’s here! He is alive! He’s…hurt? Is that blood trickling from his ears...? Oh God! Where are his eyes?*

“Sir?”

Kenn automatically lunged forward to catch the teenager as he stood and stumbled.

“Want…my…mommy, sir!” The dying boy coughed, splattering them both in red droplets as he struggled to breathe. “…mommy!”

Kenn snapped awake.

He swept the boy lying nearby, staring back at him in alarm. Their eyesight had easily adjusted to the dark conditions. It was their minds that refused to bend.

Kenn calmed his breathing. The smart kid had rotated to emptied buildings to avoid being taken. It had taken two full days to search the base. Kenn was still experiencing the horror. The nightmare was a nasty reminder of the fear he’d felt when the chopper had crashed into the officer’s dorm in front of him.

The darkness around their tent was absolute. They were well hidden, but an unwelcome sense of danger still flared.

When Charlie started to speak, Kenn shook his head, senses switching to full alert. Light rain drummed on the tarps over the truck; wind howled through the junipers around them… *Was that a twig snapping?*

Kenn drew his M9, squinting through the spyhole he’d left when they made camp in this grove of scrawny trees. *We’re too well hidden. No one’s out there sneaking closer.* He slid his wrist under the blanket to block the light while he checked the alarm console on his watch. The traps were unbroken. *An animal?* Kenn kept his gun handy in case it was the two-legged kind.

Light, freezing rain thumped on the bare branches, the tent, the shed they were behind, the covered vehicle. Sleep called, seducing…

Lightning flashed, illuminating the tent. Then darkness came again, with the heavy patter of rain. Kenn drifted off while waiting for the inevitable crack of thunder.

*Crunch.*

Baamm!

Kenn snapped awake. *Someone is out there!*

*Snap*. “Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.”

An alarm sounded for each breach, telling Kenn how many ambushers they had.

“Beep. Beep. Beep.”

The two males reacted, following the plan they’d worked out before leaving the base ten days ago. Kenn slit a gash in the tent wall, then another in the thick, black tarp over the MRAP.

The boy shoved their things into the vehicle, staying low in case gunfire broke out.

Footsteps came.

The Marine inside took over, evaluating the threat and picking the proper action in seconds. *Not rushing but sneaking. If the intruders are unaware of breaking a perimeter alarm, then they aren’t professionals.*

*Snap!*

Coming in fast instead of careful, a soft murmur of voices instead of the silence of hand signals… Kenn’s lip curled. *Base boots.*

Kenn waved the boy onto the floorboard and got in behind him, adrenaline flowing in thick waves.

Charlie started the engine without being told.

Kenn brought his M16 up as lightning flashed in the distance. Voices echoed.

“They still have the truck!”

“Get the boy! We need him!”

Recognition came as Kenn knelt in the seat. It was the tail from Fort Defiance he’d hoped they lost a week ago. “You’ll have to take lead instead!” Kenn rose, throwing off the tarp. He fired twice, following their noises with his well-trained ears.

Charlie held the brake in with his palm, then shifted them into drive, sticking to the plan.

Men grunted in the wet, cold darkness.

Kenn hunkered. “Go!”

Charlie hit the gas.

The tires spun. The truck fishtailed on a patch of ice as it lunged forward, spraying mud and clumps of locoweed.

“Get our bikes! We need his blood!”

“Shoot the Marine!”

Desperation made the kidnappers reckless. They charged the truck with jerky movements.

“Now, boy!”

Charlie slammed both hands onto the brake at Kenn’s call, hoping the Marine could handle it. He was preparing to use his gifts, but he was terrified of it.

Kenn used the enemy’s noises to pinpoint their locations as the truck slid to a stop. He fired five shots into the darkness.

Silence fell.

Soft sounds came to him–the quiet engine, the damp wind howling by, adobe buildings groaning in the distance. It was over. “Boo-yah, baby!”

“Are they dead?”

Charlie’s voice wasn’t calm, but Kenn was impressed by the control the teenager had shown during the assault. Kenn put the truck in park as the teenager shifted into the wet passenger seat. “Give us some light; we’ll find out.”

Kenn already knew they were. Each of those bullets was a kill shot, but he was eager for even the boy’s approval since no one else was around. He was alone with the sullen teenager, protecting them both without the attention or respect he craved. He would take what he could get.

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

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

Charlie gawked in shocked respect as he surveyed the battlefield. Seven bodies lay in two half circles, each one with a clean shot into dirty camouflage uniforms. It was amazing. Not one miss.

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

“We takin’ their stuff?”

“No. They were obviously sick. We’ll hit the redline for a click or two, then doze a bit.” He lifted his hood, indicating the child should do the same.

Both males heard a distant dog barking miserably but ignored it as yet another starving pet chained in someone’s yard.

“They wanted me.” Charlie didn’t like how that felt. “That’s why they’ve been following?”

Kenn saw no reason to lie. “Yes. Probably believed your blood would heal them. Crazy shit happens now. Kids are big targets.” He gestured. “Stay close. It’ll only get worse.”

**2**

The drab truck ran out of gas an hour later. Kenn was sorry to leave it, though he knew they’d been lucky to discover it at all. He didn’t know why the EMP hadn’t knocked it out too, but he assumed it had something to do with where it had been parked.

Kenn steered the coasting vehicle into a thicket of piñons, glad the sky was lightening. The rain fell steadily; the woods were dark, twisted shapes along a faint path of concrete as they unloaded their gear.

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

Charlie nodded distractedly, still stewing on the battle that Kenn’s military mind had no doubt already forgotten. The boy was having doubts about killing, but he kept them to himself. *Kenn won’t understand. It’ll just trigger a lecture.*

The sky gave light to each awful detail of the landscape as they entered the city limits of Williamsburg, New Mexico. There had never been a time for either of them when a dead body had been left to decay on a street. Now, there were hundreds amid gruesome Christmas decorations. If not for the constant wind, the smells would have been unbearable even during winter.

Kenn wasn’t encouraged by their location. Nearly every business and home they passed had been destroyed or damaged. Almost nothing was safe to use for shelter. That was another lesson they’d learned after Charlie had come close to being stung by a scorpion when he’d picked up his canteen for a metallic-tasting drink of water. They now examined their shelters for marks in the dust. Most of these places would belong to the animals forever. There weren’t enough people left to drive them back into the ground.

The two males had been making a cold camp, relying on their training. They wore gloves and hats, with extra shirts over their uniforms. They were also going easy on their water. On the fourth day of being AWOL, they’d found a looted store with a few supplies left. Kenn had been relieved, but the feeling hadn’t lasted long. They only had a week of food and water, maybe two if they rationed. The Marine thought they might have to. The lack of rebuilding was a sign of more terrible things to come. Until tonight, they hadn’t seen a single person in three days. Rare flashes of light in the darkness never lasted long enough to track. Hard times were here.

The two males pulled their hoods tighter as drizzle sprinkled them. Kenn was glad it wasn’t acid rain. That was something he’d scoffed at until he had a drop land in his eye. Then there was chemical rain, which they were getting now. Almost warm, it was also flammable. A puddle would sometimes spark a weak flame from a thrown cigarette. The weather wasn’t the worst part of traveling now, but it had definitely slowed them. They’d only come seventy miles since ramming the dead fence to get out of the abandoned military installation. They had made a lot of stops to let severe weather roll by. The fury of nature came suddenly now, in steady downpours of hot drops that made them itch, or little black flakes resembling snow. Then, there would be brilliant, flashing lightning with loud, drumming thunder that promised damage and then silence again–all in the same hour. The only true constant was the wind. It blew grit into everything.

Kenn finally sought shelter as a thin sun rose in the east, exhaustion insisting. He scanned their environment, wincing at a loud crunch of gravel from Charlie’s tired feet.

“There’s our camp for tonight.” Kenn led the way to the home he’d chosen. They were almost out of the city limits now, back to pueblos and mountains shadowing deep canyons and sharp cliffs. They would need things before venturing into that wilderness. First on the list was transportation.

Kenn sat on the bottom stair of the neat front porch as Charlie began dropping gear. He scanned the chaotic lanes of traffic on the hill across from them. One of those batteries would have juice. It wouldn’t be fun to clear the other vehicles out of the way, but they could be back on the road by tomorrow afternoon. They might even reach NORAD by the end of next week.

“The door’s unlocked.” Charlie knew not to go in. He also knew the house was empty, but telling Kenn that would blow his cover of being a normal fourteen-year-old boy.

Kenn yawned as he stood, rubbing at his stubbly, black goatee. He drew his weapon as he strode across the porch. He pushed the front door open... *New paint, walls and floors without marks or imprints, no appliances.* Most importantly, no footprints in the layer of dust coating everything.

Kenn held the gun out to the surprised cadet who usually only touched one in a class or competition. “Secure the perimeter.”

The lean teen took it with respect, snapping off a quick salute with his other hand before disappearing inside.

Kenn broke into a reluctant smile at the careful copy of his own actions when they made camp each night. He listened to doors open and shut. A minute later, he was back, returning the gun.

“All clear, sir.” Charlie went back out into the damp smell of smoke and rot to bring in their things, not waiting to be told. It was the way he had been trained, but it was also to keep Kenn from seeing how much he had wanted to pull the trigger instead of returning the weapon. He hated the Marine almost as much as his mom did. *One day, when I’m stronger, he’ll pay for every hit he ever gave us.*

**3**

“Radio time?”

Kenn shook his head as the boy cleaned up their lunch mess. He’d made them eat out here on the porch so he could study the area and finish his mental lists. “Let’s hunt. We’ll listen later.”

Charlie shrugged. “Okay.”

The tired travelers climbed the muddy hill to the interstate a brief time later; Charlie avoided staring into the cars. Most were empty of owners, but some were not.

Kenn could tell which ones held a body by the type of automobile. The newer, classier vehicles tended to be occupied. Running out of gas hadn’t been enough to make those materialistic souls abandon their expensive possessions. How long had they waited for help to come? A day? A week? In many cases, forever.

“What are we hunting?”

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

The boy proceeded to a nearby car as Kenn checked a dented Dodge for power. He registered suitcases shoved haphazardly into backseats, storing the information. Kenn found clothes and personal items, along with a six-pack of bottled water, but the rest of the search went bad. It hadn’t even been a month since the war. He hadn’t expected batteries to be dead out here too.

Kenn frowned. *Gas in the tanks, useless keys in ignitions...* Doors were hanging open; rusting bullet casings littered the ground and floorboards. Kenn revised his theory. These people had left in a hurry. *We should be ready to do the same.*

“What about a dirt bike?”

Kenn moved his way. “Yes.”

“It was new. Still has a sticker.”

The Honda’s key was in the ignition, as if someone had tried to take it but didn’t have enough time. Kenn flipped the key backward.

The lights came on; the gas gauge swung to full.

Kenn pulled the keys out, sliding them into his pocket. He closed the rear hatch of the wagon hiding the treasure. “We won’t be on foot come...” He stopped, listening hard. *Did I hear something?* Yes. “Engines.” Still a mile away, maybe more. The Marine knew it was unwelcome news. He had the same ball-itch that always preceded a shootout.

“Get back to the house!” Kenn grabbed Charlie’s arm, keeping a tight grip as they ran down the slick, muddy embankment. He wasn’t being careful, just moving.

They hurried across the yard. Charlie started to step onto the porch.

Kenn yanked him back. “We’re muddy. We’ll leave prints.” He sat on the bottom stair, fingers flying over his bootlaces.

Charlie jerked his own boots off as the sound of engines grew louder, closer. “What’s going on?”

“Stay below the windows; get your boots back on!” Kenn shoved him in and shut the door.

“But, what’s–”

“Now!”

It was an order. Charlie did as he was told, lips thinning.

Kenn pointed. “Put our gear in that closet. Leave room for yourself behind it.” Kenn hoped none of those vehicles were coming here, to this town, to this house.

A muddy jeep carrying three armed men rolled into view, leading two rusty pickup trucks–both flying a foreign flag. A line of cars with women and children came behind them. Then a U-Haul truck, a worn Mustang, two filthy white passenger vans, a nice, gold flecked convertible, and then dozens of bikes filled the road.

Kenn studied the group as they rolled closer, adrenaline once again flying. His trained gaze picked out details most civilians would miss. Foreigners, jeeps of armed men, wagons of women…and what was it about those white vans that bothered him? Had there been a flash of blond and silver? *Slavers*.

That’s why his stomach was a ball of liquid heat. They had been in the path of these invaders. If the vehicle hadn’t run out of fuel, they would probably be in sight right now. On this desolate stretch, against so many, they wouldn’t have stood a chance. *Death missed us by a quarter tank of gas.*

The large group drove erratically, bumping into one another, but they avoided the swampy area to the left of the interstate. Kenn saw it as a sign that they were familiar with the area. He could only hope none of them noticed the new vehicle in the woods or the deep footprints in the hillside. Suddenly positive this gang was responsible for all the destruction in the area, Kenn kept his hand on his gun. *I’ll save the last two slugs for*–

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

The drunken, careless men fired at trees, signs, cars, windows, and anything else that caught their attention, including the homes. Bullets slammed into the house where Kenn and Charlie were hiding.

“Get down! That’s the enemy!”

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

Kenn stayed alert even after the gang was out of sight and the sound of their chaos had faded. He was still stressing when Charlie began dozing against the bullet-speckled wall.

Kenn knew they couldn’t challenge or defend against a group that large. He had to hope they would be able to sneak through the next couple of days without drawing attention, though they would be on a loud dirt bike. Stressed was an understatement. However, he was also furious. A part of him protested letting the foreigners continue their rampage. They were an affront to everything America had stood for. If he had half a dozen grunts from his base, he might try to kill them all.

*Better yet, just give me Marc Brady*. Kenn lit a cigarette. Marc had been his team leader for the last few years and a pain in his ass, but when it came to high casualty ambushes, no one was better.

Kenn blew out smoke rings, deciding they would go northwest when they left here, then circle around to NORAD. It would add a lot of miles but get them away quickly. He didn’t want to believe the slavers had been following their backtrail, but if so, they would have to come back to where they’d lost it–here. Kenn’s smile was icy. *I can leave a surprise.* He wouldn’t know if he killed any of them, but it was still worth doing.

For the next few hours, Kenn labored on the explosives he’d taken from the base, listening for the dangerous group to return. If that happened, they would all go up together in one big blaze of glory. If not, the government was waiting in Colorado. That was the logical destination, but Kenn wasn’t ready to be back under the rule of the government that had probably destroyed the world and then left him behind to die in it after all the years he’d killed for them. He still loved the Corps; he would always believe in what it stood for. He just no longer trusted those in charge of it.

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

*We’ll find a group to travel with*, he decided, not looking forward to the boy’s reaction. The teenager expected them to go straight to Ohio, to his mother. Kenn sighed, blocking his thoughts even though Charlie was snoring softly. He had never spotted anything…different in the boy, but he was always careful. In a few years, the teenager would be the same age his mother had been when they’d met, and her gifts had been strong then. Angela had denied him access, but this sullen child wasn’t as strong as his mother.

Not that Charlie had any idea what was coming. Talk of magic was forbidden in their house, even the book or movie kind. Kenn had been careful from the beginning in case the power ran in every generation. *I still have a chance to control it.*

His role of stepfather was driven by that goal. It was part of why he had insisted Charlie become a cadet–to keep an eye on him. They weren’t exactly comfortable with each other, but they were able to work as a team, and they both liked to win the father/son events hosted at different bases each year. They’d been in Arizona this time, at Fort Defiance for the contests. They’d cleaned up, winning over half the competitions. Though they had different last names, Kenn never let anyone assume he wasn’t the child’s biological parent. They were both tall, with the same high-n-tight hair and bright blue eyes, though the regulation cuts were a bit long now. Dressed alike, there was definitely a resemblance. They even had the same way of staring directly at someone while listening or talking, not glancing away. When they averted their gaze, they were lying.

Kenn kept pondering their similarities as he worked, and the day slowly wore on. He didn’t wake the boy. He wasn’t ready to tell Charlie his mom was likely dead, but they weren’t going back to find out.

Leaning against the uncomfortable wall, Charlie had fallen asleep while cleaning the gunk from his nails. He was dreaming of his mother. She insisted she would find him no matter where Kenn went. His young heart had to believe that. It was getting harder to hide his gifts. When he slipped up at home, his mom took the fall. On the base, other cadets had suffered the blame. Out here, it was just him and Kenn, and the Marine was sharper than he’d been before.

*Please, God, send me a distraction until my mom can get here or Kenn will control my gifts. I can’t keep it from him much longer.*

# Chapter Four

**Angela**

**A close up of a building

Description automatically generated**

Ohio

**January 18th**

**1**

**“I** can’t keep them from you much longer.”

The preacher held the first dirty glass door open. He stayed close as they moved down the bare, littered hall; his dusty black robe flared out behind them like an evil shroud.

Angela scanned the faded Special Forces tattoo on his wrist. *I can do this, even if he and the rest of the teachers here were military. I just have to show them I can’t be taken.* “I don’t need your protection, Warren.”

“You’re wrong, child.” Warren leaned closer, hot breath puffing against her neck. “If you are not under my guardianship, like the others here, the staff will insist you stay!”

Tension thickened as they neared the main lounge. Angela knew his threats weren’t idle. These men had fought off draft soldiers. Those bodies were still rotting around the main entrance. By the time the draft had made it this far into the city, their trucks had been full, and their own numbers were low. When the college men won the first battle and eliminated three dozen soldiers, the rest of the trucks had rolled on. Warren had delighted in telling her the story. He was very proud of organizing the defense that earned him leadership of this group. If the others didn’t try to keep her here today, Warren would the next time she came. His lust for power was growing. She didn’t know how he’d discovered her secret, but she was sure that he at least suspected.

Angry male voices echoed from the room they were headed to.

“Today will force your hand.” Warren glanced over to be sure she understood.

“Thank you for the warning.” Angela stepped into the lounge where seven unwashed men waited for her. The thick beards didn’t hide their displeasure.

“Hello, gentlemen. How goes your day?” Her tone was unafraid compared to her thumping heart. Angela wasn’t encouraged when they only grunted or kept gawking at her like something on a store shelf just out of their reach.

“Over here.” Warren led her to a filthy couch in the center of the room; a young girl was shivering under layers of blankets.

Angela’s dislike of the greasy hypocrite eased a little. Warren was a weak man, but he feared losing his daughter. It was beating in his thoughts.

Angela was gentle as she shined the penlight around her neck into the unconscious child’s mouth and eyes. “How long has she been like this?”

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

“I hear ya.” Angela pulled on gloves.

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

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

Angela traced red lines back to the site of the infection. “No, it’s not from radiation.”

“Praise the Lord!”

There were murmurs of relief and disbelief that changed to frowns when Angela began unbuttoning the girl’s shirt.

“What are you doing?” Warren stepped closer, worn Bible now in his beefy hands.

Angela ignored his question, thinking the slicked brown hair had probably been an attempt to show her that he could clean up. She wasn’t impressed.

Angela rolled the sick girl over and found the ugly, swollen gash on her shoulder. “This is causing the fever. The red lines coming over her shoulder is a sign of infection. If those lines get to her heart, she’ll die.”

“You can stop it?”

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

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

Warren let out a deep breath. He was glad he hadn’t waited any longer to seek out the doctor. His daughter was the only family he had left. *I may kill myself if she dies.*

“We’ll try not to let that happen.” *Damn*. Angela forced herself to keep working as if nothing had happened. He’d just gotten confirmation.

Warren had frozen.

The sound of glass breaking in one of the rooms above them drew attention. It gave Angela a second to recover. “I need some things. Two bowls of hot water, some rags, a sheet torn into long strips.” Angela’s breath streamed out as she spoke, visible in the cold air.

Warren’s gaze lowered, dropping to her lips. His grip on the book tightened as he waved at Aaron. “Get what she needs from my share of the supplies.”

The former groundskeeper moved reluctantly.

Warren stared at the woman, willing himself to ignore her pull, to feel only loathing for her strangeness. He could have, in the old world. *I was so strong then!* He’d been high in the parish before the war, a religious widower for a decade. It was a long time to go without even the soft caress of a woman’s hand, let alone more intimate contact.

Then the war and this woman had come, together. Years spent resisting sins of the flesh should have prepared him, but now, when The Judgment had come and gone, leaving his faith damaged, this woman had been sent to tempt him…and her lure was stronger than anything he’d ever known. *She’s possessed*.

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

Angela kept busy laying out what she needed while avoiding making eye contact with any of the pitifully thin men ogling her every move. She never saw young males here. She suspected that was on purpose, like in the Mormon colonies where the average marrying age for a girl was thirteen. The boys were sent away to cut down on competition, but the females weren’t ever allowed to leave. It reminded Angela of the way she’d grown up, though the religion part had been slightly different.

Angela listened to Warren’s thoughts. The big decisions in this group belonged to him. His warning came from hoping she would accept his offer of protection. If she did, he wouldn’t have to fight the others for her. Angela almost understood. The men of the world now felt like they were in extreme competition for a mate. If she encouraged even one of these starving contestants, they would all begin fighting over her. Humankind, around here at least, had fallen backward in evolution. *If they push me, I’ll only use their own nature against them. No one has to die here.*

“I’m giving her three shots.” Angela kept her tone even. “One is for the pain. Don’t mix other dope with it, even if she cries. She’s too weak for stronger stuff. This second shot will fight the infection. The last one will bring down the fever. She should probably have a tetanus shot too, but we’ll cover that in a week or so.”

The little girl didn’t react when Angela injected her.

Warren flinched each time.

“Now, I’ll dig that piece of metal out of her shoulder. If she wakes up, you have to hold her still.”

Warren joined her on his knees, leaning close.

Angela controlled her fear. Showing weakness right now would be a huge mistake.

“Have you heard anything from your *Marine*?”

Angela tensed for a split second, considering her options.

Warren was impressed with the icy control that fell over her face, even as he frowned. Did she know her man and son would be in danger the minute they returned? He already had people watching for a man traveling alone with a teenager.

Angela shook her head. “He’s on the way.”

There was silence in response.

Her worry grew. *They don’t believe that any more than I do.*

It took Angela a couple minutes to pull the rough piece of car metal from the child’s infected shoulder, then clean out the wound. She started putting in neat stitches. “I’ll leave medicine, but watch those infection lines. If they fade, she’s getting better. If they keep spreading, get her to me right away.”

Warren groaned as Angela stuck the needle into his daughter’s skin.

In the heavy quiet, Angela heard the thoughts of the other men.

*That’s it. That’s his weakness.*

*Aaron was right. We’ll use his girl.*

Angela wanted to warn the preacher that he was in danger–not for his sake but for his daughter’s. It was a struggle to remain silent as she peeled off the gloves and bagged her supplies. When she stood, turning, Angela didn’t look at any of them directly. She was trying not to trigger the brawl. “Keep her lying down when you can, and feed her more. You know where I’ll be if she gets worse.”

Tension thickened as Angela turned toward the door. She stopped. The two men plotting against the preacher were blocking her way.

Aaron joined them. “Hand over that gun. You’re not leaving.”

Angela swallowed bitter fear. “Let me through. I already have an owner.”

Aaron’s bitter face twisted at the reminder of her Marine. “Not anymore! You’re mine!” He grabbed her arm and pulled her to his chest.

Years spent in hell allowed Angela to handle herself. These men were threats. Her Marine was deadly…*and he’s not here to stop me.*

A hum of raw power began to thrum through the cold lobby of the college.

Aaron’s face changed as he glanced down and found steam rising from where their skin was touching. He shoved her away.

“She burned me!” He spun toward the other men, who saw nothing but flinched back anyway.

Angela headed for the glass doors, heart racing. She kept herself from running only because of the voice in her mind whispering that if she showed fear to a dog, it would bite.

“Stop the witch!” Aaron screamed and waved at the other men.

When the two traitors came toward her, Angela froze. If her next trick didn’t work, she would use the real power inside instead of smoke and mirrors. She looked at Warren, eyes glowing. “Defend what you believe to be yours, man of a silent God!”

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

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

“She burned me!” Aaron stumbled from the room, slinging his arm around to dislodge the things that only he could see. “Get it off!”

The two teachers reached for Angela again.

Warren swung, knocking the rival on the right off his feet. He kneed the moaning man in the face and swung again, ducking a clumsy punch. The second hit landed on the other teacher’s temple, knocking him to the dirty floor.

“Mine!” Breathing rapidly, the preacher turned to Angela.

She cut him off. “Your reward is information. Those two,” She waved a hand at the unconscious men. “and Aaron, are plotting against you. Be careful. Between them and the cold in here, you’ll all be dead inside a month.” Angela slipped by him and out the door.

Raised voices came from the dim lobby.

Angela barely kept herself from running down the sloping, cracked pavement to her car. The pain in her gut, she ignored. There would be time to cry over her empty belly later.

Footsteps crunched.

She slowed a little to let Warren catch up, scanning the sickly crabgrass instead of the desperate faces of women and girls watching her exit from the upper windows of the college. The guilt was heavy, but she didn’t stop. *They need a hero. That’s not me.*

“Thank you. I had no idea.”

She dug through her bag as Warren fell in step. “There are still plenty of people left who are willing to sacrifice anyone to get what they want. That hasn’t changed.” Angela handed over two small bottles of pills, being careful not to touch him. “Instructions are on the labels.”

He pocketed the medication and opened the door of her muddy red Tempo, falling into the suitor mode he usually handled her with.

“You’ll kill them?”

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

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

Angela tensed at a distant gunshot. She quickly slid behind the wheel.

“You would be safe here with us now, with me.”

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

The preacher smiled at what he assumed was a compliment from a well-trained woman; age lines gave him the appearance of an evil cartoon badger.

“You’re sure he will come?”

Angela frowned. “Yes.”

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

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

Warren couldn’t hide his disappointment.

Angela looked away from the silent plea. She already had a jailor. She didn’t need another. She was careful not to hurt his pride, however. That might push him into trying to force her to stay now. “You’ll bring your daughter over next week for a checkup?”

“Yes.”

Wind gusted through the open window. The heavy draft lifted her long braid.

Warren’s dirty fingers were there to catch it, holding its softness for a brief second before handing it back. He forced their hands to touch.

Angela smiled her thanks, stomach rolling as she started the engine. She couldn’t wait to be gone.

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

“Yes, she should be fine in a few days.” Angela lit a cigarette and stared everywhere except into his needy, intimidating face.

“What do I owe you?”

“Nothing.” She was glad she sounded calm. “That world is gone. Come by next week.” Angela shifted into gear and rolled away, relieved when the preacher mirrored her short wave without any sign the quick exit had offended him. She hated to come down here. One of these times she might not get back out, but her heart wouldn’t let her do anything else. She would help everyone she could now and pay the price later. That was the line she’d chosen for her life when she became a doctor.

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

Her gaze flicked over body after body as she drove, determining the cause of death: *gunshot, knife wound, sickness, gunshot.* Death had come in many ways, and not only to humans. Deer and cats were the most common corpses to represent the losses the animal population was taking, but there were also squirrels, dogs, and birds mixed in. Angela forced her mind away from it all. *Maybe it isn’t as bad wherever Kenny and Charlie are right now.*

Very little in the city where pigs fly had survived the riots. As she drove, Angela heard no sparrows calling, no engines revving, no lawn mowers rumbling, no pets yapping, no voices chattering, no horns blaring. There was only an occasional scream or gunshot to break the heavy silence.

The destruction grew worse the closer she got to downtown. Debris crunched under her tires as she rolled by dark, reeking restaurants full of rotting food. She winced at the sound of glass crunching under her tires as she neared the library where shadows shifted inside, trying to learn to fend for themselves. If she got a flat tire, she would have to abandon her car. Her body wasn’t able to break the lug nuts loose yet. She needed a set of those new tires that could go an extra fifty miles on a flat. Self-sealing or something, maybe even armor-plated if she could find it.

Her broken heart clenched, tears welling. She needed to find the fourteen-year-old son she’d been apart from for months now. It was killing her not to be with him, not to be able to hug him. She wished with all her heart, along with almost everyone else on the planet, that war hadn’t come. *Hold on, Charlie. I will come for you!*

Angela flipped on the heater and the defrost. She jumped as lightning forked overhead. The glare was almost blinding. She drove around telephone poles, burnt cars, busted furniture, rotting corpses. It was awful that so many people would never have the peace of being laid to rest.

She jumped again as the wind slammed against her car. A barrage of black hail pinged off the hood in nerve-wracking blasts. The sky was grayish brown, thick with layers of dust and smoke. The clouds racing toward her came through the grit easily, spewing fat drops of rain against the hood and windows.

Angela took refuge under a concrete viaduct as the storm bore down on the riot ravaged city. It released rain that began to wash away another layer of the dirt and blood left from the end of the world.

Angela put the car in park and finished her smoke as the stench of fishy shit from the nearby mill creek invaded the vehicle. She searched the crumbling, trashy buildings on either side, free hand staying between the seats. *I was right to disobey Kenny. I need this gun.*

*You disobeyed Kenny? You’re in trouble! You’re in trouble!*

Angela nodded at that inner voice of fear. The last two months had been full of things she hoped to never tell him. Kenny wouldn’t understand her breaking rules just to help strangers. If he had been here, things would have been different, but she’d been alone when the bombs fell, and still alone when the first desperate survivor had pounded on her door; she’d made the choice alone. Their suffering was too great for her to deny what little help she could give. Kenny would have turned them away with intimidating gestures and icy threats, but she couldn’t sit by and let people die without trying to prevent it. She would face him with the complete list of rules she had broken when he found her, or when she found him. For now, she wasn’t done adding up crimes. The two biggest transgressions, one of which he might kill her for, were still to come.

The storm flew by, threat disappearing as quickly as it had come. Angela eased the car up Queen City’s steep, narrow pavement, steering around chunks of debris sliding through the muddy ripples. Abandoned vehicles and wrecks had been pulled to the side of the winding hill, looking like lined up dominoes waiting to be pushed over. Angela saw no signs of people trying to continue like normal, but she could feel them watching her through barely cracked blinds. She was disappointed by it. Angela had hoped people would come together, but these survivors wanted nothing to do with her. They only wished for her to be gone.

She sped up, willing to comply. She understood how they felt. She hated to leave the small security of her den, but Warren had cleared this hill so she could make the trip rather than forcing her to live with the college group upon their first meeting. Saying no wasn’t an option. Whenever he called for her on the CB, she answered. She would have anyway, without the threats and innuendos. Her oath hadn’t vanished with the war, but she still sighed in relief when her three-story, yellow brick apartment building came into view.

Angela swept the nearly identical rows of red brick duplexes surrounding her, their matching mailboxes beaten, dented from enduring man and nature’s fury. It was all the same–awful.

Angela parked in the rear lot, next to the small flower bed. Her eyes immediately went to the tiny grave tucked amid rows of frozen violets. Grief smothered her.

She had gone into labor upon hearing the emergency broadcast. She hadn’t been able to connect with her missing son. The stress had topped off a troubled pregnancy with disaster. Her smart teenager had gone dim to avoid being taken in the draft. She’d made mental contact a few days later, but she had already lost the baby.

She’d placed her premature baby in the cold, wet ground herself as an ugly dawn broke. Angela had never felt more pain than when she covered him with earth. Despite all her power, she hadn’t been able to save her own child. Repairing damage was sometimes possible, but she couldn’t replace what hadn’t been given time to grow.

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

The wind swelled again, but she paid no attention, broken fingernails digging into the cold skin of her palms. She sank to her knees in front of the grave. “My baby.” Tears spilled from under dark lashes. Four weeks had gone by, but it still felt like yesterday. *I wanted him so much!* His father hadn’t, but she had.

Pain tore through her battered heart. Angela let the darkness take over. Her grief was unbearable any other way.

**2**

Bands of pain were clamping down on her stomach when Angela became aware of her surroundings again. She staggered to the main door and unlocked it, hands shaking. Flashes of the past slapped her, but she refused to dwell on any of those ugly moments as she walked by her apartment. The life she’d led there with Kenny was over.

Angela eased down the carpeted stairs and slipped inside the blackness of the basement hallway. It still surprised her to do this. She’d been terrified of the dark as a girl, but she’d spent so much time down here since the war that she didn’t even use her penlight anymore.

The heavy door to the storage area slammed shut behind her, locking.

Angela winced at the noise, though there was no one left to tell on her and bring a punishment. This building had emptied out when the draft trucks came through.

Angela scanned for intruders, but there was only silence. She climbed over the debris to her den with the same thought she always had. *I hate it here. I can’t wait to roll!*

Angela eased in to the narrow door she’d hidden behind old mattresses and box springs. She slid into the tepid warmth with an unconscious sigh of relief. She was safe again for a little while.

She locked the door, then stepped over the bags and boxes littering the 8x6 storage room she’d claimed. Her legs trembled as she lit the lantern on the floor in the rear corner. She was almost shivering despite the warmth of her blanket covered area. Her body confirmed her decision. It would be at least three more weeks before she could leave. She wasn’t strong enough to make the cross-country trip. The early birth had damaged her body and her soul.

Angela tightened her grip on her emotions, heart screaming at how long it was taking. She stared at the circled date of February 12th on the calendar. Twenty-five more days of not having even a picture up in her apartment, or down here in her den. She’d buried most of them next to her baby. Warren was watching for her men to return. She refused to make it easy for the preacher by providing descriptions.

Angela pushed off her muddy shoes and socks, then replaced her other wet, dirty clothes. It had taken her days to drag supplies down here. Not being able to rest and recover had also hurt her, but there hadn’t been another choice in that first week. Gangs and killers had been sweeping homes and apartments for survivors left from the draft. Most of them had avoided this dark basement. The first thing she’d done was remove the lightbulbs down here by hitting them with a broom handle while blood ran down her legs and tears rolled over her cheeks.

Angela lit the propane stove at her feet, glad of the extra cylinders she’d found in the same crate with the handy appliance. It, along with a few other useful items, had come from the basement of a Goodwill store. She hadn’t realized how dependent on power they’d all been. She was daunted by the list of needed gear she’d prepared. She doubted she would be able to find it all.

“At least I’m not starving.” She thought of the first agonizing week after losing her son, when she’d forced herself to use the power and water while it still worked. She had cooked and dehydrated months of food until the utilities finally went off for good on New Year’s Eve. The hour-long blackouts before that had warned her to hurry.

Cramps exploded in her belly as Angela bent down to pour the boiling water into her mug. She clenched her teeth, grip tightening on the kettle. *Suck it up!* Her mind tossed out one of Kenny’s favorite responses to her discomfort.

*Pain*, the inner voice insisted*. He caused us pain.*

“Yeah.” Angela settled herself on the knee-high stack of cushions with her tea. She still had to force herself not to clean the plush, two-bedroom apartment above her despite how angry Kenny would be to discover the mess. It needed to appear looted and abandoned to anyone who wandered in.

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

The last sad voice she’d heard had been on B105 last week, telling of hundreds of millions dead or dying. The crying man had advised people to go to caves or mountains. Angela refused to do that. She had a good plan, but she needed help. She had little chance of making it all the way on her own, no matter how many illusion spells she could cast. They didn’t work on everyone, and it would be a long trip. Over twelve hundred miles straight through. With detours, it would be more like fifteen hundred or even two thousand miles, with no outside energy. She would have to rely on natural strength.

Angela switched to the TV setting. She had hoped to make at least fifty miles a day at first, putting her on base in a month, but after a four-hour trip to get to the local store, which had already been cleaned out, she understood even twenty miles a day would be hard. It now came to three months on the road. *So long, and so many of the odds are against me!*

*Gets better when you call the boy’s real daddy*.

Angela shut her eyes as pain came. She’d never forgotten how it felt to belong to Marc.

*Call him. He’s restless, adrift. He will come.*

The woman huddling in the nicely warming storage room gave the idea sincere consideration this time, instead of pushing it away in terror. Marc was also a Marine; he had been for a long time. She had no doubt he could make the trip, and he owed her a huge debt.

Terror spoke up. *You can’t!* *Kenny will kill you both!*

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

“Doesn’t matter. I’ve made my choice.” She would face the consequences when the time came. Nothing would keep her from her son, not after all she had lost, and maybe, just maybe, Kenny could be surprised into making a mistake by Marc’s presence, but also by how much she had changed. The witch inside was awake now. Kenny would find out that she wouldn’t resume her life of bondage.

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

“But not yet.” She ignored the heart that jumped eagerly. She would call out to him when she was ready. That wasn’t today.

Angela blew out thick smoke rings that stayed intact until they hit the big, brown blanket hanging over the thin, wooden door. She had been an abused animal in a luxury cage, and it had happened fast. Her gift (*Curse. Kenny always calls it my curse.*) was the root of their fights. She’d locked away her power to keep Kenny from controlling it, and spent a decade in hell because of that choice. She’d only kept two things from him during their long, hard years together–her gift and the name of her baby’s father. Everything else had been under his unforgiving control each waking moment, and many of the sleeping ones.

Until the war. Being alone while her world was blown away had ripped off the locks on the witch inside. The cell door was barely standing. The dark, shifting spirit behind that thin shield whispered almost constantly to her now.

Angela found it easy to listen. She was still surprised to look inside and see the courage she’d been forced to lock away. She was suddenly allowed to be her own person again, to make her own choices based on what she wanted or needed. That included exploring the things she could do…and of that, there was a lot.

Her gifts had aged well in storage. Most of it was random, coming and going without control, but she was learning to trust the power inside again. The voice said the war was fated, that a new, more peaceful world would replace the old, but when Angela searched the future to see if her small family would be a part of that special population, there was only darkness.

Angela concentrated, sending her power out to sweep the area around her den.

She found no signs of life.

It didn’t stop her from continuing. *I have to practice. My gifts might mean the difference between life and death.*

# Chapter Five

**Marc and Dog**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

West Virginia

**January 28th**

**1**

**“A**h, hell.” Marc knew it was a bad idea as soon as the front tires of his muddy vehicle eased onto the clear suspension bridge. He’d watched it vibrate in the heavy wind as he approached, but the water had risen while he slept, leaving only this way out. The iron grates under the Blazer groaned as he rolled forward. The bridge supports were covered in slushy, menacing debris.

The wolf in the passenger seat growled.

Marc sighed, aware of danger flying toward him again. “Yeah, I know. Sorry.”

*Crack! Rip!*

The solidness under his wheels tilted. One of the two foundations slid, yanking the bars out of the other bank. It rocked the bridge like a plastic racetrack.

The Blazer lifted. Guardrails began ripping away with horrible grinding noises. A cable snapped...

Marc hit the gas, aiming for the end of the bridge now dropping toward the shallow end of the dammed-up Black River. “Semper Fi!”

The Blazer flew off the lowered end. It dropped into the foot of rushing water like a lead ball, crushing the front bumper and tossing up a spray that drenched the driver and passenger.

Marc lowered the windows as they were pulled along by the strong current, surprised the engine hadn’t stalled yet. Slinging his kit over one broad shoulder, Marc ignored the water rushing onto the floorboards as he steered toward the steep bank he had no chance of climbing in this vehicle.

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

“Dog, out!”

Marc shoved his 6’, 225lb frame through the window an instant after the wolf. He plunged into the icy water as the bridge collapsed. A wall of liquid death lunged forward.

Marc scrambled along the slick, muddy bank as he took rope from his kit and worked an end into a lasso. He threw it right as the surging water hit the Blazer and rolled it like a White Castle box in the wind. Water and debris exploded into the air.

Marc hoped the street sign was anchored deep enough as he tied the rope around his waist. Then the water swallowed him.

Unable to breathe or protect himself from the debris in the icy liquid, Marc controlled his panic. He’d had hard tests during his career. This was another on that list.

The pole trembled from the pressure of the rushing Black River, vibrating against his hip. He used it to shield himself from the bigger chunks.

Marc drew his knife, ready to cut himself free if the pole came out of the ground. His lungs burned.

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

Marc cut the rope and climbed to safety, coughing and sliding in gelatinous slop. Yet another lesson had been reinforced in this harsh new world. *Bridges are not safe.*

Marc made it to higher ground, shivering as Dog danced in the mud around his ankles. He stumbled away from the crumbling bank as he dug out another jacket. It would flow downstream and spill over weakened banks before draining into the next town. That’s the way it had been in every other place he’d come through. Nature was reclaiming her property.

Marc glanced around as he got his breath back, deciding where to make camp while he waited for the water to recede. The Blue Ridge Mountains were eastern rolling peaks of foggy blue under a wide purple and yellow sunset that was marred by never-fading angry gray layers. South held dipping valleys and hills of tobacco fields and white pines. He’d just come from that direction. Those empty, snowbound towns hadn’t given him hope.

West was another community whose name he couldn’t recall. The released water was already overwhelming it, but he saw no one fleeing the filling streets. His mental grid also came back blank even though that sense was able to go farther now that he was relying on it more.

*The Sitrep is bleak.* Marc grunted. *A situation report from the North, then*. He rotated, shivering.

A full click above him, a small white building with a large silver cross beckoned in the dim distance. It was perched on a large, muddy hill and backdropped by cherry and crabapple trees. Again, the gritty sky spoiled a perfect picture of sanctuary in the wasteland.

Shrugging at the irony–Marc hadn’t been in a church since being robbed of his dreams–he strode that way while scanning for trouble. Seeming empty didn’t make it so.

Dog, who came to Marc’s hip, stayed close, occasionally snorting his dislike of the rumbling river.

Marc foraged in his kit for a pain pill as he swept the small town. The outskirts of Franklin, identified by a sign on a nearby street corner, were untainted. Surrounded by neat homes with picket fences, his gaze flicked from untouched manger scenes to the Christmas lights decorating most of the undamaged area. *Are there people here?*

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

He scouted the next intersection, attention caught by a charred metro bus of rotting corpses. He was thrown back to what he’d encountered when he rolled out from under the bus.

*Crunchhh!*

The sound of the water destroying the debris it had collected pulled Marc from the flashback. He wished the images would go away. He had stayed on the road after that, trekking to the family home to discover no one there, despite the funeral being set for that day. The house had held no signs of a hasty retreat, and no letter of explanation. *What happened?*

Marc swept the city limits of Franklin, drawn to the hills. He lingered on the cemetery. Its iron gates were surrounded by decaying bodies, few of them wrapped. No one had known what to do with their dead.

Neither had Marc. He almost hadn’t come home at all.

*Crack!*

Marc spun, .45 in hand.

The wolf bristled.

The reeking water was destroying debris. Marc sighed at his jumpiness. He walked toward the church. “Come on, Dog.”

He had taken leave to attend his mother’s funeral, and instead found himself alone in a place that had never been his home. The only living thing he’d encountered was the wolf on the front porch.

*As if he knew I was coming.* Marc had shipped Dog ahead, knowing the animal wouldn’t do well on a bus. The torn-up basement and single broken window was the only damage he’d found in the house. Not even the door had been kicked in; he didn’t believe his family had been taken in the draft. The fact that they had put Dog in the basement suggested something darker.

Marc pushed the thoughts away. He wasn’t going to search for them. They hadn’t been true family in a long time. If they’d found safety but hadn’t wanted him there too, so be it. They were the last group he wanted to survive with.

Loneliness reared up, reminding him it hadn’t gone away. Marc forced himself to lock down on those thoughts, as he had taught others to do. For them, it was to keep from blowing their mission by being distracted. Marc did it now to keep himself from drowning in a tide of remorse.

He’d wandered after discovering nothing at the family home, but it hadn’t taken long for him to become restless and start hunting for his own kind. He had been sworn to his country. He still wore his dog tag under his fatigue shirt and black leather coat, but the America he had served was busy dying. It was crushing that he couldn’t stop it. Now that the future was so grim, he wasn’t going back to his base. The entire world was FUBAR. Everything and everyone he had ever known was gone.

The frigid wind pushed against him as they took the last quarter mile of steep hill at a quick pace. He looked down at the big wolf. “Hell of a start to the day.”

The animal peered up at Marc, then resumed sniffing the bare, damp ground. The wolf didn’t follow any of the scents he caught, heeling as if he were a trained pet, though anyone could tell he wasn’t.

Where to go next was the most pressing choice. Marc wasn’t worried about losing his supplies and transportation, though he would miss the thick Marine sleeping system tonight. The rest of his preferred loadout was in the kit slung over his shoulder. Physically, he would do fine alone. He always had. Mentally, things were complicated. He didn’t like people. He didn’t need them most of the time, but he did need a goal. The desire to serve his country was still there, and he couldn’t do that by himself.

Most survivors had gone to ground. The heartbreaking notes were everywhere. After the first dozen, Marc had forced himself not to read anymore, knowing if he kept going, he would spend the rest of his life trying to reunite those broken families.

Caves and sewer shelters were mentioned most, but those were bad choices. Even if the flooding missed them, and the cold didn’t freeze or starve them, the poisons circling the globe were as big a threat below the surface as above it. How long would a contaminated planet allow them to survive, no matter where they were?

Marc had traveled northwest last, checking White Sulphur Springs, and then the National Radio Astronomy Observatory. He still hoped to find signs of normal life restarting, but he no longer expected it. The world even sounded empty. There were no noises other than the wind. There also wasn’t any sign of the bastards who had let it all happen. The government was absent, but the brass Marc had served all those years would never let survivors have control of topside, poisoned or not.

There should have been emergency broadcasts, flyers, and scientists in shiny suits. There should have been soldiers with itchy trigger fingers and bullhorns, giving orders but not helping. There should have been aid stations and Red Cross units overloaded with patients to be examined, tested, recorded, and left to die. The healthier ones would be kept close enough to force them to beg for handouts so the scientists could keep studying the effects. Marc wouldn’t ever do that. Not that it mattered. The government that had killed so many had likely died with them.

“Where to?” He ran a hand over soaked black hair. *Where would normal citizens gather to start rebuilding? In police stations or city halls…?* Marc tensed, registering a note to the wind that hadn’t been there before. Almost as if someone was calling for him, hunting.

*Marcus!*

Marc swung around, drawing drenched leather as he searched for whoever he’d let sneak up on him. He saw dogwood flowers and the decaying bodies of two songbirds lying in the frozen grass, but no people.

Marc’s heart skipped a beat, then clenched in old longing. That voice had been banished to his dreams years ago, but time clearly hadn’t healed the wound.

The wolf whined at his master’s pain.

“Shhh.” Marc pushed away the hope and dread. *It’s just loneliness torturing me again.*

Marc fell into Marine mode as he squared away the small church and attached shed.

Once he was satisfied that they were alone, he put down alarms. His training would make this new world easier for him than for most people. He’d been playing this lethal game for years.

Marc exchanged fresh fatigues for his soaked, torn clothes, then retied his holsters over his thighs. The river was already several feet deep around distant maple trees and column-supported buildings. Changed and warming, he evaluated the situation. His breathing was normal. His heart was back in his chest where it belonged. Other than a few scratches, he was unharmed. He hadn’t swallowed any of the nasty liquid. He also still had his hat. The string around his neck had kept it from being washed away. Had he reacted a little slower on the bridge, he would be dead now. It was a harsh, new world where some days were harder than others.

He had come one hundred thirty miles in the weeks since rolling under the bus to avoid the draft. The corpses on the streets bothered him more than the constant reek of rot. They were in every place he’d been. Stores, stations, malls, cars, homes. Men, women, kids, elderly–all shocking to see in even one American city, let alone in all of them. Marc had fought the urge to give them the funerals they deserved. Like with the letters, if he buried even one, he would spend the rest of his life doing it.

The realist inside knew that gradually, terribly, nature would run her course. The cadavers would all disappear into nests, dens, and burrows, and then into hungry stomachs, but it would always be obvious that a violent struggle for survival had swept this country. Death was now a constant, even in places that had no actual bomb damage.

Fires were the most common cause of devastation. Town after town had been reduced to darkened, shadowy frames–the victims of arson. *This new world is a bed pisser’s wet dream*. Marc hated the helpless feeling it gave him to roll through those places. They reminded him of his nightmares of the walking dead, and of the soldier who’d killed himself. In his dreams, the corpses followed him relentlessly with their not so funny, stumbling walk. They pushed and pushed until the cold ocean waves lapped at his feet; the water was the only place left to go.

Marc lit a Winston with hands that stank of fish rot. *Where am I supposed to go?*

*Marcus…*

He didn’t draw his drenched gun this time. No one else was here. Marc waved a finger at the growling wolf to quiet him.

A hint of vanilla, sweet and never forgotten, floated by on the wind.

“Angie?”

Silence.

Marc grinned. *I’ve been alone too long.* He was the last person she would call after so long.

*Marcus! I need you!*

The words went right by his ear this time, making his breath catch.

*You owe me!*

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

Not letting his practical side get in the way, Marc concentrated like she’d taught him when they were kids, but he was unable to keep from wondering if the water had won. *Maybe this is the afterlife with an angel leading me to hell.*

*You can’t go yet. Not until you help me.*

The voice in his mind was clear, as if they were on a phone. He found it helped to pretend they were as his headache increased. *Was I injured? It would explain this.* “What do you need?”

*My life back.*

Marc jerked as if slapped, thrown into the past.

*I need you. Will you come?*

Her desperation pulled at his heart. “As quickly as I can.” This would be the fastest swoop he’d ever made. In addition, this fast journey over a short amount of time would be done alone, without the support of his team. “Tell me where.”

*Ohio. Cincinnati.*

Marc’s heart pounded faster. He’d been there, once. “Two weeks, Angie, maybe less.”

A relieved blast of energy exploded from her end.

Marc swayed on his feet as her power sank into him, stopping the headache. It had been fifteen years since he’d felt that.

*You have to hurry…*

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

The line went dead.

Marc rubbed Dog’s ears, seeing eagerness in the animal’s golden orbs. Clearly, Dog felt her pull too.

*Angie called for me!* Marc struggled to control the heart that suddenly felt younger, lighter. *It only took the end of the world to force her into it.*

# Chapter Six

**Adrian**

****

Safe Haven Refugee Camp

**Utah**

**1**

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

It’s been almost a week. I can’t believe my luck. Joe, a senior Greenpeace member, arrived late and heard me trying to dig out. There were no other survivors of that meeting. Why was I spared? I deserve to be dead. My dreams always start with me back in that basement. Maybe I’ll find answers there.

Joe and I are sheltering in a barn, waiting out the storms. I wonder if my companion hears any of what I dream about. It doesn’t matter, I guess. Not much does except making it to Little Rock. My grief for America is almost unbearable. If I were stronger, I would shoot myself

Adrian stopped reading his journal to drink from his canteen. The first depressing weeks had been hard days of backbreaking labor and eerie nights of broken dreams where he was in charge of a small group of survivors, fighting to keep them alive. Instead of fading as his concussion healed, the images had gotten stronger, clearer.

He’d found himself stewing on it constantly when he was awake. Thanks to his rebel mother, he’d already known how to set the foundation for a new republic. The refugees would have nothing but their lives. They would depend on him for everything. Desperate, grateful people didn’t usually ask questions about how their leaders were meeting those needs. He’d realized all it would take was working himself to death. He’d chosen to try, sure the guilt of knowing he might have prevented the war would keep him working even after the twenty-hour days began to wear him down.

*I was right*, Adrian thought. He was well into one of those now, the third this week. He went back to reading his journal.

*January 4th*

We hit Nellis today. There’s nothing left.

We got drunk and I talked too much about some of the things I want to do now, and about some of the things I can see and hear. When he just stared, I played it off by worrying that I’m going crazy. He really feels that way, so he bought it.

I have to be more careful about what I say. If Joe finds out I’m a descendant, he’ll kill me in my sleep. He won’t understand. I went through an evolution in that basement. My gifts are growing again, for the first time in a decade. It’s been so long I forgot what it felt like. I also forgot how to hide it.

*January 5th*

It’s getting worse. The people we’re discovering, the awful, pain-filled refugees trying to find each other, haunt me. They fall to their knees at my feet; they beg me with outstretched hands to help, to save them. Then I blink and they never even looked at us! What the hell is happening to me? An effect of the experiments? It’s not a normal evolution for my kind. Am I in a coma somewhere and this is just one of my horrid nightmares? How I wish that were true. I’d gladly trade my life for America.

I should have revealed who I was back when there might have been a chance to stop it. The need to atone is overwhelming. I can’t make enough progress each day to be satisfied.

*January 7th*

The dreams are convincing me this is the perfect time. I owe the entire world a debt, but to my country, I owe everything I am. Even the one waiting for me in Arkansas. My mother was right all along. I have to try to save America.

I’ve decided to start in the morning when we reach Las Vegas. That infamous skyline is dark now, but in the city that never sleeps, life survives. I know. I can see them from here.

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

Adrian flipped the page. The topless dancer had pounced on who she wanted in charge. By the time Tonya had understood the goodhearted firefighter was only interested in drinking, screwing, and forgetting, she was sleeping in his bed and fetching his bottles.

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

They’d set out for a base in Montana not long after. Adrian’s words of the secret bunker there were easy to believe. He’d been allowed to live because it was his duty to rebuild the world; he wasn’t afraid to lie to achieve that goal.

*January 11th*

There are thirty-one of us now. Most of them are elderly men. I doubt half will survive. Their injuries are so bad I can’t help them, other than providing drugs to dull the pain or a comforting hand to hold while they pass on. Each death kills something in me. I fear I’m sacrificing family for these strangers, but I can’t walk away. They need me too. I haven’t abandoned my son. I’m just very late.

*January 12th*

We sleep in vans and buses. We don’t have enough workers for erecting tents each night, but I have an idea for two common setups. When the new man, Doug, recovers, that’ll be his first chore.

Doug’s important to me. I just don’t know how yet. I found him by accident, or maybe by fate leading me. He was trapped under a collapsed bridge in a national forest near the Nevada state line. A pack of coyotes were keeping him from escaping the crushed car that landed in shallow water. It’s amazing he survived, despite his huge size. Retired Army, he’s one of my kind, but a little too old for what I need the most.

A tremor took out the bridge while Doug was crossing it. That made me decide to keep track of more things now, like the weather. If the temperatures continue to drop–and this is wintertime, so they should–then we won’t make it to Montana before we have to hole up somewhere. That keeps me awake at night, even when the guilt isn’t burning.

*January 13th*

Damn, I’m tired. These people are depending on me for everything. I’m encouraging it to show them I can handle the weight, but standing guard at night on third shift, doing rescue or supply runs during the day, plus helping set up camp and break it down has me beat. I have to have help, preferably the magic my dreams hinted of last night. My own gifts are limited to sleep charms and mental calls, which I make whenever I have the spare energy. Will fate send me what I need?

*January 15th*

We’ve spent the last two days in a mall, snowed in. The black flakes fell for almost twenty-four hours. It left over five feet of nasty slush. I kept everyone in until it melted. It felt wrong, as if contact might sicken us. I wonder if Mother Nature might be helping our extinction along. It’s a crazy notion, but in this new hell, anything is possible.

*January 20th*

We heard foreign voices on a military channel yesterday. I ordered the camp to relocate. No one argued. That makes it official for me. I’m the boss. I know they were scared–the man was calling for everyone to surrender to the Mexican draft–but for me, it’s real now. I’m in charge of forty-eight terrified, hurting refugees.

I’ve started wearing a radio to listen for trouble. Gangs are attacking towns in New Mexico and Colorado. The stories are awful. Some of my newest refugees are survivors of two wars. The threat of the gangs is a serious one that will require a harsh plan and a lot of defensive chores these people will have to help with. We’ve had a comfortable ride so far when it comes to other groups, but that will change.

The first mandatory camp meeting is coming in a few days. I’ll find out then if I’ve done enough to get their official support.

*January 25th*

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

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

We have more supplies on the way. Kyle and Neil found an undamaged sports store. I’m glad to have those two men. They both volunteered for the police force. I decided to have them each lead their own team. Kyle started first. I’m encouraged. I’m okay leaving the camp in his hands on third shift while I sleep. These men will not be trained as guards or Marines, but as soldiers in my army. The Eagles.

*January 26th*

My leadership is official. I know some of them are already watching for me to become like the politicians of the past, but I won’t use that authority until I have to. I plan to keep returning what was stolen from them. Slowly, things will come together. I see a better time of it when I have the help my dreams keep hinting of. Five or six more like me will take us to much better places.

Adrian paused again, this time to listen to the wind… He sighed at an obvious shadow outside his flap. That was Dale. He could tell by the shadowy hips that wore a tool belt without tools. The rookie was trying to pass his first level test and didn’t know he’d already failed. The police force was new. This group of nine was the second to try out. It wasn’t promising, but they were going fast out of need.

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

“Too late by then.” Adrian sighed. He was in charge. Tonya hated it, mainly because he wouldn’t give her the time of day, let alone any authority. She had turned a hero into a drunkard, slept around on Joe in her quest for power, and tried to manipulate all of them. She didn’t understand loyalty had to be earned, not stolen. While Adrian had been busy keeping them all alive, she had been plotting. Joe wasn’t going to get her what she wanted, but instead of breaking it off, she’d convinced one of her lovers to fight for her while Adrian was out of camp on a supply run. Her motive? Adrian still wasn’t sure. Had she really believed the camp would just give Joe’s place to her lover?

Adrian’s mind flashed to the death. His grip on the notebook tightened.

*“You have been found guilty. I sentence you to death!” Adrian grabbed Caleb by his jacket and dragged him out of the tent, leaving a wide, bloody smear. He handcuffed the screaming man to the door of Joe’s lime green convertible, then stomped toward a nearby supply truck. He tossed the key into the dirt just out of the killer’s reach. “You can set him free when he’s dead.”*

*His mind raced furiously. Tonya did this. Caleb is one of her lovers.*

*Minutes later, Adrian left the tent with Joe’s stiffening body over one broad shoulder, a shovel in his other hand. People stayed by him as he dug the grave. Many of them begged forgiveness for not stopping it. Point man when it happened, Neil had been the most ashamed. No one had wanted to get involved, even former state troopers.*

*Adrian sank the cross into the thick dirt. “I’m getting tired, and there are survivors out there who care enough to really try again. If you guys can’t get it together enough to do what’s right, then I’ll find another group to help. You’ll be on your own again.”*

Adrian shut the notebook. The panicked promises had told him he had their loyalty. Except for Tonya. Never one to follow blindly, her twisted logic had become clear when she’d arrived at Joe’s tent after the burial, where Adrian was packing up. She had begged him not to be banished; he had let her stay because of one sentence.

*“If I had known Caleb was nuts, I woulda told someone!”*

That had stopped him. He too had missed it; they had let in a remorseless killer. Because of Tonya’s lust for power, two men were dead, but he couldn’t punish her due to his strict rules concerning the treatment of women.

So Adrian had devised his own line of justice.

*Scratch…scratch…*

Adrian grinned, setting the notebook aside. Revenge was best served cold. He’d only waited for that reason. He could have had her the same day as Joe’s murder if he’d wanted. He had waited almost two months out of respect for Joe. “Come in.”

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

Barely lit by the shadows of the center fire, the sexy redhead didn’t witness his smile merge into a greedy leer of lust.

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

“Oh! I’ve wanted ya so badly!” Tonya moaned, pressing closer to his hard body in the dark tent as the cold Utah wind beat against the camouflage vinyl.

Her light Southern accent was fake but sexy. Adrian’s body throbbed with need.

Tonya groaned in delight as his mouth slanted over hers, hands roaming her soft body, discovering she wore no panties to slow him down. He grabbed a handful of thick red curls and ground his hardness against her belly.

Adrian pushed the camp whore down by her shoulder, pulling at her dress as she slid to her knees; her fingers went to the buckle of his jeans. When her hot mouth closed over him, he arched forward.

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

He kissed her deeply, loving it that her gasps weren’t faked like some women he’d been with. He moved inside her, shallow at first. He pushed passionate vibes over her, groaning.

She climaxed, nails raking his shoulder, body tightening, pulsing, exploding. Adrian thrust harder, dog tag clinking against the chain.

Tonya let her hands roam his hard, tanned skin and soft, blond spikes. “We’ll be good together. I’ll be a good mate to ya.” She moaned again as he started long, hard strokes that slid her up on the floor and drew a surprising rush of wetness. Few men could pull two from her.

Adrian tangled his hands in her thick curls and pushed in deeper, on fire as he watched triumph and need melt together on her face.

“Finally, mine!” She growled, giving him a chill as she pulled him down to kiss his sexy mouth.

Coming up for air, Adrian smiled cruelly, leaning his weight into each thrust. “Oh no, baby. This is a onetime deal. Enjoy it.”

He swelled, almost snapping when she understood, but her body refused to listen. Her slender hips kept perfect rhythm as he rutted between her long legs.

“Bastard!” On the edge, Tonya pulled him down for another hot kiss that shoved her into a second world of rivers and light. She began to struggle almost immediately.

He let her. The pain in her expression was a bigger turn-on than even her mouth. Adrian ground their lips together, kissing her, touching her, mocking her as he thrust.

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

Adrian dropped his full weight on her. “Be still!” he growled harshly, hips pounding into hers. “You’ve begged for it enough!”

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

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

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

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

He laughed, fishing in his pockets for a smoke.

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

Her fake accent was gone. She snarled when his confident smile remained in place.

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

“Even you can’t get away with rape!” She pulled on her other boot.

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

“If these people knew what kind of man you honestly are, they wouldn’t follow you anywhere!” Tonya stomped from the tent with sticky thighs and Adrian’s mocking voice following her out into the chilly air.

“But they don’t know, Red, and from you, they’ll never believe it.”

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

*Was it really rape?*

Adrian shook his head. *I didn’t promise her a relationship or any other type of commitment. She came to my tent and I delivered two orgasms. No court in the country would have convicted me.*

Adrian pushed away the slight edge of guilt and went back to studying his notebook entries. Tonya was a snake who hadn’t been punished for Joe’s murder. Now, she had. Adrian’s smile faded. His leadership hadn’t been questioned once after Joe’s death. Later, Neil had told him his brutal execution of the killer had gotten the camp’s final approval. Adrian had stopped himself from telling the trooper how morally wrong it was to earn respect by taking a life. This was a hard, new world. They were all adjusting as best they could.

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

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

Adrian’s relentless mind moved on to where they would call home for the next winter. He’d already checked a list of places. When they broke camp in the morning, they would continue north, toward the base in Montana, but he already knew what they’d find there–nothing. His followers were hoping for authority. Adrian was taking them to the bunker under the compound for lack of a better option, but if they kept picking up survivors regularly, that small shelter wouldn’t hold them all. They would figure it out before he got them there. It was another layer of stress. Their choice of destination had been left to him. The camp had indicated they had faith in his decisions. Though that had been the plan all along, it was still a large burden.

“It’s like sheep.” He knew they were scared, but Adrian was unable to imagine a situation where he would give over control of his own life so easily. They had no problem being told where to sit and stand. It made things a lot easier, but it also revealed how weak they were and how much had to be done.

*I’ll go do rounds again; maybe I can sleep then.* Adrian exited into windy darkness, pulling on a heavy jacket with a fading eagle on the back. He was grateful for the salty wind that slapped his nose. Even with a hint of shit from their portable bathrooms, it was heaven compared to the reeking odors of smoke, decay, and blood hanging over the cities.

Eager to make rounds of the perimeter, Adrian still took time to listen. He heard soft murmurs of chatter and rustling flaps. His herd wasn’t settled yet. He wouldn’t hit his own rack until they were.

Adrian checked on the guards first. He heard the almost constant crunch of boots as the Eagles prowled, sweeping the darkness. Few, if any, of his new army would slack off. He had chosen them because they understood it might be just one man’s dream, but it was America’s future. They were nine-man teams of safety in the darkness. He was teaching them as fast as he could.

Adrian scanned the area. He spotted Dale again, but not the other new trainees. This new group of rookies was in the middle of individual challenges. He allowed himself a rare, brief flash of pride at having made it this far. It was their final test to be level one Eagles in his army. Only his approval on this would pass them.

Adrian ignored the glittering green eyes burning holes into him from the female section of the tents. He slid a red bandana into his front pocket, leaving the end dangling. Was the radio quiet? It hadn’t been last night, though understanding the words through the loud storm raging around them had been impossible. The screams had been clear. It still bothered Adrian that he couldn’t help.

They heard survivors regularly on the CB. Those close enough, he sought out, leaving on supply runs with a few of the more promising guards and returning with survivors. Those with him knew he had planned it that way, down to the last detail. They were *his* people; he wanted them all.

Adrian eased toward the north end of the half mile wide camp, listening to a clumsy rookie following. He needed ten more alert minded men to put on duty at night. Hell, another five observant bodies would let him get four hours of sleep instead of the three he was averaging now as he struggled to keep his end of the deal. It was a strange, dangerous life.

He didn’t baby the refugees, but he did try to distract them from some of the things that might have caused rebellion–like training his army. He gave them soccer and football games, poker nights, and shooting contests. Eventually they would start feeling like Americans again. Once that happened, they would wake up to the unpleasant reality that it was going to be a rough trip. They had to work together.

The guard on the north end of the dim parking area was Doug, now recovered from his trial under the bridge. The 6’4” Army veteran had red hair and a red vest under a raggedy green jacket. He was hard to miss, even in a crowd, but he was nowhere to be seen as Adrian stepped between the dented, muddy vehicles. Doug had been years out of service due to an injury that had left him with a limp; he was a great comfort to have during this time of chaos.

“Anything moving?” The blond leader knew he had been heard despite the unguarded appearance of the parking area. He saw tattered flags flapping in the heavy wind from nearly every antenna. That had been Kyle’s doing, he was sure.

“Same as last night. The wind, my boots, and Tonya.” Doug unfolded from behind a small, blue Mustang.

He came closer, leaving big prints in the gravel. Adrian had saved his life. He’d given Doug work that made him feel useful again, but he wasn’t really a part of these people yet. The big man wasn’t comfortable enough to joke, let alone ask questions.

“Where was she going?”

Doug stretched his wide shoulders, scanning the dark shapes of sick fir trees lining the taped off area. He kept his left hand in his pocket. It was shaking slightly. He didn’t know if the hard leader would pull him off duty for it or not, so he wasn’t taking the chance. “Her tent. She’s pissed again.”

Adrian gave a small smile of satisfaction. “Isn’t she always?”

Doug grinned, but he kept a tight leash on his mouth. Doug had joined the service to keep from being another Irish potato farmer in Idaho. Once in, he’d found a way of life and a moral code that had allowed him to keep his hope. The same was true of Adrian, who had enough faith to save the world. Doug had witnessed Tonya coming from Adrian’s tent, but Doug wasn’t about to begrudge him a piece of ass that many in camp had already had. Adrian was sacrificing everything to save some of this country. Doug, who had given most of his life for the same thing, had a lot of respect for Safe Haven’s leader. It made Doug willing to overlook anything that might interfere with the dream. Like the camp finding out Adrian was screwing the woman they all suspected was a black widow, or at least an accomplice to murder. That information was dangerous. He would guard it well.

Adrian slipped out of camp through the parking area, hating the blackness around them. It said mankind was in trouble. As he approached the men guarding the rear of the camp, Adrian stalked them like an intruder would. These guards were bouncers, factory workers, store owners, restaurant employees, and they were on drag–the area farthest from the safe haven he’d tried to create. Being the warning system put them in the most danger. Because of that, and many other things he had foreseen, Adrian had been working them hard–some more than others, like Kyle and Neil. This was a test of their alertness. He planned on many more in the future. It was essential–

*Click.*

Adrian stilled at the sound of a safety being flipped off. He was pleased when the same noise came from behind him.

“This is a US military refugee camp. State your business!” A faint, static-ridden crunch of a handheld radio followed the icy warning. The guard had let the others know they had a problem, as he’d been taught.

“Mister, I’ve got a clear shot. I will take it unless you state your business!”

“Stand down, Neil.” The trees were vague shadows shifting in the wind. Adrian didn’t see Neil at all. *He’s very good at hiding.*

The sigh was audible. “Damn, Adrian!” Neil slid his Beretta into the holster as he emerged from behind a nearby tree.

Neil lifted his night vision goggles and flipped on the light around his neck, illuminating the thick fir trees he’d chosen to take cover in.

Adrian pinned him with a searching stare. “Would you have fired if I hadn’t spoken up?”

Neil nodded right away, tall, thin shadow not quite leaning against the tree as the wind blew harder. “Affirmative. We can’t take chances now.”

Boots crunched from two directions and arrived at the same time, telling Adrian they had been where they were supposed to be.

“What’s wrong?”

“You okay?”

Neil waited for Adrian to address the arriving guards. When he didn’t, Neil did, keying his walkie talkie so the other men on duty around camp could hear too. “Disregard; false alarm. Resume your posts.”

The two men went without question or complaint, nodding to Adrian.

They were probably glad to have something to keep them awake. He had put the right man in charge of this shift, though. That was clear. The trooper, who everyone called Neil, wasn’t your average cop. Despite his young age of not quite thirty, people had begun to wonder if Neil was being looked over for second in command.

He wasn’t. He didn’t have the special spark Adrian was searching for, but Neil was still valuable. It hurt no one to let the camp assume that, and it encouraged them to follow the trooper’s every order. Neil already knew Adrian was holding that place for someone they hadn’t found yet.

Adrian noted Neil’s respect; he waited for the boss to begin. “Hearing anything?”

“Negative. Lights again, though. A few campfires.” Neil glanced around, hunting for the trainees who were shadowing Adrian. He didn’t spot them, but Neil was sure they were there. He and Kyle had recently passed their own level tests.

Adrian’s mind went to the slavers. “How many fires tonight?”

“Two northwest. Same ones we’ve spotted all week, following us. Kyle thinks they’ll make contact tomorrow. I agree.”

“Why?”

Neil frowned, settling his cover on more firmly as thick flurries rained over them. “The other campfire, the one northeast, is big and loud. That’ll push the smaller groups our way out of fear.”

Adrian was glad they’d found the equipment shed at Pine Valley untouched. They had a lot of weapons and defensive choices most survivors wouldn’t. If the loud group became a threat, they might disappear. “That’s exactly what I hope will happen. How many?”

Neil shook his head, worrying. “Can’t tell yet.”

“Was it the group we heard yesterday, screaming for all Americans to die?”

“Yeah… They’re bigger than us.”

Adrian wasn’t surprised. The bad people would always gather faster than the good. They would always outnumber them too if things continued like they were going now. “Can you find a few more men? Double the guard.”

Neil glanced at his watch. “After the check in?”

“Yes.” Adrian scanned the hat Neil insisted on wearing. It fit well with the solid black uniforms he’d put together for everyone, including himself. The eagle on the rear of his jacket was a necessary concession. Later, it would be dangerous to announce who he was so openly, but for now, he needed to be easily picked out of a crowd for the comfort of his camp.

Neil offered him the walkie talkie.

Adrian shook his head. “I’m not here.”

Neil keyed the mike. “Check in time. Let’s try to remember how to count. Point is clear.”

Adrian smothered a grin at the cocky tone, glad Neil wasn’t as tight assed as his words often suggested. Getting each shift to talk in the right order, using the right wording, was frustrating–especially for Neil. He was used to the smooth organization of a police radio. Being the end of five generations of officers made it doubly annoying whenever someone called out of order, or worse, forgot their area number.

“Area two, nothing here.” That was Kyle at the communications center.

“Area three, clear.” Doug, at the parking lot.

“Four, clear.” Chris, at the mess tent.

Everyone waited for Danny, the guard on the water tankers. When he didn’t check in, Neil frowned. *Isn’t there anything that guy can do right?* “Check in now, area five!”

Silence again… Then the handset crackled. “Five, sorry. All’s fine here.” The voice was groggy.

Neil handed the set to Adrian. This was his chore.

Adrian keyed the mike. “Area five, is my cat in the barn?”

“No, sir! Nature call.”

“Copy. Five is clear. Next?” The check in continued as Adrian handed the set back to Neil.

Neil huffed. “Think he fell asleep again?”

“Probably. Call in his relief when you get the extra men. Let’s have Danny put lime dust around the johns each day before he can have a bottle. We shouldn’t get into the habit of being careless.” Neil recapped thick brown curls under his hat. “Most of the men said okay to the mountains, if we can’t find anything better along the way and the bunker’s too small for us by then.”

Adrian understood the reluctance. He also wanted to rebuild on top of the earth, not inside it, but confessing to Neil about the size of the bunker had definitely been an excellent choice. *Wish I could have told him everything, but Neil’s too uptight to understand the other choices I’ve made.*

Neil wondered what Adrian’s shadows thought of all the conversations they were overhearing, remembering his own revelations about their supposedly altruistic leader. “I should be doing more, to help you.”

Adrian stared, yanked from his thoughts.

Neil clarified when Adrian only kept staring. “Is there something else I can do?”

Adrian studied Neil’s narrow profile as the frigid wind blew a fresh dusting of flurries over their boots. “Is there something else you want to do?”

Neil lifted his chin, trying not to be intimidated. “I have some ideas–mostly about the guards…and security.”

Adrian’s face split into a grin. He clapped the surprised man on the shoulder. “It took you long enough to ask!”

Neil didn’t know what to say.

Adrian did. “I can’t ask for it; it has to be offered.”

Neil filed that rule. “I’m offering.”

“Excellent. I want you as my chief of security.”

They were the words everyone wanted to hear. He had earned a position by Adrian, one that proved to the camp he was useful. Neil was speechless again.

Adrian made sure the man understood the details. “It’ll probably be ninth or tenth in the final chain of command, but for a while, it will be third or fourth, and you’ll always be in the loop. My word.”

Neil felt careful gratitude and a small flare of guilt. His life was better now than it had been before the war. In this awful new world, he was finally serving the true greater good. “Is this the official offer?”

“No, that comes later. For now, work hard and learn.” Adrian hesitated, then continued. “And keep your eyes open for anyone else I should talk to.”

Neil studied him. “You mean people like you.”

It wasn’t a question. Adrian frowned, hoping he hadn’t offended the trooper. “Like me?”

“It’s hard to explain. Something draws us to you.” Neil shrugged. “I’ll know it when I feel it.”

Adrian put a hand on his shoulder. “Your loyalty means a great deal to me, Neil. You’ve been by my side almost since the beginning. All the responsibility you’re hoping for will happen.”

Neil was eager for that time to come. “I recognize the sacrifices you’re making. We all do. We’re grateful you stuck by us when everyone else split.”

A little uncomfortable–his guilt was whispering insults again–Adrian opened his mouth; he was immediately disappointed with what came out. “We’ll make it. God will help us find our way now.”

Neil’s face darkened. He turned away. “Why didn’t he help before we got lost?”

**2**

Adrian took his time going back. He skirted the nervous mule deer huddled together for warmth, encouraged to see them. Except for the amount of debris rolling with the wind, it was normal here. Plastic bags, fast food wrappers, bits of paper, mildewed clothes–it was the same garbage that had always littered America, but the amount of it had grown drastically without litter patrols and trash services. The war had affected every aspect of American life, even their waste.

Still, other than the debris and the occasional rotting fox or rabbit, it was as if nothing bad had happened. That was the whole point of him choosing parks. How could his refugees heal if they were constantly being reminded of all they’d lost?

Back in the heart of camp now, Adrian heard snores. He was glad to find no one passed out around the bonfire. They were all finally adjusting to being under canvas.

Adrian nodded to Jeremy, who was now guarding the water tankers in place of Danny. It pleased him that the new guard on the hundred-gallon portable tankers was wearing the entire black outfit, but Adrian didn’t stop to talk.

Two shadows now following, Adrian got a cup of coffee from the deserted mess, then strode to the tow truck they had converted into Safe Haven’s communication center. The guard here was his most promising man. A former captain in the infamous Genovese mob family, Kyle had also dressed in the suggested gear, even down to the cap over his short, curly black hair. Adrian had convinced the mobster to make a clean break instead of trying to go back to New York for any family who might have survived. “Hear anything?”

Kyle frowned. “Nothing but static, Boss. Storm whacked the antenna good.”

“Did Mitch pass the radio test?”

“Yep. Only one who did.”

“I want him on the radio full time come morning. Tell him to get comfortable there.”

Kyle swept the landscape around them. “You know it.” Content for the moment that all in their kingdom was secure, Kyle took the opportunity to share his thoughts. “Something’s coming. I feel it in the wind.”

Adrian had the same worries. “Good or bad?”

“It’s hard to tell. A little of both?”

Before Kyle could add anything, Adrian spun. The movement was so fast, his hand was there before the action registered to the witnesses.

Adrian let go of the fingers that had been about to snatch the dangling bandana from his front pocket.

“Damn!”

“Pass.”

The Eagle, a plumber from Oregon, swallowed his surprise and snapped off a smart salute before vanishing into the darkness.

Kyle grinned. “Daryl thought he had you.”

“That’s how he failed. Rushed the end and made a noise as he went for it. Chris also passed. Dale needs to do it all again.”

Kyle wrote it in his small notebook, not questioning. Adrian was a sharp judge of character. Kyle trusted him completely.

“I’ll be in my tent.”

Kyle subtly trailed Adrian to make sure he got there. These people were lucky to have the natural born leader. Adrian was hitting on all eight; he knew what was coming and was preparing to handle it. Because of him, most of these refugees would probably survive. If they got some of the help Adrian had all his top men on the lookout for, there might be a chance for more than just surviving.

# Chapter Seven

**The Enemy**

****

Colorado

**January 29th**

**1**

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

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

Rick kept to himself as he walked through the camp, pretending not to understand the insults from those he passed. The faint noise of crying and begging was overshadowed by the lustful shouts of men and the excited yapping of fighting dogs.

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

Rick stopped in front of the crooked center tent and tapped on the flap before shoving his cold hands into the pockets of his dirty jeans. Most of Cesar’s men were drunk and in a good mood. The church they’d desecrated in Santa Fe four days ago had been full of women and kids who’d gone there for sanctuary, but it wasn’t a friendly mood. The tremors in Rick’s stomach doubled as the first flakes of black snow began to fall. What did these brutal invaders know that he didn’t?

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

“Wait there.” The Mexican leader’s cold tone carried.

Rick saw the widening grins of the two dozen men watching him. They dressed like bandits, with crisscrossed belts and wide brimmed sombreros. They also acted like them, enjoying any chance to make him squirm. They wanted him to know only Cesar’s orders kept him from the fate of all the other males they’d found. Only Mexicans were spared, and then only if they agreed to join up for the conquest of America.

Rick watched them right back. He might be an outsider, but he was also Cesar’s private property and the short, stocky leader would kill anyone who touched what was his. It kept Rick from the horrible death that was often threatened; it didn’t stop him from being beaten.

The freed inmate wasn’t exactly sure what kept him here. There had been chances to escape, but Rick hadn’t tried. Maybe it was the lack of rules, or how he felt more alive than he ever had before as he lived among these violent killers, keeping his life where no other white men had so far.

Rick turned from an icy blast of wind. *Maybe I have a death wish.* He was sure he would be eliminated eventually, but for now, he was surviving where no one else could. He straightened his shoulders. *They can only kill me once.*

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

“Come in, *Reechard*.”

Rick’s attention snapped back to why he had been called. A battle waged in his mind as he entered. He was vaguely glad to be out of sight of the unshaven, dirty slavers camped on the dark lanes of US 25 as if they owned it.

Rick saw the inside of the tent was the same. Only the bait was different. The first time Cesar called him here, Rick had been so relieved to be spared that he’d agreed without thinking. *Salem*. Time slowed as he remembered…

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

*“You wish to live, yes?”*

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

*“I know, Americano, and you will.” The slaver’s blade went against his throat, sharp knife pricking the skin with each stroke.*

*Rick moaned, scared, but on fire.*

*“If you do what I want.”*

*Rick nodded carefully, struggling not to slit his own throat as he raped the woman Cesar had thrown into his arms. His hand slid around her neck to get a better grip. “W-whatever you want!”*

*“Squeeze harder.” Cesar motioned, glowing cigar lowering to her bare hip. “She breathes too easy.”*

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

Cesar was sitting on the bed, rolling a thick line of white powder into a blunt paper, something Rick had never seen anyone do before. He waited inside the awful smelling mess, shifty green eyes going over the man in the dirty gray robe who claimed to be the bastard son of Fidel Castro. Rick knew better than to stare at the naked slave kneeling by his boots. His gaze swept filthy clothes, a blanket, scraps of food. Her dog collar and chain prevented the shivering girl from reaching any of those items. Rick had time to think he liked the look of the heavy metal on her and then reality crashed in.

“Reechard. It is time to pay for the second month of life I have decided to give you.”

The Mexican accent was thick, but understandable. Rick’s stomach dropped the rest of the way. He rubbed his damp palms down dirty jeans. “What do you want me to do?”

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

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

Rick said nothing, knowing not to tell the ruthless slaver he wouldn’t leave at sunrise.

Cesar glared at him in warning. The Mexican’s left hand clenched into half a fist; two fingers were missing. “Sí?”

Rick dropped his eyes. “I can’t.”

The former janitor’s low, apologetic voice made his 5’11”, 190lb frame appear much smaller as he stood in the flickering shadows. “I’m sorry. You’ll have to kill me, I guess.”

Cesar smiled, gold front tooth flashing in the dim lantern light of the drafty tent. “All in good time, *Reechard*.” Cesar waved a ringed finger. “Girl.”

Jennifer climbed onto the large pile of blankets behind the ruthless man. She was terrified, shaking.

Rick felt a small measure of pity, but it was drowned out by the jealousy that Cesar was getting her all to himself while Rick hadn’t had a woman since they’d left the prison and taken the first town. *Salem, where I helped kill them all.*

For a few seconds, Rick’s attention was captured by the outside noises. He thought of how bad it was here and had been in Arizona and New Mexico. He heard gunshots, a scream, a louder scream, a bigger gunshot… A fading scream. Then everything settled back to the dim quiet of the bait girl’s shallow, fearful breathing and the sound of the storm starting.

“Reechard.”

It was an ugly tone, hinting at the slight insanity most of Cesar’s men suspected and respected.

“I can’t. They’re my people.”

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

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

His gaze crawled over the washed teenager even though he knew it might get him in trouble. He’d never had one so young. *I wish she was blonde...*

Cesar, whose nickname was Hijo de la Muerte, *Son of Death*, waved a hand. “Arrodillarse.”

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

Rick’s mouth went dry, body twitching.

“You want her, sí?”

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

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

Rick fell.

Jennifer was relieved, though she didn’t change her terrified demeanor. Anyone was better than Cesar. *He uses my body against me to hurt my mind, though I try to fight that. What I can’t take is him hurting the kids this way. He’s beyond evil. If he ever finds out I have gifts, no one left in this country will be safe.*

# Chapter Eight

**Right Place, Right Kind**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

Utah

**February 1st**

**1**

**C**harlie saw the vehicles first and knew they were who Kenny was searching for.

It was three o’clock, but the blanket of sky crap, as Charlie called it, made it feel like dusk. Five long days of traveling in the gritty wind had given them both red, squinted eyes and rough, scratchy patches on their exposed skin. The dirt bike had been left in northern Arizona. Empty of fuel, with no refills in sight, the Honda was just another rusting pile of metal on a broken road.

After that, things had gone bad. It had rained nearly every day since the war, but Kenn refused to try sterilizing it. He already knew it would make them sick. As a result, they had run out of clean water this morning and towns around here were nonexistent. This was the Southern Badlands in the Black Rock Desert.

*We’re in trouble.* Kenn knew there had to be at least a gas station around here somewhere, but the sand was blowing thickly; he couldn’t see much beyond the occasional dead car or body. He had chosen not to leave the main road because of that. Utah was a huge place. A rescue party would not be sent if they got lost.

Kenn hadn’t seen a home or business of any kind since dawn yesterday. There were vehicles–batteries dead, windows shattered, inches of dust in the seats–but there were no structures. Overall, 257 was a desolate stretch.

Kenn looked east, toward home, but his mind stayed on NORAD. There had been smoke from that direction almost continuously. He’d come further west to check the Dugway Proving Ground.

Kenn forced his sore feet to keep moving and his scratchy eyes to keep searching. Raised in a wealthy family where he had been the party favorite, being on his own was new to Kenn. Even in the Corps, there had been his fellow Marines to seek admiration from. This isolation was not welcome. It didn’t help Charlie wasn’t talking to him unless he had to. Their direction wasn’t due east and the teenager didn’t want to hear about slavers or detours. He just wanted his mom.

Charlie stayed a couple feet behind the wide shouldered Marine, sheltered from some of the stinging sand as he peered through Kenn’s powerful binoculars. He wasn’t searching for anything. He was just bored, sleepy, and tired of walking. There was nothing exciting except the big ants that Kenny wouldn’t waste their ammunition on.

He swung around to look behind them.

A glint of silver flashed.

His jaw dropped. A spiteful wave of wind sent harsh, stinging grit into his open mouth. He began to cough, doubled over.

Kenn put a hand on his arm.

Charlie thrust the binoculars at him. “People!” He coughed again, pointing. “It’s...lights…right? A lot of them.”

Kenn studied the long convoy filling the horizon. Were they survivors or slavers? *Guess we’ll find out*. The large convoy of semis, cars, and trucks was now coming toward them.

Headlights flashed from the lead rig. Then from each vehicle as they were spotted.

Kenn felt his heart warm a little at the familiar American greeting, but it didn’t ease the acid in his gut. “Stay by me, boy. Do what I do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kenn tried to estimate their number. Not that it mattered. They couldn’t fight so many. He drew his gun anyway as the vehicles got closer, letting the weapon hang.

Thick sand blew harder as all the vehicles except the front rig stopped. The red, white, and blue tractor trailer inched forward.

Kenn got ready to fight.

The front semi stopped next to them, driver window lowering.

Kenn stepped in front of Charlie, lifting his gun to his hip. The barrel was pointed at the dusty ground, but his finger stayed on the trigger; it was a clear warning.

The driver’s big hand was on the wheel. When the left hand finished lowering the window, it joined the right. “Do you intend to use that weapon, *soldier*?”

Years of training made both males square their shoulders at the cold bark. The correct response fell from Kenn’s mouth, despite the insulting title. “A *Marine* never draws without intent. That would be a mistake.”

“And what’s wrong with that, Grunt?”

The hard tone allowed no hesitation.

“Because the United States Marine Corps does not make mistakes!” Kenn and Charlie answered together.

Kenn snapped his mouth shut, studying the driver. Short, golden blond hair over black, mirrored sunglasses. A white T-shirt, and yes, a single dog tag. He’d been found by one of his own.

Charlie’s frown was hidden by Kenn’s big back. *The driver’s like me. I can feel it. I hope he can’t.*

“So, where ya headed?”

This tone was friendly, but Kenn understood the first, sharp edge of command he had greeted them with was his real voice. “Northeast.”

“Hunting for family?”

Kenn shrugged, not glancing away as the wind pushed more sand toward them. “Something like that.”

“He your son?”

Always working on how he appeared to others, Kenn used a protective tone. “He might as well be. I’m Kenn. He’s Charlie. We’re from Fort Defiance.”

The driver took off glasses to look at Kenn through beautiful pale, blue eyes. “I’m Adrian.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Those are my people. They’re from everywhere. We have room as long as you follow the rules.”

The tone was casual, but that startling gaze was hard, assessing.

Kenn holstered his gun. “For a while, but we leave together when I say. He’s *my* people.”

Adrian frowned. “We’re Americans, Marine. No one is here against their will.”

Kenn tried not to flush at the scorn in the response.

Adrian picked up his mike. “Neil.”

“On the way, Boss.”

Adrian waved at Kenn. “We’ll make camp in about an hour. Neil will get you settled.”

“Thanks. We could use some R&R.”

Adrian smiled. “Don’t thank me yet. After a full week of working, you may want to be alone again.”

Kenn was encouraged. Work meant organization, authority, planning–all the things he was hoping for in a group.

A small gray minivan pulled next to the semi, door already open.

Kenn snapped a quick salute to Adrian. Not waiting for it to be returned, he waved Charlie in, then climbed aboard, sliding the door shut.

The males were grateful to be in any shelter, but this one was warm, comfortable, and functioning. Kenn sank down with a groan of relief as he swept the three armed men observing him. One was the size of a tank. The other two wore weapons and tools of military men, though they clearly weren’t.

Neil noticed the reaction, mind already racing as he waited for the semi to move so the minivan would be third in line again. “It’s not like that. If he believed you were a threat, he would have split you two up. You’d be riding with him.”

Kenn was introduced to Doug, Kyle, and Neil. He gave them first names, no details. Their leader knew he was military. Everyone else would figure it out.

All three Eagles instinctively knew important work waited for Kenn–serious deeds that would benefit them all. They also sensed something wasn’t quite right about the new man.

“The boss probably already has a job in mind for you.” In the front passenger seat, Kyle swiveled his chair to stare at the 9mm on Kenn’s hip, certain they would never drink from the same bottle. The new guy was hinky.

Kenn frowned at the tanned, stocky sentry. “Like what? We just met.”

All three men hesitated, shrugging.

Kenn sensed respect kept their mouths shut. Those were the boss man’s questions; these were his highest men.

“Could be anything.” Neil steered around the same lump in the road the other vehicles were avoiding. “Mechanic, babysitter–it’s hard to tell. He sees things, discovers talents.” Neil paused, examining Kenn in the mirror in a way that was polite but not friendly. “He might even think you should be one of us.”

Kenn took the offered cigarette, but handed the bottle of water to the boy relaxing next to him, aware of the red vested giant studying the teenager. Maybe wondering what stories Charlie might tell if he was alone? Kenn would make sure that didn’t happen for a while. “Sounds like a club.” He tested the water.

Doug glared. “It is. We’re his chain of command. We support him–completely.”

Kenn wasn’t intimidated. “I’d like to be able to do that too. I owe him our lives. Sell me.”

Adrian shifted into gear and got his convoy rolling. They were going to Delta for survivors who had called on the CB this morning. Then he planned to spend a few days in Oak Creek National Forest. The dust was horrible to drive through. The sand got into everything as it gusted against their battered vehicles. He wanted to wait until it settled before heading out again.

His mind went to his newest additions as he drove, mind replaying the meeting. Their uniforms hadn’t mattered. He had known the pair for what they were the second he saw their shadowy outlines. He didn’t believe it was a coincidence that they were Marines. Kenn would be one of his circle. Instead of being elated to have found his first promised helper, Adrian had a sinking feeling that Kenn might also be a weak link. That was dangerous because the first of his circle would be the one he depended on the most. The bond of bringing these refugees through the wilderness needed to be strong enough to hold them all together. It was the foundation. A crack or weak brick could cause the whole thing to fall.

Adrian sighed, head starting to ache from peering through the grit. It didn’t matter right now. The man was needed; he didn’t have the luxury of cherry-picking his help. Kenn had put the boy behind him, instead of in front. That said enough about his character… *Doesn’t it?*

**2**

Kenn was impressed from the minute they stopped to make camp. It grew as he watched them set it all up.

Tents were erected, campers and trucks were guided into place, yellow caution tape was wound around the entire perimeter. Kids ran for bathrooms, animals were let out, supplies were unpacked, and through it all, Neil was there–talking, directing, solving, supervising.

Kenn knew it was a perk of leadership to have that job, to command authority during setups. Kenn was only a little surprised to already want it. He’d definitely found his own kind in Adrian.

It only took a couple more minutes of watching for Kenn to understand Adrian didn’t have an Executive Officer. His right side was empty, and they were all vying for the place.

Kenn’s sharp eyes found Adrian directing the camp members in the parking area. His gaze narrowed, feet already moving. *Is someone sneaking through the cars?*

Kenn was at Adrian’s side seconds later, drawing frowns from those around them. Instead of saying anything, he chose to start earning points.

The shadow slipped a hand between the cars...

Kenn locked it in a tight grip, 9mm pointed at the infiltrator.

“Easy.” Adrian was pleased. “He’s one of ours.”

Realizing it was a test or challenge, Kenn leered as he let go. “Boo-ya!”

Adrian swept the surprised men, most of whom hadn’t noted the rookie at all because of the blowing sand. “Training lesson number eight–sometimes, no matter what you plan for, fate throws in a wild card. When that happens, you do the best you can to survive.” Adrian gave Jeremy a motion. “Fail. Help them set the targets and we’ll see if our new guy knows how to use the weapon on his hip.”

Kenn took the hint, holstering as Jeremy threw him a sharp glare and stomped off. “Maybe I could help during a drill or something.”

Adrian’s tone was full of warning. “That and more, but you’ll have to work for it. Nothing’s free in this new world, and certainly not in Safe Haven.”

Kenn’s chin lifted. “I’ve always earned my way before. I expect to now.”

“Good. Let’s get to work.”

Kenn grinned as he fell in on Adrian’s right, aware of the camp observing him, whispering, wondering who he was. *Finally!* The attention he craved.

Charlie hid his frown and stayed close to Kenn. It felt good here, but it wasn’t home. He had a keen sense that the Marine would want to stay. These were Kenny’s people; the teenager could tell. It made him miss his mom even more.

She said she was coming soon, but Charlie couldn’t help his doubts. He’d heard her calls to someone named Markus. He was sure Kenny had too, though he’d pretended to be asleep. Charlie was afraid. He and Kenn were Marines, and they’d been in trouble more than once and been lucky to escape. His mom needed help. Kenn was a true badass. The man who challenged him needed to be as well.

Charlie subtly scanned Adrian, hoping to see that same hard edge. *I wonder...?*

# Chapter Nine

**Mercy and Death**

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NORAD Road, Colorado

**Ground Hogs’ Day**

**1**

**S**amantha’s hope of safety inside Cheyenne Mountain was gone before she got there. The smoke she had been seeing all morning rolled up behind the hills in thick, black waves that signaled fresh destruction. Wide winged birds circled the sky.

Samantha had built it up in her mind. The government had been ready for decades. All she had to do was get there and persuade one guard to check her prints. Then she would be safe inside the bunker. Ignoring the conscience asking why she was worthier of protection than the dead she had passed along the way, Samantha had pushed herself relentlessly.

She’d made 8-12 miles every day, on foot. She longed to drive, but she couldn’t handle any attention she might attract. Even her weather gift seemed to be against her; it wasn’t working at all. Samantha assumed that was because of the constant stress she was existing under. She was traveling through a new, unknown world that tried hard daily to break her. This existence went against how she’d been raised. Her sheltered childhood had allowed her to stay above the human misery she was witnessing now. It was heartbreaking. The dream of safety had been the only thing keeping her going.

She wanted to gather supplies and hide, but the hope had kept her moving through Rawlings, where rats as big as bread loaves were starting to take over. In Table Rock, she’d been chased out of a barn by an animal that looked like a cat, but acted like a raccoon.

Yesterday morning, she had bleached her yellow locks to kill the lice that were now immune to pesticide products. She wasn’t sure where she had picked them up; it was likely from the dead soldier when she’d taken his gun and ammo. In all reality, the tough little bugs were the least of her worries.

Today, Samantha had been hunting for a groundhog. She didn’t believe the creatures really predicted the weather. She just needed a break from the flashes of murdering Henry.

Samantha shifted her battered kit onto her other shoulder, bracing against the stiff, gritty wind that tried to shove her off her feet.

Ahead, a lump lay in the street.

*It hasn’t even been two months! How can NORAD be gone?!*

Samantha drew in a ragged breath and forced herself to keep going. The sole of her boot flapped at each step. When she passed the uniformed man who had been shot, she wiped away a tear. There should still be something she could use, or maybe even a radio she could listen to for some idea of where to try next.

Glad for her goggles in the heavy, reeking smoke that swirled over the road in waves as she got closer, she walked between the trees to avoid being outlined by the sky. Samantha knelt down and looked at the place she would have been, where she probably would have died, if not for the chopper crashing.

Buried in the Cheyenne Mountain complex, the tunnel to the once impenetrable compound was open, releasing pillars of thick, black smoke. It drew Samantha’s attention back repeatedly as she scanned the devastated shack city spread across the two-lane road in a pathetic mix of moldy boxes, tents, and wood of every kind. A crowded cemetery filled the far corner of the haphazard refugee camp. These people had come here after the war, following family and friends taken in the draft. They’d stayed here, dying on the indifferent doorstep of safety. There were no signs of survivors, just the hum of flies swarming corpses.

*Was anyone let in?* Samantha swept row after row of destroyed cooking, sleeping, and laundry areas. She lifted her goggles to wipe away tears. *No. Not one of them.* These people had been desperate. They would have overrun the guards the second the door was opened.

This was something the government had planned to do nothing about. The people running things had probably watched the slaughter in relief until one compassionate soldier or unwilling draftee had been unable to watch his fellow Americans, maybe even his own family, be murdered. He’d gone out to help, allowing the compound to be breached.

Samantha settled in the cover of bushes, sheltered from the sharp wind while she waited for the fires to finish burning down. It could have happened that way. Then again, they might have had bait to get the door open. That also had a ring to it. She examined the battle scene again. Blackened, smoldering piles of debris highlighted shot bodies lined up near the compound’s entrance, almost all male. The females were gone.Samantha pushed away the thought how bad their lives must be now. The main doors were charred, dented, beaten. *This compound was conquered.*

She scanned the area, then the sky. The thick layer of clouds threatened rain or worse by morning. Samantha decided to set up her shelter and go down tomorrow. She was dreading it, but she hoped there would be bits of food or the location of another government complex that had held. *Please, God. Don’t let me be alone forever.*

**2**

Samantha went down at dawn to see what remained of the facility. She had a tough time forcing her feet to pass through the blackened entrance. She tried not to stare at the dead, but she couldn’t help crying as she stepped over hands still outstretched for mercy that hadn’t come. Another two hundred human lives, gone.

Sharp, glittering glass crunched under her boots. Thin clouds of smoke lingered; snapping flies tried to invade her long trench coat. Despite the season, snow hadn’t layered the ground here yet. The rotting corpses were creating a perfect environment for insects.

Red lights in the tunnel signaled a generator still in use. It comforted her as the dim daylight faded from view. She had a gun, a Taser that may or may not work, two knives, and a can of mace, but she didn’t feel safe as she wound deeper, straining for sounds. This new world was full of death and destruction. More of it existed down here in these long concrete halls.

The disadvantage of the red lights was that she could see all the horror. Blood stains and bullet casings were hard to avoid as she walked over the uniformed dead littering the hall. She only saw soldiers. Whoever the enemy had been, they’d taken their dead with them.

She flipped her belt light to high as she stepped into the first room. It was a security area with four gory bodies and no loot.

The next three rooms held more of the same.

Samantha went by open doors marked as Utilities and Lavatories, knowing they wouldn’t hold anything she needed. The tunnel dead ended into a spacious bunk area, with bodies in many of the beds. They wore an even mix of military uniforms and Capitol Hill casual. They’d been shot. Sam wasn’t sure she could force herself in there for long. She went to the stairs. *I’ll search there last.*

**3**

Samantha returned to the top level after three hours of searching. Tacky blood was so thick on some floors that the Presidential Seal was no longer visible. The lounge had been stripped; both cafeterias had fire damage. Laundry rooms didn’t have a single sheet or blanket, and the three medical bays were completely empty. Not even a box of bandages had been spared. Whoever had done this had made sure survivors would find nothing to keep them alive.

As she headed back toward the room of bodies, she was drawn to a small painting of President Milton placed in a shadowy corner behind a set of shattered doors. It hung askew, revealing a darker shadow.

Samantha examined it and found the covered entrance to a throw room tunnel. Set into the wall, it was a secure area where the Secret Service could literally toss a person to be safe while they guarded this only way in. Samantha avoided a bloody handprint on the rail as she hefted herself into the opening.

The tunnel dumped her out onto a thick mat in a narrow hall lined in multiple doors. Sam sighed, able to feel how empty it all was. *Back to scavenging through body-filled rooms in the dark. Lovely.*

The sixth door was a war room. Computers were destroyed, communications equipment was broken, uniformed bodies Samantha vaguely recognized were draped across desks, lying on the floor. Drying puddles were impossible to avoid as she checked stacks of papers and books, then the computers. None of the electronics responded to her fingers.

She dug through the file cabinets next, but most of the charred papers were too damaged to read. She found a single sheet intact; it had two ominous sentences.

*All descendants must be rounded up according to the new mandate made by President Heins before his death. No exceptions are to be made.*

*They were hunting descendants... My kind.* Samantha tried not to be disturbed by it. She went back to her search, dumping out drawers and swiping at dark corners of high shelves, but she came up empty.

She scanned for anything she’d missed... Samantha found writing on the wall. *Is that red marker...?*

She realized it was blood.

***We did it for our country.***

She eased out of the room, stomach in a knot.

*Scratch…*

Sam spun, fingers fumbling for her gun. She stopped when she saw a big rat. If not for the noise it would make, she would try to kill it anyway to keep it from doing what the insects were. Sam glared at the bold rodent as she went by.

The last door led to a small lavatory. When she saw no bodies, not even blood smears, Samantha allowed herself to use one of the dusty, cobwebbed stalls.

Peeing was bittersweet. Even taking paper from the almost empty roll hurt. She struggled not to cry. *It’s all gone.*

A small, dark shadow dropped from the ceiling above her. It landed on her bare knee.

“Damn!” She slapped at the spider as it ran upward, missing. It was fast.

Sam gritted her teeth as the arachnid bit her, sending a rush of pain up her thigh that shot straight up into her spine.

Sam squashed the fleeing spider against her leg, grinding it into little pieces. She wiped the remains down the dusty stall wall. “Serves you right!”

She used the last of the paper on the roll to wipe the bite, a bit uneasy at how sore the wound already was. Then she put it from her mind. *I’ve been here too long.* *I’ll check the lounge, then get the hell out of this mausoleum.*

**4**

The climb out of the throw hole made Samantha anxious because it took so long. She breathed a sigh of relief when the faint, dim glow of red lights finally came into view. *One more room, then I’m out of here!*

Samantha hurried by the rows of bodies. She stepped into the smoky, vomit-smelling vending machine area, stomach growling for chips or a candy bar despite the odor in here. She ran to the three tall dispensers, but every ring was empty.

She slapped her hand against the dirty glass. “Damn it!”

“Help...”

Sam jumped, fumbling for her gun again.

“Please.”

Samantha drew in air, glad her bladder was empty. She lifted her belt light for a better view of the man dying on the brown and white sofa.

“Do it.”

Total awareness flickered in those dead eyes. Sam wished her peripheral vision would go out. The gore was everywhere. She breathed through her mouth to keep from gagging as she stepped closer. Trying not to gape at his emaciated body, she realized it was a white sofa. The brown was his rotting body drying into the material.

“Please…help me.”

The pitiful whisper made him seem more human. She lowered the gun. “What can I do?”

“Kill me.”

Sam blanched. “I can’t do that.”

He moaned. It was a wet sound. She heard his jaw grind as he coughed. Scarlet flew from his mouth, ejecting one of his teeth. Reddish drops of agony rolled down his distorted cheeks. “Please!”

She lifted the gun as his gasps filled the room. His body was no longer responding to his commands. The sickness was destroying him from the inside.

“Where...” She pushed aside her horror to talk. “Where else can I go?”

He struggled to answer. “Only a base…in Cheyenne taking calls. All gone...faulty air valves. A lot of us got sick.”

“What about the Essex?”

“No! Ground…Zero. Evac’d after the bomb… No transportation for…radiation.”

Sam was scarred by the hell in his eyes. *I’ll never forget this moment.* “There must be some place left, some people. What about all the Joint Chiefs, and the Secretaries?”

“Breached. Burned alive... Wouldn’t touch me.”

Samantha’s mind went to the smell of gasoline and the charred room four levels below them that she hadn’t been able to enter. She shook away the horrible images. At least their struggles were over now. “What about the people who did this?”

The dying man coughing again.

Sam retreated as bloody pus sprayed from his swelled lips.

“Guerrillas. Came during...a storm. Hit Fort Carson first. Attacked the refugees. Took females. One of them...drafted. Betrayed us. ...retaliation for the war.” He lifted a finger, skin sliding to the side. “Please…do it now. Don’t know...anything else.”

She tried to smile as she lifted the gun. “I’m Samantha Moore.”

“Pat. Mi-Michaels.”

She gasped in horrified recognition of the former press secretary. She asked the only thing that mattered to her now. “Why were you hunting descendants?”

Pat’s eyes lit up. “Evil! Caused the war!”

Sam couldn’t think of anything else to ask.

When he tried to beg again, she pulled the trigger.

His body jumped like Melvin’s had when she hit him with the Taser.

Sam ran, loud steps mocking her flight. She had no idea where she would go, only that she shouldn’t have come. *I would have been a captive here too. I can’t go to another bunker. I have to find my own kind and blend in*. *The government is no longer my safety net.*

# Chapter Ten

**Hard Goodbyes**

****

Ohio

**February 6th**

**1**

***I****’m leaving today. This is no longer my home.*

Angela was dreading the journey she was about to make; the horror in her dreams said it would be worse than her life with Kenny. The nightmares warned she would confront dangers that made the Marine seem like an amusement park ride, but none of it mattered. She couldn’t wait any longer to leave. The circled day on her calendar was over a week away, but she was going now. She just needed to know where Marc was first. Angela had to be sure he was coming this time.

She wasn’t eager to tell her story. She planned to put it off as long as she could, but the odds were against her making it alone. Kenny was also a huge problem. He wouldn’t just hand her son over. Between her man and the trip, she needed help. Marc was the only one left to ask for it.

*You can’t!* Her fear shouted this time. *Kenny will kill you for this!*

The door in her mind stayed shut.

The power inside wasn’t at her beck and call. She shared space with a gifted spirit who was still sore about the years in a mental cage. Angela didn’t have more information on how it all worked or where her kind had even come from. All she knew was she needed to use it right now but the witch inside wasn’t cooperating.

*I’m scared.*

*Of being locked up again?*

*Of him killing us this time.*

Angela stood in the dark hallway of her apartment building, understanding only fear was preventing the call. Anger took control. “I’ll kill him if I have to!”

The rush of angry energy blew her fear away. The door in her mind swung open. Her breathing became shallow as power ran through the mud tracked mental halls. Memories washed over her, strengthening the connection.

Jet-black hair, long, feathered, soft on her fingers as their mouths touched. She called for him now, releasing a powerful vibration that rattled like an earthquake. *Marcus!*

His hands had been light, gentle as they crossed forbidden lines. *Marcus!*

He had loved her and left. She had never recovered. *Marcus!*

*I’m here, Angie.*

He sounded older, used. She winced at the pain of having him in her mind. It reminded her of when it had just been them against the world. “Are you coming?”

*I’ll be in Cincinnati by the end of the week.*

Angela let out the breath. Five days. She was worried Marc wouldn’t care once he found out what she wanted. She didn’t know what kind of person he had become. She was depending on an old debt.

*Will you tell me what’s going on? I picked up a few things, but I can be better prepared if I know more.*

Angela listened to her heart*. You do know what kind of person he is, or you wouldn’t have called him.* The old Angela, the one the war had almost freed, stared hopefully from her twisted cell door.

*Angie?*

“I’m here, Marc.” She could almost feel him wince this time. It surprised her to discover she didn’t enjoy it. She owed him much worse.

*Can you tell me what’s going on?*

The caution in his voice allowed the old Angela to open the door between them a little wider. The words fell through silent tears. “My son is somewhere in the middle of the country. I need you to get me there...and then help me get him back. I’m leaving now. We can meet up on the road.”

There wasn’t even a pause after her request.

*It’s bad out here, Angie. I wish you’d wait for me.*

Pain slammed into her heart. “I tried that already!” She was suddenly sixteen again, hurt, betrayed and alone, with no one to depend on.

She slammed the door on Marc’s incoming protests, but the old Angela was stronger now. She was forced to listen to the muffled explanations he labored to push at her. She heard his remorse, but no matter what he said, Angela refused to answer.

**2**

Under dawn’s early light, Angela approached the shiny black Blazer in the secluded garage. Her anxious gaze swept the extra tires on the luggage rack, the rear area crammed with boxes, and of course, the tiny grave she had spent time at every day since the war. Leaving her baby behind was hard. She had to force the grief down. *I can’t abandon the living child to stay and mourn the dead one.*

Angela wiped away her tears, then finished her comparison of contents to the lengthy list in her hand. *Do I have everything?*

After another minute, she put the paper in the mailbox, along with an envelope in plastic and the door keys from around her neck. It would have to be enough.

She swept the red Tempo, making sure the weather hadn’t dislodged her notes. She had also written on Charlie’s bedroom wall, and left the keys in the ignition of the car–just in case. Her quiet, respectful son was becoming angry and impatient. If he slipped off on his own (*and survives! Please, let him survive!*), she would change course to intercept him.

She had no delusions about the world they were in now. She’d made sure her son would know the truth if he came here–the real truth, not that bullshit she had been forced to tell him for the last decade. There had been a great love, a hard choice, a lie, and a deal of convenience, but really, none of it mattered now. What did matter was telling him how to survive if he found himself alone. The notes would keep him alive until his father came for him.

Light, ashy flurries started to fall as Angela got the last bag from the hallway. She stepped out the door, spotting a woman reflected in the glass she wasn’t sure she knew anymore. She was much stronger than she appeared*. Someday, I’ll look the part.* Angela slid into the driver’s seat, giving a thin smile. *I’m changing again. It’s good...*

“Going somewhere?” Warren’s cold tenor outside the open door was unexpected.

Angela flinched, but didn’t draw the gun her hand was resting on. *How hard do I have to fight? Will a good bluff set me free?* She hadn’t heard them come up, hadn’t felt a warning. They’d probably been here all along, letting her do the labor of loading the supplies.

Half a dozen men lined up across the bare, muddy courtyard in front of her building, cutting off her path of escape. They leered at her openly this time. They were quiet too, another bad sign. She recognized the outline of vests under their thick layers of clothing. Her heart skipped a beat. *They came prepared.*

*Or so they believe*, the witch inside comforted. *Hold your ground*.

Angela tried talking first. “My owner called me. I have to go.”

“Shut up.”

Warren’s bruises told her the chain of command at the college had changed, making this a more dangerous confrontation. Talking her way out was improbable as she stared at the zealot.

“If you try to run, they’ll open fire.” Warren grabbed the door handle. “Get out here.”

Angela slid to her feet, scanning the six men. All of them had a gun aimed at her. She sneered at Warren, gesturing toward the bible under his arm. “No longer under your protection, *Preacher*?”

“No one is.”

It was confirmation, yet none of the others stepped up to do the speaking, to take control. They stayed well back, even Aaron. Aaron hated her because she’d stayed independent after the war. He was the one who would shoot her. The others wanted her alive. Aaron wanted her dead for humiliating him. “Let me go. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

Her would-be captors exchanged nervous looks instead of the scorn she’d been hoping for. It told her they had discussed the possibilities of getting hurt but were determined to follow through.

Her anger flared to life. She would have to fight her way out. Angela let the witch have a little more control. She had to fight–she didn’t have to kill. *And I won’t!*

The scruffy males advanced toward her together, faces grim, leery.

The witch whispered words; Angela muttered them. “Poison! Blindness! Disease!”

The reaction was instant.

“I can’t see. I can’t see!”

“Skin’s on fire! Someone put me out!”

“The bugs!”

“Help me!”

Warren wasn’t fooled by the vivid bluff. He put a hand out to grab her... He jerked away as lightning flew into a tree in the courtyard next to them, shaking the ground.

The oak exploded, raining wooden shrapnel.

Warren snatched Angela by her sweater, jerking her against his hard, thin body. “Surrender to me! I want that power!”

Her face became a snarl of hatred. “I belong to no man!”

Lightning crashed again, close.

She pushed him away with a strength he wasn’t expecting. When he tried to grab her again, the witch whispered two words.

Angela shut her eyes as her newest gift was revealed. “Fire! Ice!”

Lightning cracked a third time, striking the truck Warren had arrived in. It exploded, raining twisted metal over the battlefield.

Warren and Aaron ducked.

The sky opened up. Chunks of heavy black hail began pelting them.

The four rear teachers whose names she had never learned recovered quickly, but they fled, not using the guns they’d brought as their bluff. They couldn’t use the power if they killed her.

The witch held out a hand; flames danced along her fingertips.

The two remaining men stopped.

“If you push me, I will kill you.” The witch’s voice was ice cold.

Aaron lifted his gun, finger tightening on the trigger.

The witch surged forward to laugh at him. “The woman may die, but I am immortal!”

Aaron paled at her glowing red orbs.

Horns sprouted; her long, crooked mouth opened to reveal sharp, needlelike teeth. When the forked tongue lashed out at him, Aaron ran. He didn’t look back.

The witch remained, resisting Angela’s attempts to get her under control, but the preacher revealed no fear even though he was now facing her alone.

“You are not strong enough to override her morals. She’s a doctor. She will not let you kill me.” Warren was sure of his answer.

The witch grinned, red eyes becoming reptilian. “Doctors kill often. They don’t murder. This will be self-defense.”

Warren grabbed her arm again, Bible in his hand. “I am the Lord’s prophet! I see you, Demon of Souls! Surrender yourself to me in the name of the Father, the Son–”

The witch released the ball of flames before Angela could stop her.

“Ahh!” Fire leapt up the preacher’s bare hands. He slapped at himself.

Angela shoved the witch back before she could deliver a final, consuming blast. *Stop! It’s enough.*

*Never! Never be enough!* The witch roared, furious at the attempted theft of her power.

Angela glowered at Warren, ignoring his pain as he tried to put the fire out. “You have offended us. The witch wants your lifeforce as payment.”

Fear filled his face.

“She’ll settle for your death.” Angela held out a hand, where tiny flames were growing, shaping into a ball. “Does it have to be today?”

Warren wanted to push anyway; she could feel it. Angela let the witch’s red orbs blend with her own again. “Last warning…”

The religious fanatic spun away, tattered book falling to the muddy ground.

Angela sucked air into lungs burning from holding her breath. She’d won. *I’m free!*

Her scream of triumph echoed as her attackers fled.

More confident now that she had another defense to depend on, Angela strode to her Blazer. Warren wouldn’t die and the others wouldn’t follow her even if he wanted them to. If he came for her later, it would just be him, and maybe Aaron. *Two against one is much better odds.*

Fate laughed at her.

Angela pulled the Blazer door shut as Warren vanished into the thick, rolling black smoke billowing from his burning truck. When his faint outline was gone, the witch retreated to allow Angela an untainted view of the home she had lived in for the last fourteen years.

Angela pushed the grief away as she swept the tiny grave. Shadows darted through the rolling smoke around her.

Angela started the engine and shifted into drive. She was sad and excited, but mostly scared, even with the gun. *My kind is not meant to be alone.* She pulled her sunglasses over teary eyes and drove away.

Empty and full mailboxes waved a final, hard goodbye in the mirror. Angela was suddenly sure she would never be back here.

**3**

It was a long day.

The slow going made Angela grit her teeth in frustration and curse as she spent the entire morning creeping west. She squeezed through wherever she could, pushing dog houses, a dumpster, furniture, and even cars out of the way.

The pavement everywhere was cracked, full of spring potholes. She found herself listening for the hit that would give her the first flat tire of her journey. Worried, she began to ease through muddy yards to avoid the glass littering the streets, then berated herself for only making two miles in four hours. More than once, she found her way blocked and had to drive through fences, wincing at every snap of wood, plastic, and bone as she traveled through the riot ravaged areas she had known before the war. Everything was so different, so dangerous; she would never have recognized the towns if she hadn’t been there before. Doubts about her ability to make the trip hit her hardest as she passed through Cheviot, Ohio.

Angela tried to steel herself as she entered the city limits, assuming it would be as bad as her own neighborhood. It was worse. She cried as she drove, tears blurring the awful scene but not enough. The medical salve under her nose pushed back the stench, but again, not enough as the gritty wind gusted harder.

Half of the buildings were gone, burned to charred, blackened frames. Those remaining had shattered doors. The main street was crammed with abandoned cars and wrecks; the corpses made her heart ache. Had no one in this small town found safety?

Angela steered around the blackened shell of an Army transport truck where the driver’s uniformed body was rotting. She sucked in a horrified breath as she cleared the vehicle, able to see what remained of the local municipal building. Only the tall pillars still stood. The wide field of rubble behind it was unrecognizable. Tears came harder at the sight of so many who had represented authority decaying on those charred stone steps. Police, soldiers, and citizens lay in a tangled, gruesome heap.

The Blazer fishtailed on the ice.

Angela hit the brakes too hard and slid on the slushy street. Her front tires slammed into the curb, throwing her against the seatbelt.

The scare allowed her to get control of herself. She concentrated on the quiet rumble of her engine. After a moment, she felt better.

Angela started to reverse... Something changed in the air. She switched off the heater to listen as she swept the area.

*Not a threat*, the witch informed her, settling back. Just *more starving refugees*.

Angela put the Blazer in park. She climbed into the rear seat, ignoring the greed insisting she couldn’t spare anything. *Yes, I can*.

It only took her a few minutes to gather a few things and write a note. She set the two bags outside her door, then got moving again. She had included a list of local stores that still had nonperishables, but Angela knew she’d only delayed the inevitable. Guilt slapped her. She was leaving them here to die.

*Because they’re lost*, the witch commented sleepily. *Without a shepherd, they’ll stay out in the cold and freeze to death. They’ve lost their strength. Those who cannot find hope will not survive*.

Those words pulled at Angela, echoing in her bitter heart. Kenny had found his reason to fight. Charlie’s dreams were full of the survivors they’d joined. She knew they were going to Montana. It made her stomach burn to wonder what kind of sorry bastard was now in charge of her child. She didn’t trust Kenny’s judgment at all; she paid little attention to her son’s inexperienced impressions. No one Kenn approved of could be good.

Angela drove by long gravel driveways surrounded in pine trees and shrubs gone wild from lack of care. The houses on the outskirts gave no comfort as she left the ghost town behind. They were sprawling beasts with paint-chipped porches and untended lawns, their fields ready to be planted. The two-car garages would hold one white or red Ford Crown Victoria, and one midnight blue Starfire that would wait forever for its owner to restore it. There were no signs of normal life, or any other. She drove faster, holding tight to her determination. She was terrified, but she could never turn back and live with herself. Her firstborn son was out here in this hell. *I’ll get him back or die trying.*

**4**

Angela made camp her first night in an old cornfield lined in patches of black ice and dirty snow drifts. It was half a mile from the jammed lanes of Interstate 74. The brown, brittle stalks didn’t come to the roof, but when she threw a wide, dark tarp over the top of the car, then scattered slushy snow on it, the vehicle blended in. She felt better as darkness rolled over the broken land.

Angela went to the area she had driven through, straightening rows until the path was normal again, eyes darting at every sound or shift of shadows. She didn’t see any insects or other wildlife, not even ants crawling over the dirt as she set camp. She did hear a robin, but she was unable to pinpoint its location by the weak call. Things were no better here than what she’d left behind.

Angela only got out what she needed for dinner. Nursing a smashed thumb and a sore finger she’d pulled a large splinter from after making her fire and hanging the tarp (nailing things and lighting them up were what her Marine was good at), she left the rear hatch open. The ends of the wide tarp hung to the ground, almost shielding her from the road as she ate.

The sandwiches were gone quickly, as was the vivid green sunset. She sat on the tailgate, surrounded by pillows, sipping a hot cup of chamomile as darkness filled the land. The warmth of the heater pushed back a little of the loneliness as she drank her tea, mourning.

She hadn’t heard anyone on the CB, but gunshots in the distance had made her drive faster through some places. She hadn’t expected to find normal towns, but not seeing any survivors bothered her. When she filled in a page on her journal from now on, she would include how many people she saw and what each town was like. She wasn’t sure why she wanted to do it, but instinct said she should. In this new world, instincts were a defense that had to be used. She’d only managed eight miles, but it was enough to drive it home. The world had changed. Danger was her new constant companion.

More of it waited for her upon success. Once she found Charlie, there would be a price to pay for leaving when her significant other had made it clear he wanted her to wait for him in Ohio. Until the war, she never disobeyed Kenny. They had a deal and he got mean when she broke the rules. He would be upset about her leaving, but he would be furious about Marc. Blood would spill, likely hers. Kenny would never believe anything she offered as an explanation. She would have to warn Marc that it might come to violence. It was only fair he knew what he was getting into.

*I wonder where he is now...?*

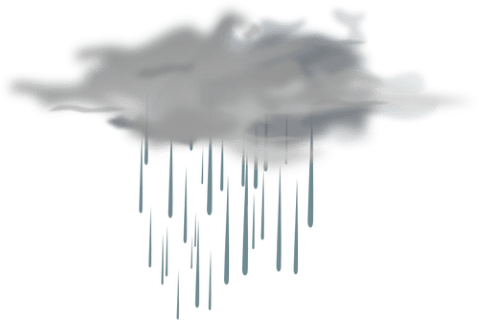
The witch tried to seduce her. *You can call him again and ask.*

Angie didn’t fall for it. Not because it was wrong, but because a part of her was too excited. She couldn’t wait to see him again. *What if I still love him?*

Angela told herself she was eager because it meant getting to her son. She was finally able to sleep.

Her dreams were haunted by visions of spending eternity searching the wastelands, but never finding him.

# Chapter Eleven

****

**Dangerous Secrets**

February 10th

**1**

“**A**ngie!”

Marc snapped out of the nightmare. He focused on steamed windows as sweat rolled down his neck in torrents.

He could still see Angie’s long, brittle hair flaring in the dust; blood smeared footprints had stretched out behind her as she walked the broken landscape, searching for her son. The victims from his draft escape followed on her heels. *Was it a dream or a warning?* There was no way to know for sure.

Marc snapped his seatbelt over his long black coat. It didn’t matter. Wherever she went, he would find her.

A soft whine echoed.

Marc glanced over his shoulder at the animal curled up on the rear seat. “How’s it hangin’, Dog?”

The big timber wolf ducked his snout under a wide paw and groaned.

Marc grunted agreement, wishing the sun would hurry and rise so he could make better time. He was sick of the damp, cold air that always hinted of snow. “Just a few more days and then we’ll take a break, get me some hot food and extra sleep, and there’s Kibble for you.”

*Not more of the crusty crunchy!* The blackish-red and gray animal rolled over and stared at his master upside down with piercing gold eyes full of impatience. *I can hunt, you know.*

Marc yawned again, wanting a shave and shower. He swallowed a pill instead. He needed to be alert enough to drive. He was exhausted. He had made two hundred fifty miles in eleven days, with over half of it in the last five. He’d even been eating while he traveled, and only pulled over whenever he couldn’t stay awake any longer.

Marc calculated Angie was only a hundred miles ahead of him now. He’d pushed hard to get here. As a result, he wasn’t completely sure where in southwest Ohio he had stopped. The roads here were unbelievable. Some intersections required hours to get through. It had taken him a full day to cross the suspension bridge from Kentucky. It would have been faster if he’d left his vehicle behind, but Marc wouldn’t unless he had another one lined up.

He rolled the window down to view the foggy street sign.

The first thing he noticed was the billboard above him wishing the city of Cincinnati a happy, prosperous New Year.

“Some great joke.” Marc scanned the muddy, rusting CSX rail yard that was under inches of sludge. The dark trestles were barely visible. Even the graffiti (Die Milton! Hondo eats draft ballz. Px2012 yo!) looked as if it had been there for years instead of eight weeks.

Nothing moved around the dirty suspension bridge swaying precariously behind him, just the same wind and rain blown debris that was everywhere. The burned frames of two Hum-vees with charred Wright Patterson logos stared in reproach. Both had crashed into a thicket of dead and dying pines.

It was bad here. Marc was glad Angie had left, even though he was worried about her being alone. Clearly, it had become too dangerous to stay.

Marc consulted the map. *Where am I?*

His heart leapt as he figured out his location. *Close*.

Marc got rolling, scanning the foggy city for trouble. He found nothing, but the sense of a problem coming lifted his neck hair again.

Dog came up to the front seat and dropped into the passenger side. He pawed the button for the warmer, then sank down. He stretched his head over and rested it on Marc’s knee.

Marc rolled up Queen City Hill, not worried about the cleared lanes. It had probably happened in the first weeks after the war, when some cities had tried to recover. Then the power had gone off.

Marc wondered again why he was here. Angie had a man. Why wasn’t he helping get their son back? Had her husband run out on her? Maybe he’d been taken in the draft, along with the boy. That made sense.

*Maybe he’s dead*. Marc’s heart whispered the alternative.

Marc shoved the secret desire away as he braked in front of the brick apartment building. He’d come here a decade ago, but hadn’t possessed the courage, or the callousness, to knock. She’d had a new life by then; it didn’t include him. He’d had no right to disrupt her happiness.

Marc had returned to duty and thrown himself into his career. By saving, fixing, impressing, he’d ended up in MARSOC, where they used his brains as well as his brawn. But he had never married. He was unable to settle for another female. He’d never regretted loving Angie, only that he’d let them be caught before they could run.

“She’s not here now. Place is empty.” Marc scolded himself again for coming. Chasing ghosts was always a bad idea, but here he was, drawn into the past. He had spent his adult life trying to convince himself that it hadn’t meant much, that she hadn’t been the one. Marc was filled with familiar shame. He’d taken advantage of her. He’d known it was wrong, but he had been unable to resist, and oh God, hadn’t every orgasm since paled in comparison?

*I just want to know what kind of life she’s had*. *That’s why I came–recon. I don’t want to face her in the dark.*

He left the engine running, Dog watching anxiously through the dirty window. He didn’t lock the door, though the remote entry was in his pocket. Anyone who tried to enter the Blazer would get a major surprise.

Marc jogged through the drizzle to the front of the building, noting a burnt truck by an oak tree that had been hit by something harsh.

Marc slid his coat behind his holsters as he opened the cracked glass door.

The dark hallway smelled like burnt sugar. Two sheets of paper on the carpeted floor caught his attention. Marc knew instinctively who had written them.

*I’ll settle for whatever’s in that letter*. Marc flipped on his penlight and retrieved the pages from the mud tracked carpet. He didn’t really want to go in the home where some lucky bastard had lived the life he had dreamed about every night since being ripped from Angela’s side. Marc read the letter with a sharp curiosity that missed little.

*Charlie, lock yourself in and be as quiet as you can. Do it right now!*

*If you’re reading this, either we missed each other, or I didn’t survive the trip. I’m terrified of that, of leaving you on your own. I wish I could be with you! I love you. I miss you so much it’s like there’s a knife in my gut.*

*I have a big secret to tell you, one that was supposed to wait until you were grown and out of the house. Kenny is not your dad. I know you’ve suspected, but I couldn’t tell you before. I’m sure you understand why. Your dad is Marcus Charles Brady.*

*Our family was strict Christian. When your dad and I fell for each other, cousins by marriage, it was too close for anyone to accept. We didn’t plan on it; we were swept away. We had decided to leave when I was older, but fate didn’t give us time. A bit after your dad was sent a*way*, I realized you were coming, and I wanted you more than anything. I didn’t tell anyone. I just ran as fast as I could. The family had legal control until I was of age. They could have taken you. Worse, I’ll always believe they would have made me get an abortion. So I ran.*

*And Kenny found me. Kenny and I made a deal that said we would become his obedient family. It seemed like the best I could do at the time. I know it was the wrong choice. How could I not know, when I can feel it in your looks? He’s been our master.*

*Yet, after all that’s happened, he has chosen not to come back. He’s tired of me. That only leaves one person you can trust–your real dad. You have to call Marc. You know what I mean by that. He’ll come once he knows it’s true. I’m sorry I never told him, never gave him the chance to be your father. He had no idea you existed, or he would have come for us. I know it in my...*

Marc stopped reading. Anger, guilt, and joy warred in his heart. He had a son. *We made a baby!* *She should have told me!* *I would have come back a happy man.*

*Really?* His mind was cruel. *You wouldn’t have felt like a criminal, sure it was wrong?*

Marc let out a harsh sound. That’s exactly how it would have felt back then, but it didn’t matter. He hadn’t knocked, and she’d been forced to survive on her own. “I should have talked to her that day.”

“Yes,” another voice answered. “You should have.”

Marc drew his gun as he turned.

“You must be the sinner she talks about in the letter. Her *lover*.” Warren sneered, pain on his face.

Marc took in the clothes, and the charred skin, connecting him to the wreck outside. Marc was suddenly sure the preacher had forced Angie to defend herself. “You’re the reason she couldn’t wait here for me.”

Warren scowled at the confirmation of their relationship, lifting his own gun as he came out of the dark corner where he’d been lurking. “My daughter and my leadership are gone because of the witch. Will she come back for you?”

Marc’s anger grew. “She’s not who you should worry about.” Marc’s Colt barked in a flash of death before Warren could fire.

Warren’s gun dropped to the carpeted floor, blood blooming on his chest. The broken preacher dropped to his knees as blood ran from a corner of his mouth.

Marc stared at the shuddering man for whom death was fast approaching. When Warren’s mouth opened but no sound came out, Marc understood anyway. “She’s not here to serve any man. She’s special.”

“A demon!” Warren choked out.

Marc’s sympathy vanished. He watched the preacher take his last breath while either thunder or gunfire cracked in the distance. “You’re no better. You had no right to judge.”

**2**

After pulling Warren’s cooling corpse around the corner of the building, Marc put the papers back together on the glass door, where he was sure the letter had originally been.

He returned to his warm vehicle, giving the anxious wolf a quick rub of comfort. He flipped on the wipers to clear the heavy layer of rain thumping on the window, then wiped the stinking liquid from his hands.

Marc called out as the riot ravaged streets of Cincinnati rolled by. He had to know she was okay. *Angie!*

He hit the brakes as a child’s faded ball rolled across the dirty pavement. He rolled on. *Angie!*

*I’m here.*

“Where? I just left Queen City Hill.”

Angela hesitated, knowing by his tone that he had read the letter meant for their son. *How long has he known where I lived?*

“Angie?”

*I’m ten miles north of Greensburg, Indiana.*

“I understand why you didn’t tell me, but I wish you had. I’m thrilled.”

She sent a clear warning. *He’s mine. Parentage doesn’t matter.*

Marc didn’t respond, though he wanted to. If she sensed the things floating through his mind, she would disappear. It hit him again. *I have a son!* It was a reason to have hope, a goal. His heart was lighter than it had been since the war. He would now serve his child…and maybe that child’s mother. “I ran into a friend of yours here. He had some burns.” Marc could feel her scowling at the words. He was aware of Dog observing alertly.

*Warren. He’s dead?*

Now, Marc was the one frowning. Something else she should have mentioned…though she hadn’t known he would go there. “Yes.”

*I had hoped he was no longer a threat.*

“It was his choice.”

Silence hung between them for a moment, broken by the drumming rain and squeak of his wipers, but the connection between them was strong. It allowed him to hear stray noises–a clink, a snap, a grunt of effort. She was breaking camp. She didn’t want him around yet. “Where are you holed up?”

Marc felt her wondering how he knew she wasn’t on the road, but she didn’t ask. That meant she didn’t know how much he was picking up. *Good. More time to recon*.

*I’m in a cornfield off highway 3.*

“You could stay there, take a break for the holiday. It wouldn’t take me long to catch up.” He sent the option carefully, not mentioning Valentine’s Day by name.

*No.*

He was glad she didn’t sound mad, but he still frowned at how set her tone was. “You okay?” Marc was flooded by the old need to protect her.

*I’m fine.*

“Okay… I can’t wait to see you.”

The words were normal for the situation, but she couldn’t mistake his eagerness.

Another cold warning rushed out to slap at him.

*Nothing’s changed for us, Marc. Don’t think it has.*

“I don’t, but I had reasons, Angie.”

*I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. Only my son does.*

Marc wished he could see her, so he would know if she really meant that. He couldn’t say it and mean it.

Angela let go of the connection.

Marc didn’t protest as he steered around fresh bodies. She wasn’t ready to deal with him yet. She probably hated him, despite what she had written to soothe their child. He would let her have the lead when it came to settling their past. If he pushed, she would slip away. If he wanted to get to know his child, he needed her along.

*If?* A big grin filled Marc’s face. There was no if. He would track her down if he had to, but as long as he made it clear that he wouldn’t hound her, things should be okay. She would have her missing child and he would only ask for time with the son he hadn’t known existed. Marc was a little surprised by how much he already wanted the boy. His heart liked it that their love had created a life. He was grateful for the chance to love again.

In Indiana, Angie got into the driver’s seat of her Blazer, emotions chaotic. If Marc was in Cincinnati now, he was a week behind her. Angela wanted to keep that distance a bit longer. She needed to be able to look back after this was all over and know she had gotten the journey started. She was also stalling. She had no idea how to ask Marc for what she needed. Only a fool would agree and that, Marc had never been.

# Chapter Twelve

**John and Anne**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

Rawlins, Wyoming

**February 11th**

**1**

“**Y**ou’re not fooling me. You don’t know who to call, even if you do fix it.”

John Harmon MD flinched at his wife’s voice echoing across the living room. He put a hand to his chest, trying to catch his breath.

“Sorry.”

“Uh-huh.” John studied his wife; he was glad she had finally gained a little weight while they’d been hiding in their home. Anne was half of his 240lbs, with hair still brown instead of his salt and pepper. She was beautiful for fifty-eight. He hadn’t been as lucky. “You did that on purpose.”

Anne’s brown eyes flashed concern above fine age lines. She set the large green afghan she was knitting on the recliner’s matching brown end table. “I had to. You’re sad again.”

Stalling, he took off his glasses and laid them on the device he really didn’t know how to repair. He stared through the only window in the large two-story farmhouse they hadn’t covered in thick layers of plastic. John frowned at the Discovery Channel special going on in their muddy yard. Their neighbor’s dog had collapsed and died near the barn yesterday. The collie’s carcass was now a carpet of ants. Their bloated bodies twitched in effort and obvious communication as they struggled to cut up and relocate the food. Backdropped by a sunset view of the hazy Rocky Mountains, the foraging ants were each the size of a quarter.

They were the biggest John had seen around here yet; their bodies were constantly changing from the contaminated carrion they were ingesting. All the nests were getting regular doses of contaminated Miracle Gro from the rain and snow. John hated to think about what it was doing to the rats and spiders, who could hatch or birth young every few weeks.

Once nature finished cleaning, leaving only bones, predators would change to other food sources, like people. The death toll from this hell wouldn’t end for a century or more. Everything had changed. It had been thirty-eight years since he and Anne were in the army at the same MASH unit. He had to remember what had kept him alive then, so they could use it now. “We have to pack up and go. The weather’s not as bad now that two months have passed. We’ve cleaned out the local stock.”

Anne stared.

John was sure he had caught her off guard with his words. He didn’t know where they would end up, or if they would even be able to make the trip. It definitely wouldn’t be a blow off. Their hometown of Rawlins was no longer safe, but the temperatures were still falling too. They couldn’t stay here. The food would cover them for another month and a half, but nature wouldn’t wait.

The lonely echo of his wife’s shoes on the bare floor made John wonder what the footsteps sounded like as they floated down to the dark, flooded tunnels of their barricaded basement. Was it a dinner bell to those open dark ways and everything that might now be calling that nasty area home? They heard noises sometimes. He was never sure if it was the moment that they would have to defend themselves. They didn’t go down there. They also didn’t take down the boards he’d used to seal the door, but they did occasionally tense and glance that way. John was glad Anne knew how to use the shotgun and the rifle he kept by her chair. Not that a firearm would be effective against sewer rats.

“But why, Johnnie? We get along here.”

“We’ve seen no sign of anyone coming to save us.” John sighed. “And because of the basement.”

*Scratch. Sniff…sniff.*

As if to prove his point, they heard the curious, hungry rodents near the door. The sewer grates at the other end of the treeless land kept out the bigger problems, but the rats had come in by the hundreds after the war. He and his wife had sealed off the unused parts of their home. The rats were too big to get under the floors, but their pups weren’t. John expected to see them in substantial numbers soon.

“Where would we go? Other than those men with the guns, we ain’t seen a healthy person in nigh on two weeks.”

John forced his hand away from his aching stomach, gaze still on the yard. He hoped that ugly green twilight would finish setting and hide the view so Anne wouldn’t get upset.

“Johnnie?”

The thought of leaving their home obviously hadn’t occurred to her. John felt that terror too, but it wasn’t strong enough to get him to change his mind. She had to do things his way now. Her life depended on it. “To NORAD, for starters. We’ll surrender to the draft.”

“What if it’s all like here, or worse?”

She was referring to the dead pets, dead police, dead crops, and of course, dead friends and neighbors they’d known all their lives. He knew the horror was still fresh for her–especially the memory of passing a neighbor’s wrecked truck on the two-lane dirt road to their farm. Both doors had been open, and they’d seen the bullet holes in the windshield as they returned from their burning office to avoid the panic gripping their town, their country. Anne had wanted to stop, but there hadn’t been a reason to. The elderly couple was dead, brains blown all over the road.

“We’ll have to do some searching. Other healthy survivors are out there. I know it doesn’t feel that way when you look out the window.” John winced at his reference.

“But we’re old; they won’t want us. Shouldn’t we stay hidden?”

“That, my dear Anne, is exactly what most people will do, and they will die. What the weather and disease don’t take, the gangs and starvation will. All these threats are lessened when humanity comes together. Despite the flaws, we are not better off without society.”

When she leaned toward him, tan slacks rustling, John gently surrounded her with his arms, hoping she wouldn’t notice his racing pulse. “You’re a nurse. I’m a doctor. It’s wrong of us to deny them our help. They need us now more than ever.” He kissed her wrinkled hand. “Our age will make us more valuable because of our experience.”

John played his trump card without guilt, knowing her inability to get pregnant, which he believed to be his fault, would keep her from arguing more. “There are a lot of kids out there too, Anna, kids who are alone and hurting. They need us. Trust me, my sweet, I do this for you.”

“I do, Johnnie. You know that. I always have.”

John grit his teeth against a wave of pain that settled deep into his guts. “Good. We’ll leave this week.”

Anne turned her head.

John tensed, expecting a bad reaction as her eyes landed on the gruesome scene outside.

She shuddered.

He opened his mouth to comfort her.

“I never did like that damned dog. It barked too much.” Anne returned to her knitting, leaving him with a shocked look on his lightly bearded face.

Even after all these years, she was still capable of surprising him. John was happier than he could say that they had survived the actual war together. *There’s no one I’d rather be with as I die.*

**2**

A while later, John was still at the window. The big ants and most of their dinner were gone. Freezing rain was falling again, but John didn’t see it. He dwelled on his wife, on the half-truths he’d told her. He never lied, but he sometimes left things out and this time it was huge. He would tell her soon, though. She had a right to know that this next year together would probably be their last. He had to get her to some kind of safety, and he had to do it now. She would refuse to budge if he told her why they were really going.

Movement in the dimness caught John’s attention, mostly because there was so little of it now. He watched a shadow limp across their driveway, keeping to the line of dormant bushes around the edge of the long porch. He and Anne had seen a lot of radiation victims right after the war, in the initial stages where travel was still possible. John tensed, expecting one of the walking dead.

Tall and thin, with dirty curls under goggles, the young woman wore a muddy coat that came to the top of her boots. *Should I call to her?* She looked healthy, other than a slight limp.

Before John could decide, she turned toward the window.

Her mouth opened in fear, panicked feet slipping on muddy debris, and then she was gone, disappearing into the hazy darkness.

John rose to go to the door anyway.

Another lance of burning pain struck. He dropped back into the chair, breath stolen. He held his swollen stomach, wishing the pills would hurry. He needed a lab that still had power, so he could run some tests. It would be easier to plan his wife’s future if he knew how long he had before the cancer took him.

John sighed again. He wouldn’t stop until he found someone to protect his sweet, gentle mate. Anne would never last in this hard, new world alone.

Anne tied the last knot of string on the blanket and then began to put away her supplies. She didn’t look at her husband. She didn’t need to see him to know he was in pain and gunny sacking to keep her from finding out. He could try to distract her with talk of kids all he wanted–she did feel a bit of regret that she had never been able to bear him a son and hadn’t wanted to take one in that wasn’t theirs–but it didn’t keep her from noticing things.

His eating and sleeping habits had changed drastically; she’d seen the empty pill bottles in the trash. He was protecting her, like he always did from the dreadful things. She would do what he wanted and pretend she didn’t have a clue, but Anne knew he was sick and hunting for a place to leave her. John wanted to be alone when he died. He’d said it many times. He claimed it would hurt too much to say goodbye, and while she would do anything for him, she simply couldn’t allow that. Leaving him alone to die would be a betrayal of their life together, and now, after all that had happened, any betrayal of life was wrong. *When we go, it will be together.*

**A week later**

“Go faster! Faster!”

“Hold on!” The horrified doctor swung the wagon into the dark woods that lined the road and killed the engine a few yards in. He was glad for the heavy fog and cover of night. “Get down! Low as you can!”

The elderly couple shoved themselves onto the floorboard as best they could.

John stifled a groan at the cramped position, glasses sliding from his face as the engines grew closer.

*Pop-Pop!*

*Screeechh!*

Headlights flashed their way. The gunshots and engines echoed as the storm rolled overhead.

“I love you, Johnnie. Have since we was kids.”

A cold hand locked onto his hairy wrist through the sleeve of his plaid shirt. John covered it with his own shaking fingers, afraid he might wet himself despite all his determination not to. “I adore you, my sweet.”

The large group of vehicles began to fly by.

The couple froze, listening to the gunshots, wincing at each whine and ricochet.

Drunken shouts echoed, along with thuds of metal hitting, scraping. Rain thumped on the roof; a tire squealed.

A bullet pinged off their bumper, making them both flinch. Their grip on each other tightened, both aware the fog was the only thing keeping them from certain, painful death. A long two minutes later, the gang was out of sight; their noises faded to silence.

Terrified it was a trick, John kept them still for another fifteen minutes. He finally moved when the bands of pain in his stomach caused tears to slip from his eyes.

Driving without lights, John took them west on 40, away from the gang. They would still go to Cheyenne Mountain. They would just take a different path. They’d been on the road for five days now. John had been careful to use methods that didn’t require much physical labor. They weren’t spring chickens. He wasn’t taking any more chances than he had to. So far, they were a bit stiff and a little sore, but they both felt more alert than they had in years.

“How long will this add?”

John slid his glasses into place. “Couple hours. We have to get off these frontage roads, but we’ll still make Routt Ridge by dawn.”

Anne nodded, wrinkled fingers turning on the heat and defroster before digging into the kit behind his seat. “Take these.” She dropped two white pills into his wrinkled hand and held out an open mason jar of clear liquid.

John took them gratefully. His gut was on fire; the blood in his veins was pounding in rhythm with his pain. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” Anne flipped on the CB and went back to checking channels. He was her man, her love, and she wouldn’t let him suffer. She had a good idea what was wrong. She had been a nurse long enough to read the signs he couldn’t hide on this journey. Now, it wasn’t a secret anymore.

John scanned the foggy landscape, able to see faint outlines of dude ranches and hunting lodges. Other than those, and the occasional farm or dead vehicle in the road, there was nothing around here. It had been isolated before. Now, it was desolate. Wind howled through the shadowy darkness around their vehicle, warning of more ugliness to come.

**4**

*Damn.* John swept the ugly scene coming up in front of them. It had been a group of travelers, or maybe a large family, and the gang had killed them all. The trail was leading straight to NORAD. *Has the gang been there too?*

John winced as another bump jarred him against a spring sticking out of the seat. He shifted, trying to avoid it as the wagon chugged along the smoldering streets of Granby, Colorado. He hoped Anne stayed asleep. The gentle snoring coming from the blanket filled passenger seat gave him hope that she might get to miss this particular stretch. One glance out the foggy window would reveal that they were in danger again. Signs of a battle littered the area. The winners had marked their victory with devastation. Homes were in flames–even trees on front lawns were burning. Cheery Christmas lights had melted onto the branches. Cars had been rammed through buildings, and bodies lay where they’d been shot. The blood hadn’t dried yet.

The doctor was horrified to see their tires leaving bloody tracks, but the puddles were unavoidable. So was the smell. Even with the windows up, it was revolting.

John lowered the glass, stopping to listen for survivors.

He heard only wind and crackling flames. The equality state was no longer that. Now, only the strongest would survive.

A*nd those with them.* John scanned his wife once more before sending his attention back to the apocalyptic road. He and Anne had been that type in their youth, but now, he could only hope to find people who would protect her.

John continued to look for survivors, but the gang had been thorough. After another long minute, he got out of the area. Granby was just a huge cemetery without a marker now.

Dawn was starting to break as he cleared the city limits. The dusty sky barely hinted at light. John knew he couldn’t go another full day without sleep, but they weren’t stopping near here, not even for a stretch. *Those men might*–

“Want me to drive? I’ve got my glasses.”

John jumped. He hid the pain from it with a tight smile while loosening the belt over his swollen abdomen. “We’ll switch after brunch. I’ll snooze in your warm spot.”

Anne adjusted her silk shawl tighter over her sweater, then shut her eyes and laid on the pillow against the locked door. Instead of giving him hell about not telling her he was sick, she had adjusted to caring for him as they traveled. She was handling the journey well. *Was I a little bored, a little restless?* *Hell of a way to have an adventure*.

The rain began to solidify into snow.

John wasn’t happy about it, but he didn’t stop. There had already been a bite to the wind that warned they would be running the heater the entire trip. John was glad to have the cans of gas on the luggage rack. Three hours at a station with a foot pump had given him a nasty backache, but they were good for two weeks of driving. He hoped to find a safe place long before it ran out. Along with the gang they had hidden from, there had also been other dangers on this trip–like the radiation victim that had snuck up on them in the fog three days ago and almost got the door open before John could get the wagon into drive.

*Talk about taking some years off my life*, John thought with a touch of bitterness. The weather was also hard to drive in, but at least the acid rain would force the rest of the mortally injured to hole up somewhere and finish dying.

John scanned the tarp in the rear of the wagon that hid their belongings, the last remnants of their life before the war. He desperately wanted to find a group of people like themselves... John knew they were out there, gathering somewhere. He could feel the pull of their calls, but he saw no one.

The old Ford kept on chugging.

**5**

An hour after dawn lit the sky, the snow had lightened, and the wagon sat on Routt Ridge. The older couple observed in silence, hope gone. NORAD had fallen.

“Check the radio again. Maybe we’ll hear survivors.”

Anne did it slowly, but they heard nothing as she flipped through...

John caught something. He put a gentle hand on his wife’s wrist to keep her from changing to the next channel. “Wait.”

A second later, the radio lit up with heavy static and a man’s calm words.

“Safe Haven… Red Cross... Welcome all survivors... follow… clear means closer.”

They lost the transmission. The radio went to full static.

John looked over Routt Ridge, not needing to see the horrors in the bunker to know they were there.

“Whatever you think, Johnnie.” Anne’s voice was shaky, but there was confidence too–confidence in him.

John considered. They could at least check the new people out from a distance. With NORAD gone, there was nowhere else John could think of to try. If that complex had fallen, no place was safe.

John turned around and headed the wagon west, sure they couldn’t have heard the transmission if the new people were south. The mountains wouldn’t allow the waves to carry that well on their cheap radio. He would narrow it down by the clarity of the calls, and then determine if this so-called Safe Haven was aptly named.

John still believed leaving their home had been the right thing to do. They had started seeing rats the day before. His last memory of the home they’d shared for so long was of nailing the *Warning! Rodents!* sign on the front door. They would probably be sick from rat bites by now if they’d stayed. He had waited as long as he could.

John assumed the group they ended up with wouldn’t be exactly what he was hoping for, but if his beloved wife would be safe and have a good place after he was gone, he would offer his services in exchange.

*If that doesn’t work, I’ll get on my knees and beg.*

# Chapter Thirteen

**Guns and Magic**

**A picture containing weapon, gun

Description automatically generated**

Indiana

**February 14th**

**1**

**T**he twin brothers crawled toward the dim campfire and the quilt covered woman sleeping behind it, coordinating with simple hand signals. The area around them was wooded, dark; there was no glare of moonlight off bald scalps to give them away as they stalked the female. The Morgan Monroe State Forest had been remote even before the war. There was no one to help her.

The brothers had come far east of their main group to take revenge on the snitch who’d put them in prison. After those two bloody days, the brothers had resumed their travels, ferreting out survivors whenever they wanted shelter or sex. They’d found girls and their mothers huddled in basements after the draft had taken their men, but the waves of energy this lone woman was sending out had called to them. They’d followed from a distance to make sure she was alone. When the woman stopped to change a tire–her third in two days–they’d made plans based on knowing she would have to rest afterward. She wasn’t healthy.

Now, she was sleeping.

Dean and Dillan had been dishonorably discharged from the Army for the murder of a Korean civilian. They expected no trouble from one lone woman. The assassins excelled at front line infiltration; only the sound of the cold, Indiana wind howling through the trees echoed as they slipped from rough trunk to yellow grass. Their movements were so alike they appeared to be one 6’, 220lb threat instead of two.

Exhausted, Angela was dreaming of murder, rape, torture. The men in her nightmare were giving no mercy. Their knives flashed across the girl’s body while they talked.

*“They’ll throw us out for this.” One of the men sank his blade deep into a soft, dead breast.*

*His twin nodded, poking her bruised thigh. “We’re not going back. Come on. Her daughter’s awake.”*

Angela snapped awake as mental alarms blared, telling her she’d let danger get too close to run. She jerked her gun from under the blanket, searched the darkness beyond the dim firelight.

The grove of trees she had eased the Blazer into were the only things in sight through the darkness. There were no sounds, not even a cricket–just the wind and the popping of her small, unevenly rocked fire. His cover was good. She found the intruder by the layers of overlapping slime in his mind. Angela pointed her gun in his direction, not sure if she could shoot a person.

*Defend yourself! Use the fire*!

The witch ordered it, but Angela couldn’t. The intruder hadn’t done anything wrong, though she knew his lean body was ready to react. She could feel it.

“Don’t make me shoot you!” Angela hated her shaky tone. The flag dotted blanket fell unnoticed to the damp dirt as she stood.

“I’m hungry. Got any food?”

The words fell awkwardly, tone devoid of empathy. It gave her a chill of terror when he took a small step closer. She lifted the weapon. “Don’t! I will shoot you!”

Energy, fear, and adrenaline raced through Angela. She called for a defense other than her gun. She wasn’t good enough with it.

A door appeared in her mind, one carrying a feel of death. She put a hand on the knob, but hesitated, not wanting to take a life.

“What’s your name? Pretty bitch?”

The intruder’s simple, awful words made her understand the smoke and mirrors she had used on Warren wouldn’t deter this seasoned hunter. She opened the mental door, preparing to do battle for her life. *Nothing will keep me from my son!*

The witch whispered again, revealing secrets.

Angela’s stomach clenched. “Where’s your brother?”

The witch took immense pleasure in the surprise that spread across his smooth face.

Angela darted a quick glance at her Blazer while he was distracted. It was too far away.

“How do you know that?” The hunter stalked through the cool darkness.

*Dean. His name is Dean.* Angela felt a great wave of heat jump from her chest to form a thin shield between them.

The shield was only visible for a second, but Dean saw it.

“Be gone, killer. You have no welcome here!” Angela forked her hands at him.

The burned-out fire flared to life; the crackling flames reached for the surprised man.

The mercenary took an unconscious step backward, revealing his brother and the barrel of his gun.

“Drop it!” Dillan wasn’t sure why his brother had hesitated. It had never happened before; he couldn’t think of anything that would cause it now. They feared nothing. “You shoot, you die slow.”

Angela stepped through the mental door.

A dangerous voice echoed from the dark distance in her mind. *You accept?*

*I do*.

Power flew from her chest. It slammed against the brothers, knocking them both to the ground.

Angela’s breathing was harsh as silence fell; the thin shield vanished as the fire sank to a dim glow.

“Whhoooo!”

The wolf call was close, as if it was responding to her cry for help.

Dean gaped at his twin. “What is she?”

Dillan frowned at his brother’s spooked tone. He hadn’t seen the shield or the fire; he’d already passed off being knocked down to gusting wind. “Ours. We’ll have her now!” Dillan reminded his brother of who they were.

They shared an evil leer, then spun, rushing her.

Angela threw herself toward the Blazer, firing wildly.

The twins dropped low.

The dry click of her gun echoed.

They stood up, closing in for the kill.

“Fire! Ice!”

The flames blazed between them again, but faded just as fast. Her energy was spent.

The brothers leapt at the same time, ignoring bits of hail falling on them.

*Crack! Crack!*

Only Dillan made it across the short flames as bullets flew through the air.

A predator padded into the circle of light as Dean hit the tall grass beyond the fire, clutching his leg.

Dillan grabbed for Angela’s arm, meaning to use her as a shield against whoever was shooting at them.

Powerful jaws sank into his wrist.

Dillan let go of her, bullets forgotten. “Ahh! Dean!”

The timber wolf shook, not letting go.

Dillan punched the creature with hard, serious blows that had no effect.

Angela winced, retreating as bones crunched between the wolf’s teeth.

“Kill it! Dean! Help!”

Dean stayed quiet, hands searching for the gun he’d lost when the slug had slammed into his leg, but his gaze was fixed on the shadows. He hunted for the dead man who had done this.

“Dean! Shoot it!”

The wolf jerked the hurt brother to his knees, blood covering his muzzle.

When the beast finally let go, baring sharp, red teeth, Dillan scrambled to get away.

“He’ll go for your throat if you move.” Angela forwarded the warning from the beautiful predator, stunned.

The twin stilled, holding his mauled arm.

Angela retrieved the gun she had dropped as the injured killer glowered at her. His hatred gave her another deep chill. Her death was in those remorseless eyes; it was ugly.

“This isn’t over!” Dillan was almost crying tears of rage.

Angela paled.

“Yes, it is! You’re both dead!” Marc stepped from behind her muddy Blazer, Colt aimed where the other man had fallen out of sight. He advanced in that direction, content the wolf had things under control here.

“Marc.” Angela stopped him despite the witch warning her not to interfere with the defense she had chosen. “I’m not hurt. Let’s just go.”

Marc hesitated. “It’s a bad idea.”

Her heart thumped at the sound of his voice. “I know.”

Marc gave in, fading into the shadowy darkness by her vehicle to provide cover without being a clear target. “Go on, then. I’ll catch up.”

Angela grabbed her things. She was glad when the wolf stayed between her and the furious killer on the ground. The doctor inside wanted to help, but his hatred! Even if she could change the way the brothers saw her, they would always loathe her for this surprise defeat. She would be healing them so they could hunt her.

*They will anyway*, the voice behind the now shut mental door warned. *Better to let your new man kill them*.

*No killing*. *And Marc isn’t my man.*

“We’ll come for you!” Dillan sat up, shirt soaked with blood.

The wolf snarled, telling Angela to stay away. If Dillan got a hand on her, he would snap her neck with his good arm.

“You’ll look over your shoulder forever, witch!” Dean shouted from the tall grass, still searching for his gun. “You’ll bleed rivers while we have you!”

Evil laughter floated on the wind, giving Angela another chill despite Marc’s presence.

When she lifted a brow, Marc sighed heavily, cold gaze returning to the snake in the grass. “You already know what I think.”

Angela studied her conscience for a brief second, but she had lived by the old rules for a long time. “Let’s just go.”

Dillan was in agony; the mangled wrist was excruciating. He was horrified to find himself relieved by her decision. For the first time since they were teenagers, the twins had underestimated their prey. It was humbling for men who had engaged entire military units alone, but especially for Dillan, who was more aggressive. This humiliation would never be forgotten.

Angela opened the door, but she hesitated to leave Marc with the two killers.

“Now. Take Dog if he’ll go.”

Marc’s words held a tone of command she responded to, even as she frowned.

*Man is your guardian. I am his. Go*. The wolf pushed against her leg.

Surprised by the clear answer from the animal, Angela climbed into the Blazer and shut the door. The powerful engine fired up. She slid the window down. “That should be a fatal injury now. Will you die?”

“Who are you?!” Dillan demanded.

The witch smiled through her lips, hunger glinting. “You’ve called enough of my names. Stay clear of me.”

The Blazer was out of sight a few seconds later.

When both man and beast started to retreat, the twins began to hurl insults, hoping to grab Marc and use him to draw Angela back.

“The railbird is running!”

“Coward! Can’t you finish the job?” Dean stood, gun now in hand.

Dillan was furious. He didn’t care that he was an easy target if Marc chose to fight. “Hell won’t be far enough for you to run! We will have her!”

Marc stayed silent, aware of their tactics (hadn’t Warren tried the same thing?) but he was sure they meant every word they screamed. Unlike the bitter preacher from her hallway, these two could back it up.

Out of sight now, Marc wound through tall oaks and high bushes, leaving muddy prints in the grass. The wolf kept pace.

The big animal leapt into the vehicle the second he opened the door, going to his spot in the rear.

Marc slid in and started the engine.

The radio lit up, making them both flinch from the unfamiliar sound.

“You there?”

He shifted and hit the gas as he keyed the mike. “Be in your mirror in a click. Kill your lights; stay close.”

The bright red tattles disappeared. “I will.”

Marc slowed a little as he went around her on the gravel road, pleased she had left room for him to take the lead. When she fell in tight behind him, he let his knowledge of the area take over. He swung them onto an old dirt path that would bring them out well away from the vengeful threats they were leaving alive. It would help that the ground here was dry but not dusty enough to leave tracks.

Ignoring his gut that said doing this was a huge mistake, Marc lit a smoke and lowered the window. Angie hadn’t wanted it. The last thing he needed was for her to know he was a hardened killer… *Even though I am*.

They rolled over streets and dirt roads that Angela didn’t have time to find on her map before they took a different one. She kept her doors locked and her attention on the *Born Free & Die that Way!* bumper sticker she could read whenever Marc hit his brakes. *He’s here. Marc came!*

Marc kept one eye on the winding dirt road and one on the vehicle in his mirror, glad when she copied his path. They rolled around downed trees, crushed cars, and wireless telephone poles–damage he was almost sure had been caused by an earthquake. She was following him as he had followed her, trusting the choices he made–like he had trusted her choices when he’d tracked her here. It occurred to him again that some of her decisions had been reckless. Finding her had been easy because she wasn’t taking the easiest or most reasonable path, just the quickest–like the water crossing in Geneva. They’d both been lucky that bridge had held.

Marc stared at her shadowy form in the mirror. *That’s Angie!* Marc wanted to grab the mike and tell her how happy he was that she’d called, but he resisted. This wasn’t the time or place, and not just because of anyone who might be listening. He had to get himself under control first.

His mind flashed to the image of her bathed in firelight, no longer the innocent young girl of his memories but a rounded, beautiful woman. He felt the pain keenly. Slender curves, a pale, flawless profile, midnight black hair… It was suddenly easy to remember how silky it had felt under his trembling fingers. It had only been one weekend, fifteen long years ago, but he had never gotten close to it again. The occasional barracks bait he’d succumbed to had been blue-eyed, with long dark hair, and he had loved them all in the dark. Searching for what he’d lost, he was always unsatisfied when it was over. Being with Angie for just these few minutes had already reminded him of how lonely he’d been. Unless he could hide it, she would know his one weakness. *I never got over her. I never will.*

**2**

Nerves began to eat at Angela as the miles passed. She found herself hoping he would keep driving all night. She was grateful for the rescue, but she had counted on at least one more day to figure out what to say to him. What she needed was dangerous. She was crazy to try guilting him into it using something that had happened so long ago. It would never hold him.

*Then tell him the basics and let him make his own choices.*

Angela agreed with the witch’s advice. *That’s what I’ll do, and hope the rest takes care of itself.*

Her dreams had kept some things alive in her memory, but she had forgotten about his hard, tanned skin and the way a couple days’ stubble was attractive on him. Marc was a modern-day cowboy now, with wide shoulders and lean hips in dusty jeans and scuffed boots. He wore a wide brimmed, faded black hat, and a dog tag under his shirt and black trench coat. He also sported a gun on each hip; the crisscrossed belts accented the great shape he was in. Her Marc was all grown up. They had been devoted friends once, lovers… Maybe even soul mates. She was counting on his sense of honor, but also worrying about how to protect her heart. *I have to be careful not to encourage anything. The past is done. We can’t go back.*

By 2:00am, storm clouds were rolling, and Angela was ready to stop. She was too tired to worry about talking. She yawned as they rolled onto yet another weed dotted gravel road; a street sign flashed by too fast in the darkness.

They drove by small buildings she recognized as restrooms and showers. She assumed this path wound around a campground of some kind, or maybe even the rear of the state forest she had been in.

Marc’s brake lights stayed lit as he came to a stop in front of a wide log house overtop a two-car garage with a dark second-floor window. A caretaker’s home, maybe. Garbage littered the area. The trees were spaced out; spots were cleared for campsites. Only oddly colored weeds grew in those neat rock circles now. It was spooky. She jumped when the radio lit up.

“I need to check it out. Stay close, okay?”

“Yes.” Angela shut off her engine, but she didn’t get out as Marc exited and Dog took off to water the weeds. She wanted to watch and see if the Marine took over Marc the way it did Kenny, but she also needed to know where her enemies were. Angela shut her burning eyes, searching for the evil twins she had stopped Marc from killing.

**3**

Dillan and Dean tracked the couple with their lights out, blood-soaked clothes sticking to the seats of their jeep. The two Blazers were easy to spot when brake lights flashed like beacons in the darkness. Not disconnecting those bulbs was a mistake. It was understandable, considering the circumstances, but it was also enough to get them trapped.

“You have gas left?” Dean stayed low as Dillan observed their prey through the binoculars. They had followed separate trails for the first two days of tracking the woman, being careful not to lose her, until tonight, when they’d come together for the attack.

“Two gallons. You?”

Dean smothered a cry, fingers digging into his thigh for a bullet. “Four. We’ll wait until they’re asleep and send them both to hell.”

Dillan wrapped his mauled wrist. “Yes. I need to hear her scream while she burns.”

**4**

Marc frowned as he came out of the garage. Angie hadn’t emerged from the Blazer that was the exact same shade of mud-spattered black as his own. Able to feel the hum of raw energy, he stopped himself from reaching for the handle. *She’s hunting for the brothers.*

When she opened the door, Marc stepped closer. She didn’t look thirty. He, on the other hand, knew he was five years older by the age lines and gray starting to show in the mirror. His birthday had been eight days before the war. Marc wished he had celebrated it this time. “Everything okay?”

Angela shrugged, coming out of the zone. “For now, but they’ll come for us… For me.”

*She doesn’t sound right.*

Angela didn’t tell him she had seen only darkness in their future. She eased out of the Blazer, trying not to wince at the pain in her gut.

Marc saw she had a Therma Care patch stuck to her seat. *What a great idea.* He scanned the .357 on her hip. Her random firing at the twins said she didn’t know what she was doing with the six-shooter. It was probably too big for her hands, chosen because it was pretty. Marc sighed inwardly. She’d be better off using his old piece of shit. Though really, the M9 in the bottom of his kit didn’t fit that old USMC nickname. He’d had more respect than that.“We’ll make some distance in the next few days and lose them for good.”

Angela shivered as the fog cleared, hoping he was right. The two men were dangerous. *I should have let Marc take care of them… Marc. We’re together again.* She peered up, becoming aware of the tension.

Marc couldn’t fight the stunned happiness. He felt as if he was in one of his dreams. He didn’t register her fear as his arms came up, nor the rigid body he wrapped them around with a groan of longing. “God, I’ve missed–”

“Let go of me!”

Marc retreated as if burned. *Angie’s afraid of me?*

“Not at all.” She hoped he hadn’t noticed her hand plunging toward her gun. “I just don’t like to be touched.”

His expression darkened. *Since when?*

“Is it okay to go in?” She buttoned her long black sweater, then slung two big duffle bags over her shoulder.

“Yes. Window’s covered, so our lights won’t be seen.”

Angela hit her rear latch button and shut her door, not staring at the decaying bodies of two wood thrushes near her tire, or the man she’d dreamed about almost nightly for years. During the day, she’d been careful to keep Kenny from catching her loneliness, but dreams were hers. She’d used them to remember.

“Get out what you need, I’ll take it in.”

“I’ve got it.”

Marc wasn’t surprised when she stepped by him. The waves of anger coming from her stiff form were hard to mistake. He went to get his own gear, stealing little glances. He felt her doing the same, despite her anger shield.

When she stepped into the dark garage without hesitation, it surprised him. The Angie he had known was afraid of the dark, terrified even.

*This isn’t her*, the voice inside advised. *Go slowly*.

Marc stepped in behind her. He waited for Dog, then shut the door.

Dog began sniffing the bottom floor.

Angela switched to the far side of the small, mostly empty top room; the pen light on the chain around her neck shined dimly. “Figured we’d use the loft. It’s a good vantage point.”

Angela slid her bags back over one shoulder.

Marc was unable to keep his eyes from her ass as she disappeared into the darker shadows of the second floor. She came back down less than a minute later. He said nothing about her cushioned movements as they brought in the vehicles. *Is she in pain?*

Angela backed her muddy SUV in first, while Marc held the garage door and kept Dog out of the way. As they switched places, he delivered a silly wave that reminded her of the past, when he had been willing to try anything to pull a laugh from her.

Instantly sad, Angela climbed to the loft and set up the heater. *Having emotions sucks*. Angela sighed in relief as the red glow came on. She had chosen the far rear corner floor that was just bare, dusty planks. She was making her bed as Marc came up the stairs.

Angela knew from her life with a Marine that he would want the spot closest to the exit. She unrolled her bag in the far corner.

One of them had to say something soon to cut the tension. It was awkward, sad.

“Where did you find a heater? I kept finding cylinders, but no base.” He was impressed.

Angela tried to pretend it wasn’t relief filling her at the sound of another human voice. “The basement of a Goodwill. It’s great to have.”

Marc studied her, hunting for clues.

Angela began to set up the Coleman stove he had brought in, not sure how to begin the conversation.

Rain began to fall, drowning out the hard, new world on the other side of their four walls. Below them, Dog curled up on a pile of old hides and drifted off.

Marc took off the long leather coat and draped it over the rail.

Angela was drawn to his thick arms as he dug out his own bedroll. He did indeed put it between her and the ladder.

They both avoided the boxes, bags, tarp covered bike frames, and tall mirrors layered in thick dust. There were a million things she wanted to say. *Where to start?* “Want some hot chocolate?”

“Sounds good.”

She handled his stove confidently; she knew what she was doing. Marc kept quiet, wishing she would meet his stare for more than a second at a time. *What’s her problem?* The urge to ask questions was hard to resist, even for him, but he knew she was tired. If she said she’d rather wait until morning to talk, he would agree, but he wouldn’t be able to sleep.

Angela lit the Coleman, a twin of the one sitting in the rear of her Blazer. When she’d noticed him taking his in, she had left her own packed. It made her think about their vehicles. They hadn’t just chosen the same camping equipment. Of all the cars and trucks in the country, they had picked the same color, year, and make. *Is that a coincidence?*

“Can you use the gun on your hip?”

Angela increased the fire on the small pot of water. “I can load it and pull the trigger. Does that count?”

Marc noticed she bagged the garbage instead of leaving it. *I like that.* “Not really. You use it before tonight?”

“No. I didn’t want to attract attention. Guess I did anyway, but I had a flat and the flashlight wasn’t enough to see by.” She tried to keep an even tone as her mind flashed memories.

His dread of her story increased.

“Thank you for coming. There’s no one else I can ask.”

Marc wanted to insist she could count on him, but stopped himself. “I’ll help if I can.”

Angela poured the hot water and stirred. When she brought their cups over, she quickly retreated despite his hand reaching out.

She balanced on each foot to slide her shoes off. Settling herself on her bedroll, Angela pulled the blanket over her lap before easing out of her sweater to reveal a simple white T-shirt with a flag on the front. The jeans hidden under the quilt were unfastened around her aching guts. She had been pushing herself and she was paying for it.

Marc also settled on the floor, lips tightening at the attempt to hide her pain. He busied his hands cleaning one of his Colts, but his attention stayed on her and the details his years of experience allowed him to glean. A pretty (*small*) diamond ring hung on a chain around her slender neck. It was a claim of ownership that she obviously still felt or she wouldn’t be wearing it. She was thinner than she should be–probably only 120lbs, and her nose was crooked, though that was barely noticeable. He also spotted the shadow of a scar under the edge of her wrinkled shirt sleeve. She looked scared, sick.

Instead of the guilt or anger he had expected her to use, Marc now sensed sadness. The old need to protect her rose, stronger than ever. He kept his mouth shut by a hair, sure anything he said would be met by scorn or sarcasm. This was her show until he agreed and he hadn’t yet.

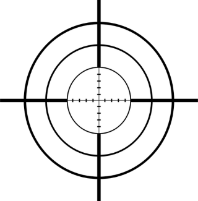
Their eyes locked; heat began to melt the ice wall between them.

Her gaze flinched away.

There was joy and pain in that brief glance, enough to make his heart skip a beat. *I was right. There’s little she can ask for that I won’t give. I haven’t felt so alive in a decade. Exploding buildings and flying bullets are nothing compared to being with my Angie again.*

# Chapter Fourteen

**Mine First**

****

**1**

**“A**re you really a Marine or do you just like being a moving target?”

Marc grinned, a bit surprised she knew he was military and what branch. Most civilians didn’t. He wondered what had given him away. “Been doing it a long time. Saw no reason to change.” Marc slowed his hands on the gun. This talk was clearly going to take a while.

“What’s your rank?”

“Sergeant.”

She stared at him. “Why only an E5?”

He was surprised again by her knowledge. He shrugged, starting to worry. *Is her man military too?* “I disobeyed a direct order too many times. Lost rank.”

“When did you enlist?” She hated herself for asking, but she couldn’t deny the need to know.

Marc snorted and noticed she jumped. She’d been attacked. She had every reason to be a little twitchy. “I didn’t *enlist*.” He tried to control the heavy sarcasm. “It was either put in my time or go to prison for statutory rape. I’ve been a jarhead for fifteen years.”

Her expression became guarded. *Fifteen years. Right after we were caught in my bedroom.*

“The first year was bad, but I learned not to draw fire, and I made a life. I do...did things most people can’t even imagine.”

Her lips thinned. “Sounds like you’ve enjoyed it.”

“For the most part, yes. It was good, knowing I was making a difference.” Marc tried to get her to meet his eye. “What about you, Angie? Have you been okay?”

She shrugged. “It’s had good days and bad days.”

*Simple*. Marc studied the bags under her dark lashes, the broken, jagged fingernails, the unhealthy pallor of her skin. *Too simple*. “More bad than good though, right? Otherwise, you wouldn’t have called me.”

She nodded, but didn’t give details.

Guilt rolled over Marc as if she was screaming. “I’m sorry. I made a mistake.”

Angela lit a smoke, flash of annoyance streaking across her mind. *Does he regret loving me or not coming back for me?* “I don’t need your apology, just your help.”

Marc winced. “I will if I can. Tell me.”

She let out a deep sigh that told him he wouldn’t like any of it.

“I left some things out of the letter. Important to you and me, but it’s nothing my son needs to feel bad for.”

Marc waved a hand, understanding what she wanted. “This stays between us. My word.”

The wind gusted outside.

She flinched again.

Dog continued pacing in front of the door, noticing her tension, Marc assumed. It was hard to miss.

Angela blew out a thick cloud of smoke. “We’ve been living with a man named Kenny for the last fourteen years. We met at the hospital where I gave birth. He was there for rehab on his arm. I had talked my way into a job as a lab assistant, running packages between floors to pay for my medical classes. He was normal, safe, dependable. I ended up telling him everything one night on my break.” She paused, sucked in a breath. “He acted horrified that I was a single, underage mother on the run, living in a sleazy hotel, working ten-hour shifts, and spending another six hours, four days a week, in classes. He was scandalized that I had to have the hotel manager’s drunken sister and teenage daughter babysit.”

Rage was filling Marc’s heart now. “And the concerned Samaritan offered you a deal you couldn’t refuse?”

She nodded again.

The hate in her eyes left no doubt that she had been hurt. Marc braced. “What was the deal?”

“Me. I had to accept him as my…owner, until my son is nineteen.”

“Nineteen?”

Angela crushed out her butt and opened a flat black case to pull out a thick blunt. The wind howled in warning again, but neither of them noticed. “He said the extra year was his bonus for being such a good citizen. He never let me forget he was caring for someone’s bastard.”

Marc couldn’t say anything in defense. After all, it was true. “What do you need me for?” He couldn’t help the defensive tone.

Angela lit the weed, inhaled.

When she passed it, he noted how careful she was not to touch him.

“Help me get my son back.” She gestured. “Clearly, I’m not cut out for the environment.”

Marc knew it couldn’t be as easy as that. “So, just for the trip?”

Angela shuddered. “No. Kenny’s also a Marine. My son is a cadet. They’re together now, in western Utah. Kenny can be…harsh when he doesn’t get his way.”

Marc didn’t respond, mind running over what that confrontation might be like. She did want him to challenge a fellow Marine. He could, but only for the right reasons.

“When he gets like that, I can’t handle him alone. I need you to stay close once we find them, for a little while. Maybe he and I will work things out.”

Marc heard a mix of emotions in her words; doubt was the clearest. “But?”

She took the smoldering blunt back, and again, made sure they didn’t touch, drawing a deeper frown from Marc. *Where’s my Angie?*

“Kenny doesn’t know what a compromise is. He’s never had to before, and unless the war changed him, he’ll fight to keep what he considers his. I still owe him six years.”

Marc knew trouble when he heard it. “So, I get you there, and what? Protect you while you tell your man you don’t love him anymore?”

Angela bristled. “It was never love! We made an unfair deal, and he’s had over a decade of my life that I can’t get back! You don’t know! Kenny will be furious. He won’t care about my reasons or needs. When he finds out I want to change the terms of our deal, that maybe I want complete freedom, he’ll do whatever it takes to hold onto me. Unless he’s changed.”

“And you hope he has?” Marc didn’t want to know, and yet he needed to. When she hesitated, his heart stirred. *There’s room there…*

“We were a family for a long time, and if he can just stop–” Angela caught herself. “If he can compromise, I might be willing to resume our life.”

“And if he won’t?” Marc took the blunt and stubbed it out. When she met his eye again, there was no mistaking the fear, but the determination under it reminded him of the old Angie.

“I’ll grab Charlie and go north. Kenny would never expect a weak woman who speaks a little Spanish to pick Canada.”

Marc let out a frustrated sigh. *She’s not telling me everything.* “We could do that anyway.”

“No. I have to give him a chance to do the right thing.”

Marc frowned at her. “So, I take you there and hang around until you make up your mind, and then maybe take you north. What’s the catch?”

Angela sighed ruefully. “There’s more than one, but the biggest is Charlie doesn’t know for sure Kenny is not his father. I’ve never been able to tell him, but he’ll figure it out when we show up. Then Kenny will know. Once he realizes who you are, he’ll never agree to anything. You may have to fight for both of us.”

Marc said nothing, waiting for more details.

Angela let out a worried noise. “He’ll be madder than I’ve ever made him...and maybe it’ll come to blood.”

His frown deepened. “Surely you’re exaggerating?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m not. He’ll recognize you for the threat you are and try to run you off. It’s only fair you know what you’re getting into.”

Marc felt a fresh tremor of unease at her serious tone. “Then why take the chance the boy will get caught in the crossfire? We’ll just grab him and go.”

Angela shook her head. “No, Marc. I would have been sent home; they would have taken my baby. Kenny saved me from that. We made a deal, and while I can’t keep that promise now, I at least owe him the chance to accept that things have changed and keep the family he had–just on different terms.”

Marc studied her, not liking any of it. If her man was that possessive, there was bound to be ugliness. “What you’re asking is unfair. I can’t even spend time with my son. It’s a bad deal now too.”

She stared at him. “You won’t help me?”

The crushing disappointment made him look away, sure if he held her gaze, he would give in. “I can’t be your show of force, and maybe even your attack dog just because you can’t honor an old promise and are too honest to skip out on it even after all that’s happened. I won’t challenge a fellow Marine for those reasons.”

Angela held in hot tears. “I understand. I’ll go my own way come morning… I’m sorry, Marc, for all of it.”

She laid down, trying not to cry. She couldn’t bring herself to tell him the awful truth about how bad her life had been. He had to see on his own how much she needed him.

Marc wanted to talk more. He wanted to convince her that she didn’t have to stay with someone she didn’t love, that even after all these years, he was still waiting. But he also loathed the idea of being a Jody. No real Marine let himself become the guy who stole a fellow grunt’s girl while they were away.

Marc blew out a sigh of frustration, frown growing when the small sound made her flinch again. *What am I supposed to do?*

*Whatever she asks!* his heart reproached miserably, already aching at the thought of being split from her again. His emotions insisted she was the real thing, a true damsel in distress. He went over her words and reactions repeatedly, searching for clues. *What didn’t she tell me?*

**2**

Angela jerked out of the first deep sleep she’d had since leaving Cincinnati. Weak alarm bells blared for the second time in the same night, but the mental door refused to open. She was too tired.

Marc woke the second she sat up, heart thumping at the sight of his dream woman with sleep on her.

“We have to get out of here.”

Marc began pulling on his boots, not hesitating.

The clink of his dog tag caught Angela’s attention as he stood to fasten the jeans that he’d discreetly loosened. A sexy strip of hair running from his flat, tanned stomach to his groin grabbed her next. She snatched in a surprised breath at the chill of desire. It had been a long time since she’d felt anything close to passion.

“What is it?”

Angela grabbed her blankets, sweater, the heater. “I can’t tell. Big and fast.” She hurried to the ladder, leaving the rest of her things.

Dog whined in the darkness below. Whatever it was, the wolf felt it too.

Angela climbed down, going for the door. She opened it... “Oh, my God!”

That brought Marc from gathering the rest of their things. He stopped in the doorway behind her, stunned.

Thick, orange flames twined up the porch rails of the house; the tree line was ablaze in every direction. Even the air was burning. Fat drops of rain were catching fire as they hit a burning branch or rail. It was as if the sky was on fire from the ground up; tiny sparks flew into the night like fire following gasoline. The rear of the garage was also sending up smoke, telling Marc that direction wasn’t safe either. He scanned for an escape. “Dog, heel.”

The wolf came to Marc’s side, fur up.

Angie was frozen.

Marc gave her a nudge as a thick wave of black smoke gusted over them. He noticed she cringed away from him, even in a moment of danger. “Back the way we came and stay on my ass!”

Angela hurried to her vehicle, heart thumping.

Marc kept track of her and Dog. He was glad when they were all inside. They were rolling a few seconds later, tires traveling over hot, smoldering branches and limbs that had already fallen. The smoke grew thicker, making it harder to see as they went by burning cabins and tall, flaming trees that threw showers of sparks over the vehicles.

*Pop!*

*Pop!*

Neither of them noticed bullets barely missing tires. Slugs slammed into the ground in hard, quiet thuds that couldn’t be heard over the crackling, popping rumble of the fire.

Smoke rolled across the road; flames blocked their way in places. Marc was forced to lead them in and out of trees that had become giant torches. Dead limbs fell behind them, thumping to the ground in geysers of flaming debris.

Angela’s grip on the wheel was white as she followed, neck sweaty, cheeks streaked in soot. *We almost burned!* Angela tried to keep her attention on his bumper sticker instead of the flames and her panic. *Death! One wrong turn from death!*

Marc went back the way they’d come, instinct screaming this wasn’t a natural fire.

The flames thickened.

Marc took them west as sweat poured off his neck.

Dog growled. *Watch out!*

The flames rose in a thick wall. He keyed the mike. “Hit the gas! We’ll go right through!”

The Blazers plunged into the fire at high speed. The heat rose to intolerable, and then they were through, coming out unharmed on the other side. The temperature was instantly cooler.

Marc took them down the next steep hill, winding into the coolness with long, bone jarring bumps. The flames hadn’t been through this brown and green terrain yet. *Maybe we got out in time. Because of Angie.*

He could still see the flames in their mirror, though. Marc aimed for White Creek, where animals were following the current in the creek and walking the bank. He eased the Blazer into the half foot of steadily flowing water.

Angela followed, relieved Marc had found them safety.

Marc rolled into the middle of the creek, hunting the tree line for a dirt path that he’d only been on twice. It was nearly inaccessible to anything but a bike or jeep unless the driver was skilled. It would take the fire a while to spread up that hill.

Spotting the path, he steered that way, being careful not to crush animals darting into the water for shelter. Marc keyed the mike. “Remember how we used to ride dirt bikes behind Daniel’s house?”

“Yes.”

“This is trickier. Stay a few car lengths behind and remember, an uncontrolled slide doesn’t happen unless you hit the brakes too hard.”

Angela had to grin at his tone. He was eager for the next thrill, like she’d been when they were young. She hadn’t allowed herself to think about the fun they’d had together in a long time. She hadn’t been able to deal with the crushing pain, or the anger if Kenny sensed it and reacted. It still hit her at odd times that she was now free to think about anything she wanted. “You lead, I’ll follow.”

*Since when?* Marc shifted gears. He felt her catch his mutter; he smiled at the feeling of the old connection. He went up the next steep hill with an easy burst of speed.

Angela counted to five before following, glad when he didn’t seem to have trouble on the dark path.

His Blazer fishtailed as it hit the top, brake lights flashing briefly before he dropped out of sight.

Heart in her throat, Angela hit the gas harder as she neared the top and tapped the brakes as she started to drop into thin air.

She saw Marc halfway up the next incline, and then she had her hands full as gravity pulled hard. She landed on a narrow path that shot downward at an awful left tilt. The Blazer slid heavily. Thick gobs of mud sprayed the trees.

Her hands worked the wheel, foot on the gas... She made the curve, shooting up the hill where Marc was disappearing.

Her Blazer slid to the right again when she made it to the top. Angela winced as she scraped branches and trees, forcing her foot away from the brake. She used loose hands on the wheel to keep the teetering vehicle on the edge of control.

Angela brought it away from the steep hill, proud of herself. She jumped as Marc’s thought came flying at her.

*It gets bad from here. I’ll tell you which way to aim.*

She heard him in her mind this time, catching the worry and the excitement. She was suddenly sure Marc would never let her go on alone. His sense of honor would be the excuse he gave himself, but it was really the old hunger and restless need. Her life had been in grave danger twice in the same eight hours. *The Marc I grew up with would never–*

Angela stopped, not ready for the pain that would come upon completing it. This trip would be easier on both of them if she remembered the past was gone.

**3**

The twins had come up, and then down, the steep mining road much more slowly than Angela and Marc. They were barely able to make the muddy, hairpin curves. As they reached the summit of the last dark, treacherous hill, Dillan pointed at two sets of brake lights disappearing into the smoky valley below. They watched for a long moment but saw nothing else.

“Still going west.”

“Meeting someone?”

Dillan shrugged. “Cesar, if she goes far enough. He’s in that area by now.”

“She won’t be able to handle all those men.”

“Neither can we. We’ll have to share.”

Dean scowled. “No.”

“Exactly. We’ll follow but hang back, let them believe we gave up. Our chance will come.”

Dean dug through his kit for two capsules, glad to be traveling in the same vehicle together again. He’d missed his brother’s warmth. “Start out again at daylight?”

“Yeah. We know which direction she’s going. We’ll camp high before dusk each night and keep track by their lights or fires. They’ll relax, and we’ll take ‘em off guard.”

“We need a stronger tranquilizer.”

“And sharper knives.”

**4**

Angela and Marc didn’t stop until almost noon. They were both exhausted as they sat on opposite corners of their tailgates for the tuna sandwiches and coffee she’d made. Marc had gassed their vehicles while she cooked.

Dog had stayed close, not wanting to leave them alone. He spent the time sniffing Angela’s feet as she worked.

The layer of grit in the sky appeared thicker. The depressing view matched from land as well. Angela tried to avoid staring at the suburbs of identical condominiums crammed together across from the field. The windows with corpses of starved pets were hard on her. Most of the skeletons appeared to still be searching for the masters who had left them to such an awful fate.

“We have to come to some terms before we go any further together.”

A sweet smile of relief lit her tired face.

Marc sucked air into lungs that felt too small. It was no surprise he’d never gotten over her. *No one else will ever hit me this hard.*

Dog looked up, head tilting.

Marc saw her happiness cool and knew she was waiting to see if she could pay the price he was about to demand. “First and most important, I’ll teach you some basic defense and how to use your gun.” Marc knelt by her bumper and worked with his smaller tools kit while they talked.

Angela nodded, frowning at the notion of being close enough to him, or anyone, long enough to learn something like that. “Okay, to both.”

“Good. We’ll plan routes together and share the chores. I’ll keep my distance as best I can and still protect you.” Marc extracted the brake lightbulb and placed it in the bag with the bulbs from his vehicle. “In return, I’ll need more than an introduction. It can wait until you decide about your future, but then they’ll both have to be told. I already want to spend time with my son. That’s just going to grow for me.”

Angela frowned again. The things he wanted were reasonable, but fear beat in her heart. “Agreed. Anything else?”

“Yes.” He didn’t look at her. “I need to know things about your life. We can leave that for when you’re ready, but on the way, I’d like you to tell me about...Charlie. Everything I missed. Bedtime stories, any pictures you have?”

She gave him a cool smile. He wondered what words she hadn’t liked. *All of it?*

Angela gave him a cool stare. “Is that it? Good. Now, I have conditions. First and most important, we will travel every day. I’m in a hurry, and I want that clear. Second, you’re in charge, but when I say to change direction, we do it. We’ll use maps, but I’m tracking him too, and I trust *me*.”

To a man who hadn’t had anything but guilt and loneliness for a long time even before the war, her protectiveness was attractive. “Agreed, next?”

“Next is last. When we get there, do as I ask and abide by my choice. I don’t want violence.”

He locked eyes with her, not letting her look away. “You’ll make sure I get time with my son, even if we have to sneak?”

“Yes.” She swallowed nervously. “You’ll protect us from Kenny, even if it comes to blood?”

The open fear in her expression hurt him. “With my life, baby.” The answer fell easily despite all the years between them.

“Then I agree.”

Mindful about keeping his distance (*still stinging from it*) Marc didn’t put out his hand until she did.

Angela almost drew back, then placed her fingers against his.

Lightning flashed, forking into thick clouds that rolled across the sky as the lovers touched. Electricity sparked, threatening to sweep them into the past.

Marc let go. He was a man of his word.

For Angela, the silence after the crash was deafening, but she didn’t apologize for the small theft of some of his healthy energy. She was almost sure he hadn’t noticed anyway. Her gifts were something she planned to rely on now. He would have to get used to it. Kenny couldn’t. He hadn’t even been able to consider accepting her for what she was without using it for his own gain. *Is Marc different?* She began cleaning their lunch mess. *Time will tell.* “Come on, Sir Lancelot. I’d like to make another three miles by dark.”

Marc snapped a stiff salute.

Angela glanced away, not wanting him to see her disappointment. Had a tiny part of her heart been hoping that one of his conditions might be another chance with her?

She shut and locked her door, swallowing bitter pain. That was exactly what the old Angela had been hoping for.

It was a struggle not to cry as she shifted into gear.

**5**

They traveled until it began to get dark. The rain had finally cleared, leaving damp, reeking wind as they rolled over dead wires attached to downed poles and hundreds of trees that had their tops sheared off. It was sad and monotonous. Despite her need to hurry, Angela was glad when Marc called her on the radio. She was beat.

“Ready?”

“Yes. You pick, I’ll cook.”

“Deal. Take that first long driveway on your right.”

Angela saw the benefits of his choice as she eased up a muddy driveway full of cracks and weeds. Thick trees blocked the view on one side. A neglected cornfield did the same for the rest of the property surrounding the small farmhouse. A few of the big windows were broken, but the home appeared otherwise undamaged.

Marc drove toward the small carport, hoping there was room for two. He had expected Angie to be driving something flashy and unusable. Her seriousness about making this trip was something of a relief, as well as a worry. It spoke of someone who didn’t exaggerate.

Marc stopped as Angela eased her vehicle into the hard dirt row of corn near the carport. She snapped a surprising few of the knee-high stalks. Obviously, she’d done it a few times. Closing his mouth on the correction he had started to give, Marc waited to see what she had in mind.

Angela pulled out a rolled-up camouflage tarp, and took it to the roof. When she tossed it over her Blazer, pulling on the stiff ends, the muddy vehicle disappeared. The Marine inside stirred in respect at her resourcefulness. Fresh recruits tried hard to impress him, usually without success, for the full eight weeks. She’d done it in less than a day.

“There should be room for both of us.”

The radio made him jump. She’d crawled under the tarp. “Copy.”

Angela stood on her roof, holding up the tarp for him to enter.

Marc concentrated on what he was doing instead of her long legs. He put the Blazer in park and killed the engine.

Angela stepped across his hood and jumped down. She tugged the tarp until he had to flip on his light to see.

Angela was driving thick steel pegs into the corners of the large tarp when he emerged, wearing gloves and a heavier coat.

Marc went to secure the house, Dog at his hip, but his mind stayed on the woman he could hear. She was an asset in this new world. She was strong, smart, and a possible target for every person who spotted her. That was what had stopped him from leaving. Marc was almost sure the fire had been set. He’d found damage on the corner of his tailgate that could be the trim from a bullet. The brothers had tried to fry her in her sleep. When she’d woken too soon, they had started shooting. The smoke had ruined their aim and saved Angela’s life. Amid the cracking tree branches and roar of the flames, Marc hadn’t even known they were under attack. She wouldn’t stand a chance without him; he had loved her too much to let her go on this suicide mission unprotected.

They would stay on side roads and be careful with shooting lessons that might draw attention. *One glimpse of her and we’ll be under attack again. Everything else in this new world is so ugly, people need beauty in any form. Then they’ll crush it under obsessive care. I won’t let that happen to her.*

**6**

“You don’t wear any insignia.” Angela couldn’t take any more of the silence. “What branch of the Marines were you in?”

They were settled in bedrolls on the floor, eating and trying not to stare at each other. Dog was curled up out of sight. Angela didn’t know exactly where, but it was still a comfort.

Marc was still dwelling on her story of finding fresh meat in the basement of a lavish home she’d passed in Edinburgh. Drawn by lights in the windows, she’d found a generator running. There had obviously been people there recently, but she hadn’t run into anyone while exploring the big house. What courage that must have taken!

“Marc?”

He replayed her words. “The one with no name.”

His answer drew a frown. Kenny had said the same thing a few years ago when she’d asked about his advancement. She sighed, staring at the bedroll between her and the doorway as the wind howled. Kenny was going be so pissed she couldn’t even predict what he might do. *Is Marc equal to that?* “Like The Unit?”

Marc snorted. “You watched that BS?”

“Every Tuesday, no matter what.”

Her bitter tone made his smile fade. He sensed she wanted to ask if he was that good. He admired her control when she didn’t. “Yes, I am.”

Angela met his eye. “Honestly?”

He nodded, not quite thinking about the harshest things he’d done.

Angela felt the darkness on his soul; it comforted her. “Him too. He’s got six years in now.”

Marc’s expression became shuttered. “Most men don’t do it that long. It’s dangerous work.”

“How long for you?”

“Eight. I had my own team.”

Angela heard his pain over the personal loss, but she couldn’t bring herself to mouth the pleasantries the old world would have required. He was mourning a great life. She’d barely had one to lose. She had clung to her sons and now, one was rotting in the ground and the other was lost in the wilderness.

Belly content for the first time in a while, Marc flipped through the pictures she’d set by his plate. He was glad she hadn’t pushed him on why he stayed in the service. The question required trust, and they didn’t have any. *Time to start building some.* “Why didn’t you call me, Angie? I would have taken responsibility.”

She pushed away her half-finished burger and corn. “I wanted more then. I wanted all of you or nothing.” She lit a smoke. “They wouldn’t have left us alone anyway and you know it. Between their religious crap, and your shame, we didn’t stand a chance.”

“Didn’t I deserve a say in that choice?”

Angela took the cigarette from her mouth with shaky hands she knew he saw. There was probably little he didn’t notice. “We both deserved to be happy, but it was taken away. I found out about the baby, and I was alone. I made hard choices that were wrong sometimes, but we’ve always been together, and no one has ever told him he’s going to hell because of our sins against God.”

Marc winced, fading back in time to the confrontation with his mother.

*“She’s your family! How could you?!”*

*“Not by blood!”*

*Slap! “By God!”*

Angela sighed. “That was a long time ago.”

“Yep. A lot of hurt between then and now.”

“We made our choices. What’s done is done.” She yawned and stood, surprised to discover his misery didn’t please her. She really did owe him much worse for the way he’d abandoned her. She strode toward the door, pulling on her sweater.

When he followed, Angela felt better that he was taking her request for protection seriously. “Where all have you been since the war?” She went to her Blazer.

Her waist was so small he could span it with both hands. Marc shoved them into his pockets instead, remembering a time when he’d been free to do that and a lot more. “I was in Virginia when the bombs fell, going to the new family house for a funeral.”

She tensed. “Whose?”

“Mother.”

Angela started to offer sympathy.

Marc waved a hand. “Don’t bother. I went home to bury the past, not her. She’s been dead to me for a long time.” He lit a smoke, casual tone not changing. “After Roanoke, I traveled northeast for a couple weeks, but it was all worse. There were already mutations in West Virginia. After that, I changed directions. I’ve been to about twenty big bases, offices, centers. There’s nothing.”

Hearing it only made Angela a bit sadder. That world was gone; eventually they would all stop expecting its return. Angela got another duffle bag from the rear seat and disappeared behind a tree, liking it when Marc waved the wolf after her. This was why she needed him. He would teach her to be strong and protect her while she learned.

*What happens when he runs out of things to teach?* the witch asked ominously.

Angela wasn’t in any state to search that far ahead. She didn’t answer.

They went into the tepid warmth of the faded, drafty farmhouse a minute later, both avoiding looking at the happy profiles of the family who had lived here. Pictures smiled at them from all the walls.

“How much gas do you have?” Marc pushed the heater closer to the window so the draft would carry warmth farther into the room.

“Only quarter of a tank, but I have two five-gallon cans in the rear.”

“Great. I’ve got about the same. We should be okay for a few days.” Marc spent a minute at the window, scanning the landscape around their vehicles. He had chosen this room because it was the closest one to their wheels that had a window for a quick escape. Marc wondered if he should point it out to her. *How much does she want to learn while we travel?*

Angela wondered if his home had included a wife. The pain was staggering.

“So, he’s a HAC-RAM?”

Angela smiled.

Marc stared. Enough of those happy looks could blind a man from even noticing other women. He knew.

“He has been for three years. Have a Child, Raise a Marine, was one of Kenny’s better ideas. They were in Arizona, at an annual competition when the war came. They usually bring home a box of trophies. From the outside, he’s the perfect dad.” Angela settled on the couch.

Marc forced his mouth shut. He was going slow to avoid missing clues, but he was already picking out things that bothered him. The jumpiness and hand flinching toward her gun at every sound could be attributed to her being attacked, but she also hesitated to walk close or look him in the eye. No physical contact was a given, but her cold reaction to his hug had been unexpected, uncalled for. *What did she go–*

“Where’d you get the wolf?”

“Dog?” Marc smiled awkwardly, not sure how much of his thoughts she was picking up. “He was part of a pack before we met up. Rangers caught him after a kid was taken.”

“They were going to put him down?”

“Yeah. My buddy had a farm. Dog settled in and we made friends.”

“He obeys well for being mostly wild. It’s good you didn’t take that from him.”

Marc lit a smoke. Most people didn’t realize that when they heard the story. “I only changed him where I had to. He went on base with me, on missions a few times. It saved my ass more than once to have him along.”

“It sounds like you’ve lived the ideal bachelor’s life.” Angela hated herself for being too weak to resist probing.

Marc didn’t hesitate. “There was never anyone serious for me after you. You’re a tough act to follow.”

The old Angela did enjoy his pain this time. She slapped at him with sharp claws not quite fully extended. “Hell, Marc. You could have had a supermodel. I never figured you for a swinging single.”

Marc shrugged, mind screaming *ambush* at her accusing tone. “I wasn’t that either. Too many strange ones out there. I had one fast date with a girl who had a nose ring and three-inch purple fingernails. Strange.”

Angela opened her mouth before she could censor the words and was appalled by the jealousy that spewed out. “Did she have long black curls and pale white skin like all the others? Did you see my face when you exploded in her?”

Marc sucked in a breath.

Angela scrambled up to put distance between them. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe I said that.”

“After everything you’ve been through, I guess you owe me a few.” Marc stood too, reeling from the blow that she already knew he wasn’t over her. He frowned when he caught her flinch.

Angela tensed. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

The fear was unmistakable. Marc put his back to her so she couldn’t see his rage. *She is afraid of me, terrified.* “Better to let it out, honey. The sooner we clear the air, the sooner you’ll trust me again.”

“But I do!”

Marc moved toward the door, subtly watching her expression. He recognized her relief when he went by without punishing her.

“I called you, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t want to.” He forced the words out. “And you don’t trust me. It’s a problem we’ll have to work on.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m fine.” Angela was afraid he was about to leave her here.

“Then why do you almost go for your gun every time I move?” He watched her slide trembling hands into her pockets. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Marc waved at the wolf. “Stay. Guard *her*.”

The animal sat down by her feet.

Marc shut the door, leaving Angela relieved, confused, and sorry that she hadn’t hidden her feelings.

Marc walked the perimeter, furious. *Angie’s scared, and not that childish shit women do over mice and spiders.* It was real fear of being hurt. He loathed the people who had taught her that. He was hoping her life hadn’t been as bad as observing her implied, but every minute they spent together said it had. The fear she was carrying wasn’t from being attacked just since she’d left Ohio. It wasn’t new. She was honestly terrified of men and that only came from being hurt by one.

*What if she has been abused by her man? What if he is as violent as she’s implying?*

“Then I’ll fight for her.” Marc thought he’d probably end up doing that anyway.

*But only if she chooses not to honor their relationship.* His conscience threw in the condition, but Marc lashed out in bitter anger.

“To hell with her relationship! She was mine first!”

Angela emerged from the house as he came up the steps, swallowed by her bigger coat and hat this time. Dog stayed next to her.

Sweet vanilla filled his nose as they passed. Marc grit his teeth to keep from reaching out. *I’ve missed her so much!*

Angela heard him as if he’d spoken. She forced herself to stop as the stiff wind blew her curls around. Marc was doing her a great service. She didn’t want him to be upset. “It wasn’t meant to be, but we’ll be friends again, in time. That’s something, right?”

Marc wanted to say she was wrong; they had been soul mates. “You’ll be safe with me,” came out instead.

Marc was glad he’d reassured her when she flashed an honest smile.

“I know it deep down, but...” Angela shrugged, not wanting to expect more than he was willing to give.

Marc understood. “But it helps you to hear it, and you’ll probably need me to do it again.”

She flushed, brows drawing together. He recognized her needs so quickly. *Why couldn’t Kenny have been half the man Marc is?* She went to the Blazer, aware of him like she’d known she would be. *Some things never change.*

**7**

When Angela stepped out of the Blazer, she found the wolf sitting on the porch. “Hi, Dog. We haven’t been properly introduced yet. I’m Angie.”

The big animal resignedly held up a paw. *We’ve met.*

Marc grinned as Angela’s laughter rang out. She bent to shake without hesitation. Even most Marines were too leery. He observed from the impenetrable darkness of the doorway, heart thumping when she pulled her clothes to the side to adjust a lacy, white bra strap. The desire changed as his gaze went to the jagged knife scar on her shoulder. It was rough, ugly, and out of place on her pale skin.

A hard knot formed in Marc’s gut as his mind played a video of her being held down, struggling and screaming, while someone carved what could be a grotesque letter K into her flesh. *Isn’t her man’s name Kenny?*

There were a lot of possibilities, like a car wreck, shrapnel, falling on something, bobbing when she should have weaved, and still, he knew what he knew. Marc went back to their den, counting the ways he would make her man pay if he was the one responsible.

Five minutes later, Angela still hadn’t come in.

Marc went back out, though Dog was guarding her. He didn’t like the lack of noise.

Angie was in the darkest corner of the porch. If not for the sound of her pen scratching on the paper, Marc would have missed her. *How can she write in total darkness?*

“Something about the way my vision works. What’s the temperature?”

Using his lighter, Marc checked the small stick on disc she had put there earlier. “Either thirty or twenty-eight. Can’t tell which.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure.” He lit a smoke, staring into the thick shadows around them. “I need to ask you something.”

Angela shut her notebook. “Shoot.”

“Was calling me just a way to make him realize you don’t need him, so you can get what you want? Are you using me against him?”

Angela flipped on her penlight as she stepped toward the rail. “Not in the way you’re thinking. He isn’t coming back for me, but he intends to keep my son.”

“Why doesn’t he want you anymore?”

Fathomless grief flashed out. Marc drew in a sharp breath at the pain he read. Something awful had caused it, something she wasn’t going to tell him yet.

“I’m a burden.”

He scowled. “You’ve done well.”

“I was never allowed to be this person before.” Angela stared at him. The bags under her eyes were almost like bruises. “He heard the calls too; he knows I’m on my way. He doesn’t expect me to bring help that he can’t handle, so yes, I am using you, but only in the ways you’ve agreed to.”

Marc knew from her tone she wanted to be done with this topic for now. He pointed at the small black discs he’d set out. “Those are motion alarms.” He picked up a rock and a stick, and tossed them in different directions. Two tones chimed from his wristband.

Marc hit a button to give them silence, holding his arm up for her to see the sequence.

Angela controlled her flinch.

“Different sound for each breach tells how many intruders. Red button shuts it off; green arms it.”

“You learn that in the Corps?”

He smiled. “Along with a few other things.”

“Like what?”

“Survival stuff mostly. It’ll come in handier now, I suspect.”

He sounded wide awake. Angela frowned. “Aren’t you tired?”

“I’m a Marine, honey. This is par for the course.” Marc didn’t say he’d only gotten a short snooze before their escape from the fire. His mind had been too busy racing to sleep. He had taken a pep pill after lunch.

They were both quiet for a minute, scanning, listening. There were no lights or noises in the cold darkness around them, no insects or rodents in the brush. Angela shivered. The world was dying. Would they too? Shaking off the morbidity, Angela followed Marc into the warmth of their den. When he took off his coat, thick arms flexing, her gaze was drawn to his muscular body.

“I grew up, didn’t I?” He grinned, hoping for a laugh.

“Yes.” Angela slid into her blankets. It was all going to be much harder than she’d expected. She tossed the black case toward his feet, observing for anger in case the throw made him jump. “Light the big one, will ya?”

Marc leaned against an end table as he fired it up. His gun belts were under his pillow, boots nearby. Sweet smoke curled around them.

Marc hated the tension, but it was a step up from what Angela had lived each day.

“In the mornings before we leave, I’ll start showing you how to use that gun.” He tried not to gawk. She was unbraiding long curls he longed to touch.

“Okay. Will you tell me about some of your missions another night?” She smothered a yawn, watching the wolf pick a bed under a dusty cabinet.

Marc frowned. “You mean the places I’ve come through since the war?”

“No, your time in the Corps.”

“Okay. Pick a city, state, or country.”

“New Orleans.”

Marc tensed. “Before or after Katrina?”

Angela heard the change in tone. “During.”

“Okay.”

She shivered at a strong draft.

Marc pushed the heater closer to her with his foot, aware of the spark between them trying to flare up.

So was Angela. She tried another topic. “What’s the first thing I should know about guns?”

“Don’t have one if you don’t know how to use it.”

Angela understood the answer had been drilled into him, but she found his tone smug. “The second?”

“When it’s life or death, like now, rule one means shit.”

She gave a tiny smile, head starting to thump. “What will you do with me first?”

His eyes went to her mouth. Marc dropped them to the floor; wind howled through the dead cornstalks around the farmhouse. “We’ll work on target practice for a few minutes before we leave each morning. We’re not as likely to be tracked by the noise.”

“That’s smart.”

He stifled a groan of relief as he laid on his side, facing her. “Won’t matter if someone’s nearby.” He stared at the ebony curls now resting on the blankets. *Would her hair still feel like silk against my skin?*

Angela’s nostrils flared, as if she had smelled the thought. The fear on her face made him roll onto his back. Marc didn’t want this moment to end. He was enjoying the buzz, the heat on his feet, and most of all, the sight, smell, and sounds of Angela invading his senses. She too had grown up.

*Yes, I have*. Angela eased down as mild stomach cramps continued. *Enough to not encourage what I’ll never be free to give.*

“Night, honey. See you in the morning.”

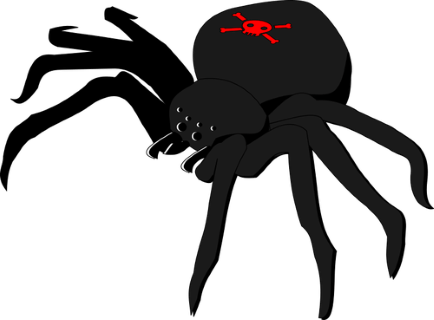
The old saying reached that cold, dark place in her heart with a single, beautiful, fiery blast of heat.“Yes, you will.” The old, familiar, hurtful response came from her lips as if no years had gone by.It was hard not to let the tears escape. Marc was here, but every wall that had stood between them before was still up, only they were twice as tall. It would be a long time before they were even friends again.

Marc laid with his hands under his neck until her even breathing told him she was asleep. Then he eased back onto his side, letting his eyes go where they wanted. *How am I going to do this?*

Fifteen years had gone by, but Marc had never put her out of his heart. He would never make it a thousand miles without telling her the truth. *I came for another chance at our love. This pain has been unbearable. I’ll agree to any deal you offer.*

# Chapter Fifteen

**No Pain, No Gain**

****

Colorado

**February 15th**

**1**

“**D**amned spider wasn’t even the size of my fingernail.” Samantha was about to cause herself a lot of pain because of it. Her leg was bad. The wound was hard and swollen, black in the center with angry red lines of infection crawling up toward her heart.

Green Falls and Woodland Park had been looted, like every other place she’d come through, but the pharmacy had been intact. Samantha had tried all the antibiotics she found, giving each a few days to take effect. Though they had slowed the infection that had made walking impossible, it was now life or death. She had to do surgery on herself.

Samantha was holed up in the Devil’s Head Hunting Lodge, taking shelter in one of the large, rustic cabins. Old, uncomfortable furnishings sat around a beautiful stone fireplace, with an outhouse in the rear, and huge glass windows in the front that gave her a view of dwarf birch trees with black moss. The other walls were decorated by a buck, a bear, a snarling bobcat, and a calendar showing December. Isolated, she was hoping to recover here while waiting out the approaching blizzard.

Terrified of passing out and bleeding to death, Samantha let her mind go where it wanted as she worked on her courage. The thick layer of dust on the floor said no one had been here since all hell broke out. There were a few bloody smears outside, but no bodies, not even a stray cat. That worried her. It said predators around here were cleaning up the carrion.

Her stomach dipped. Samantha saw the doomed press secretary on the sofa again, heard the single shot. The compound was fifty miles behind her, but Pat’s grotesque face was a daily companion.

“You won’t last as long as he did if you don’t do this, Sammi.” She could only hope this drastic action would succeed. Bandages and supplies were spread out next to her; flames were roaring in the fireplace at her booted feet. Samantha pulled her cap over her long braid. “It’s time to shoot, Luke, or give up the gun.”

Samantha, who had once created useful technology for the government and saved the life of a president, picked up the hot knife. A second blade glowed in the fire. A shoelace was tied around her upper thigh, cutting off circulation. She clenched her teeth as she pinched up the swelled flesh around the stinking wound. Thick, yellow clots gushed out and rolled down her thigh.

“Don’t need someone to ride the river with.” The leg of her sweatpants was cut away from the thigh to the knee. If she passed out, she wouldn’t freeze to death. “It’s do or die time, Sammi.”

The steel in her spine stiffened into an iron bar. After a quick prayer that she had no faith in, Sam drew in a deep breath and pushed the glowing knife against her leg.

It sank into her flesh like it was butter.

She screamed as pain raced up her leg. White and yellow pus shot out, followed by scarlet streams.

She cut again, hoarse cry never completely stopping as a chunk of her leg slid to the sticky floor.

Stomach and teeth clenched, the sobbing woman forced her shaking hands to drop the knife and grab the full, open bottle of rubbing alcohol.

Sam dumped it over the bleeding wound, still screaming. She snatched up the second knife before the agony could overwhelm her. Tears blurred her vision as she shoved the red-hot end over the gaping, bleeding hole.

Her lungs were raw before she stopped shouting.

Sam used the iron twice more to be sure she had closed the odd, deep wound. She could feel her heart thudding in her chest, but nothing else except the flames that had become her leg. She dropped the bloody metal into the fire and grasped the syringe of morphine with jerking fingers.

She gave herself half of the green liquid; the pain immediately sank down into a monster she could tolerate. The morphine was powerful, consuming. She was unprepared for the strength as it made her mind swim.

When she thought she had herself under control, Samantha shot a generous dose of antibiotics into her thigh and then sat still, trying to stay awake. She was afraid of the wound breaking open, and terrified of her dreams. Melvin and Henry were her companions most nights, often joined by the press secretary from the bunker. She knew it was just her mind sorting through it all, but she couldn’t help being afraid. If this surgery succeeded, she might make it to Cheyenne by April Fools’ Day. If it didn’t, she would die here.

Pain came in thick waves, stealing her breath. Samantha reflected on her Seattle office as a distraction. She had spent more time there than in the condo she’d inherited from her parents. She hadn’t been a public member of the weather service, just a computer message they had been told to listen to no matter what their own data said. She’d been well treated, with a home office full of luxuries designed to keep her happy and working.

“Prize rat in a cushy run,” she slurred, crying. *I was part of the problem. Some of this is my fault.*

Samantha slumped against the bed of cushions and pillows she’d made.

Outside, snow began to fall.

**2**

*Wwhhhoooo!*

Sam moaned in agony before her eyes were even open, hands going to her wound. She screamed as clumsy fingers found the raw, angry flesh of her leg.

Sam jerked awake. She took shallow, rapid breaths as she slammed the needle into her other thigh, shoving in the rest of the morphine. Her empty stomach churned. She gagged. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Sam concentrated on holding in her guts as the pain started to sink back down.

After a moment, she pried her lids open. Cleanup had to be done. An animal outside had woken her. The mess was already drawing predators, even though she could hear wind beating against the cabin. Her dream flashed. A blizzard was coming. Places on the edge of the storm would experience sudden temperature drops. The war’s death count was about to climb.

As if to prove her point, the storm picked up; freezing rain slammed against the windows.

Sam jumped at a blur in the corner. Squinting, her blurry vision told her it wasn’t a threat. The long mouse appeared normal.

Samantha forced herself to use the bedpan, leg flaring at each jar and wobble. She cleaned herself with alcohol pads, relieved to see the infection lines were already lighter.

She forced herself to drink a cup of water and eat a pack of stale peanut butter crackers. She also tossed one into the corner for the mouse to find.

Samantha missed the fire. She hated shivering in the dark, but she wasn’t up to the effort required to relight it. For now, she had a big stack of blankets and a couple of flashlights. That would have to be enough.

Sam took another half syringe of morphine. She tugged the covers over herself with numb hands. “I’ll rest a while and then I’ll be okay.”

She told herself that repeatedly, needing comfort now that loneliness had caught up on her solitary journey. Samantha had finally come to hate the constant silence of the new world. She needed to be with people again. As soon as she was able, she would get on her way to Cheyenne and the EPA weather shelter that was there. She would check it out and stock it for the winter, then make it her hideout. She couldn’t help hoping other survivors would be there, but she knew that was too much to ask for. *All roads lead to death now. It’s just a matter of how we get there.*

Part Two:

**On the Road**

February

# Chapter Sixteen

**Birds of a Feather**

**A close up of a bird

Description automatically generated**

Near Roosevelt, Utah

**February 16th**

**1**

“**H**arrison to Eagle One. Twelve o’clock, up high.”

Adrian glanced up from the roadmap he had splayed across the steering wheel. He narrowed in on an enormous black cloud coming over the distant hill toward them. It was like a badly trained platoon, spreading an evil shadow over the land.

Adrian leaned forward, squinting. He grabbed the mike. “Shit! Convoy, halt! Put it in park and get as low as you can!” Doing 35mph, Adrian slammed both feet down, reaching for the trailer brake. Pulling the curved handle, he applied the clutch as he downshifted through half the gears and then tugged the rear controls harder.

The semi shuddered, grinding as the tires locked up. Thick white smoke rolled from the rear wheels.

Left hand straining to keep the loaded truck straight, he let go of the chicken stick, using the pedals again. The semi finally shuddered to a stop. “Neil, Kyle, get that truck of turkeys away from us!”

“Copy!”

“What is it?”

Adrian groaned as their birds clucked loudly, responding to the echoes. “Everybody stay down! Fate sent us a wild card!”

The birds flew straight for the convoy.

Adrian had enough time to wonder what species they had been as he spotted blackened wings and dead eyes, and then the flock arrived.

Birds slammed into them, shattering windows, banging off doors and hoods in awful thuds that sent blood and guts flying as the blind victims came in for a landing. They squelched against trees, ripped apart on sharp, bare juniper branches, and hit the ground in wet, sickening thuds. The gusting wind carried them in faster than the Eagles could shoot. The flock was huge.

Adrian knew the sounds of their guns wouldn’t be enough to carry through the din of the birds calling, people screaming, glass cracking, and awful, wet thuds. *A fire? Stereos?* Now holding his spare vest over the cracked, gory windshield, Adrian spotted Kenn coming from his truck. He knew instantly the Marine was about to work his bolt and make himself look good while doing it. *About damn time!*

That’s what Kenn was thinking as he climbed onto the roof of the school bus. Birds were diving in for sightless landings all around him as he blew the air horn he’d taken from his glovebox. The kids next to him had their windows down. They were being pecked and scratched. Kenn knew Adrian would be relieved only a couple had gotten through. The lower half of the glass was taking the brunt of the aerial assault. Kenn blew birds out of the sky before they could get into an open window, rotating and blasting the piercing air horn between shots.

People were amazed when the flock began to divert from their straight-at-the-ground course. Birds were sensitive to high-pitched noises, like whistles and horns. It cut through the din.

Kenn soaked up the feeling of being the hero.

The Eagles followed Kenn’s lead with both defenses. All the guards carried loud horns in case the weather knocked out their radios.

The flock circled the camp in groups, dipping and spinning. Some stayed high, but most were confused, not sure where to go. Their bodies dropped from the sky like rain as the guns took their toll. The ground was littered in carnage as the rest of the flock finally understood. They returned to the air in ragged staggers. Neat lines had also become a thing of the past for animal populations.

Now, the guns were louder than the cries of the sick birds. The rest of the flock flew by instead of trying to land. They called anxiously to each other to keep from getting lost.

A minute later, they were out of sight, but their calls echoed for a long time through the gritty February sky.

Adrian keyed his mike. “We’ll call that a day. Man on point, take over.”

“Yes, sir!” Kenn jumped from the bus, jeans and army jacket splattered in gore. He rotated, evaluating, and then gestured to Kyle. He would cover things in the order he knew Adrian would want, and enjoy it that the mobster wouldn’t be able to argue. Kenn considered Kyle a rival. Though he still had some hopes of swaying the Italian to his side, he enjoyed putting the man in his place. “Have Neil set a perimeter in that onion field. Tape it and get the camp in it. Send someone to the bus with first aid kits, then set showers and wash areas over here so we don’t contaminate our campsite. Make the wire tight and short.” Kenn peered at his wrist while Kyle scribbled it all down. “It’s almost lunch. Tell Hilda to scrub the tuna sandwiches. There’s no way anyone will eat that shit now. Also, have Doug handle the reporter. She’s taking pictures. When all that’s done, we’ll need a few new vehicles. You and your team can handle it personally.”

Kyle swallowed a nasty remark and got busy. He did have a beef with Adrian’s new suit, but now wasn’t the time to voice it.

**2**

Adrian groaned as he lowered his 6’1”, 230lb body to the dark bank of Duchesne Creek six hours later; mud began soaking into his dusty jeans. His head ached from the fumes of all the cars they’d stripped, the gas tanks they’d emptied. It had been a twenty-hour day for him already, but it wasn’t over. This area was ugly, full of death and devoid of normal life. Even the ants wouldn’t live here, and that frightened him. *Will spending a day or two on this ground make us sick?*

Adrian sighed. They had to have a break soon, but not tomorrow or the next day. He had settled for making camp under the retractable awning of an apple orchard that had been long since stripped. After satisfying himself that Kenn knew how he wanted things for tonight, Adrian had come here to steal a few minutes alone in the darkness. The tired leader tensed at a ripple from the creek. Something was alive in that reeking liquid. Adrian tried to take hope from it. They were fifteen miles from Roosevelt, Utah. Horrible things had happened there. It was bad enough to make Adrian consider backtracking despite the extra miles it would add.

This land was broken, rotting, and muddy. The roads were impassable without using tow trucks. Bridges had collapsed or washed away, and nearly every street was crammed full of vehicles–most empty of their drivers. Adrian assumed they were from people who’d fled California and Washington. They’d witnessed entire distant hills of mud collapse in the last few days. The thick, reddish ooze swallowed homes and highways, and the weather was the cause. It sleeted or rained each morning now, but the saturated ground couldn’t hold it. Barely above freezing most nights, the sleet was the color of ashes and added more weight to the muddy hills.

Adrian was almost positive they were on the edge of a ground zero here. Besides the possible dangers, the views added proof to that theory. Twisted metal, crushed cars, and building walls laid over the ground like grave markers. There were charred shoes, flattened fire hydrants and bones. Human and animal bones were scattered across the sagebrush like a jigsaw puzzle that had been shoved off a table.

*Where did all this damage come from?* The nearest ground zero was in California, too far to have caused this, but even Adrian’s military mind couldn’t come up with another reason. This had to be the edge of a bomb zone, one that had come after communication lines fell. *I’ll add it to the map I’m keeping.*

Lightning flashed in the distance. The vivid red and gold drew his eye, but Adrian’s mind stayed on his broken country. How much of his homeland was like this? Most? Would they be forced into the caves to survive? “What new life can there be if we have to live it in the rotting shell of the old one?”

Adrian tensed again, this time at the soft crunch of a boot. His hand dropped to his hip, despite being sure no one had gotten by the guards. Three full shifts of men were on the perimeter. They were protecting him too, though he wasn’t training them to do it. They were following Kenn’s lead.

“Adrian?”

“Down here.” *Maybe the future won’t be as bad as I’m expecting.* Safe Haven hadn’t chosen a final place to settle yet, but Adrian was certain the mountains would win the vote when the time came. And he already had doubts about being able to make such a place safe for even a month, let alone for the nuclear winter he feared was coming. The first one would be the hardest.

Kenn eased across the sloppy hill and sat, handing over a mug of hot coffee. Like Adrian, he didn’t care that mud seeped into his clothes. It didn’t matter anymore.

“How are they?”

Kenn’s answer was simple, honest. “Tired and down, same as you.”

Adrian didn’t offer excuses that would be obvious lies. It was impossible to pretend everything was fine when they were rolling over the unburied bones of their fellow citizens.

“We’ll be better when we’re away from here.” Kenn took a sheet of paper from his pocket. He’d been thrilled to discover *Man on Point* on his schedule this morning. When the birds hit them, he’d come through with full marks. Before the sick flyers though, there had been surprise from the Eagles. Now, Kenn had more pals than he needed. He had chosen to keep them at arm’s length for the moment and search for allies among the camp later if he needed them. Adrian was the only one he really gave a damn about.

“Sitrep, whenever you’re ready.” Adrian relit the cigarette he’d been ignoring.

“Perimeter is good. No serious injuries. Radio is quiet. Everyone is accounted for. The pictures from Cheyenne Mountain are in your tent.”

Adrian was sure those images would be worse than the ones from Salt Lake City. “Anything I should see?”

“No.” When Adrian didn’t ask for details, Kenn didn’t offer any. Their leader was depressed enough. He didn’t need to see the fry-room at NORAD they’d forced open, but Kenn was sure Adrian would recognize the clever way it had been done. Someone among the slavers had military knowledge and that didn’t bode well. Kenn planned to give Adrian the full in the evening report he had been asked to deliver about various issues and setups.

“Neil get the pictures yet?”

“No.”

Adrian was unhappy the state trooper hadn’t been chosen to go along for that run, but it had been Kenn’s mission and he hadn’t intervened. To make it up a bit, Adrian wanted Neil to see the photos before the camp did. The people here didn’t have access to all the pictures the Eagles took, but big places still gave them hope. He had to show them those photos or they would go off on their own to check and maybe not return. Some did anyway. Adrian was never offended, just relieved when they did return. He needed them all.

“We have two new arrivals that weren’t in the group following us. They wanted to know if we had any use for a doctor and nurse.”

Adrian’s surprised laugh was music to his ears. Kenn loved this feeling of pleasing the leader. “I knew you’d like that. John and Anne Harmon are husband and wife of almost forty years; they had their own office. They were going to NORAD, but they heard Mitch on the CB and decided to come in. They’d like to trade their medical skills for food and protection.”

“Damn, that’s great! It’s exactly what we need. Give ‘em a couple days to settle in and then put them to work.”

“Too late. He noticed Zack’s arm and insisted on cleaning and stitching it right then, along with handling any other injuries. Neil is setting him up in the corner near the livestock. Right now, *our doctor* is examining the scratches the kids got. He says the birds were American Gulls.”

“Give him one of the biggest tents and have a red cross painted on it. The doctor’s name should be in red, white and blue–Safe Haven colors.” Adrian made a mental note to talk to the doctor in the next week. With that eager attitude, he would probably be well liked. That was one of the reasons Kenn was settling in so fast. People were realizing his only goal was to give whatever was needed. Only those closest to Adrian still had objections. Not that they would go against his wishes after the meeting tomorrow. Adrian intended to make it clear where the Marine belonged. It would help that Kenn never stole his thunder. His willingness to be just support had earned him respect. His quick reaction to the birds had to be counted in too. Giving Kenn point duty had been a great idea at the perfect time.

“You wanna do this later?”

“No.” Adrian huffed at himself in the windy darkness. “I’m easily distracted tonight. Go on.” Adrian wondered if Kenn still planned to go back to Ohio. Kenn hadn’t mentioned leaving since that first day. He didn’t have much to say about his old life at all–something most people here liked, but not Adrian. Kenn was busy carving out a place for himself, but the feeling of something not being right was stronger now than when he’d first arrived. *Is it because Kenn thinks no one noticed?*

“...and both women are on livestock duty, like you wanted. Water is down to three tankers; toilet paper is at twelve cases. We changed four flats, two windshields, and exchanged ten vehicles for the others Kyle’s team found. The tires came from the reserve.”

Adrian had known they would be into the reserve this week, but it still made his stomach burn. Their transportation was as important as the food, but water was priority one. If they didn’t keep moving and locating supplies, they would die, but their reserve wasn’t growing. “What’s the biggest problem?” He already knew. Even with the carpool law he had insisted on, they used a lot of fuel.

“Gas. We’re down to the reserves on it too after we fill up tomorrow.”

The reserve of gas was only a tenth of what they’d found. It would hold them for two days, at best. They should have more by now, but people were scared to leave camp. That was also about to change. “We’ll get away from here, then drain the tanks on every car, tractor, and lawn mower we find. At some point, we’ll get lucky and run across a station with something left in it.”

“We could try 191.”

Adrian glanced over, catching Kenn’s excited tone. “That’s a highway crammed with dead traffic.”

Kenn was eager to score bonus points to go with the full set of marks he’d earned earlier. “Exactly. Dead vehicles–like trucks and semis of food and water. Maybe even a fuel tanker or two.”

Adrian clapped him on the shoulder as the wind gusted again, carrying a chill they both felt and ignored. “You’re full of good shit today.”

Kenn soaked up the praise, ready to volunteer, but he stopped himself. He waited to see if it would be offered. He’d made progress with the camp. Not as much as he wanted, but it would always come down to Adrian’s opinion in the end.

“You’d like to go? Be in charge?”

Kenn nodded once. “Sure.”

The lightning storm to the west hadn’t died down. They both stared, human souls more afraid than in awe. Things in nature were bad now.

“When?”

“Leave in the morning, early. Catch up by mess, day after tomorrow. I’ll have Eagles meet you by the trucks. Anything else for me?”

“Nothing but Tonya. She wants to meet you in your tent.”

“Yeah, that’ll happen.”

Kenn kept quiet, brow puckering at the quickly thrown sarcasm. Tonya insisted to anyone who would listen that she and their leader were sleeping together. Adrian laughed when confronted with it. Most people had decided she was chasing what she couldn’t have. Not Kenn. Adrian and Tonya might not be a legal couple, but he didn’t believe Safe Haven’s commander was refusing that pogue bait when no one was around.

“Kenn.”

He glanced up to find Adrian’s sharp eyes on him.

“You got a thing for redheads?”

Kenn dropped his baby-blues, shrugging. “When they look like her, who doesn’t?”

Adrian chuckled, liking the honest answer. He wanted to trust Kenn as much as Kenn wanted to be trusted. “She gets a man’s attention, but she’ll do whatever she has to if it will get her what she wants.”

“What does she want?” Kenn wasn’t sure why he was asking.

“For me to either be her legal mate, or out of this job, so she can put someone else in my place and have power through them. She doesn’t care which. She’s as much as said so, to my face.”

Kenn laughed, despite wanting to do and say all the right things. “She’s got guts; she takes care of herself. That kind of woman was rare even before the war.”

Adrian didn’t like the tone, but he let it go. “Tonya is strong, and we need that, but we’re weaker with her too, because she uses her strength for selfish reasons. She would have to do a world of changing for anyone to accept her here. It would be a hard sell.”

Kenn took the warning to heart. He didn’t say more on the subject.

Adrian stood, scanning the lights, sights, and sounds. A neatly organized camp met his gaze. Fires drove back the darkness while dogs yapped for dinner, doors opened and shut, calm voices echoed, and steady footsteps crunched over the ground. *Normal as it gets now.* Kenn had done an excellent job. “We’ll need to add safety glass to our lists. I don’t like how easily a flock of birds put us in danger.”

Kenn said what his boss was thinking. “Be too easy for bullets.”

Adrian was more than pleased. Finally, some of the born help was here. “I’ll do rounds in an hour. Wanna come along?”

“You know it.”

Adrian strode to his tent, eager to have a little time to himself.

Kenn’s mind stayed on Tonya as he joined the dozen camp members setting up base around the huge bonfire. It wasn’t the first time he’d been drawn to the sullen woman. Tonya was selfish, greedy, and a troublemaker. Kenn recognized her streak of meanness, but she was also strong, smart, and determined to have Adrian. The people here hated the idea, but Tonya was openly hostile to anyone who spoke against it. She had even earned a day of hard labor for a slapping contest with Big Billy, a 300lb schoolteacher from Oregon. She had won, hands down. Tonya wasn’t afraid of anything, and that had earned Kenn’s respect–something women didn’t get from him.

Kenn responded to the greetings and gratitude of those around the flames being teased by chilly wind, but he stood by himself. He hoped this fuel trip would secure his place in Adrian’s chain of command. Kyle and Neil were tied for second. Doug was in third, but to Kenn’s selfish mind, they weren’t Marines. Kenn didn’t think it would take long to get what he wanted, just more hard chores. No one held the XO position here and Kenn had found himself longing for it. Then the birds had come and helped.

Kenn passed on the bottles and joints going around the fire, noting the lantern was out in the tent he shared with Charlie. *Good.* As Kenn grew closer to Adrian, the time he spent around the teenager reminded him of the secrets he was keeping.

Kenn stared into the dark, unable to pick out the surrounding mountains. His mind returned to Tonya. She wanted Adrian in a way that was almost an obsession. His name was always on her pouty lips. Kenn felt a sharp connection to her because of that. It wasn’t a sexual thing for Kenn. *I just need to be near Adrian and the authority he represents.*

Others felt it. Kyle and Neil did, and Doug too, but Tonya was the only one to pursue Adrian openly. She was often humiliated by him and the camp as punishment for it.

Kenn spied a flash of flame red. He studied Tonya as she came through the crowd of drunken, unfriendly people with an air of haughty contempt.

Everyone shifted, whispering, staring at her.

Tonya held her chin up, glaring at some of them when the whispers became too loud.

Each time, the person fell silent. They all knew Tonya would back up her challenges.

Kenn felt a new bolt of desire for her. Those skintight black slacks caressed her long legs and her red net top made men consider breaking rules. It also caused the women here to hate her for making them feel plain.

Kenn was disappointed when she slipped into her tent. He almost had to force himself to stay where he was as conversations resumed. The camp had mostly accepted him, but the Eagles were hoping for him to cross even the smallest line and be denied the position he was aiming for. Kenn wouldn’t ruin his chances here on a piece of ass, no matter how hot. It would be a betrayal of Adrian, but worse, of the wife in Ohio he’d spoken of. That would be unforgivable, thanks to Adrian’s strict but simple moral code: Do what you want and be shunned or do the accepted thing and be welcome. Both types lived here, but only one held any power.

“You wanna hit this, man?”

Zack, a truck driver, was holding out a thick blunt. He was unarmed, alone, and carried himself like a fellow controller. Arm in a white sling, the driver smelled new. It took a while for that to fade. Kenn assessed him. Like Adrian, he would also need a right hand. *Is this it?* “Sure, thanks.” Kenn hit it hard, keeping it for a long moment, waiting. He wasn’t disappointed.

Zack eyed Kenn’s arm and wrist tattoos. “I hear you handle the big man’s shit and your own. Interested in some backup?”

Kenn handed over the smoldering blunt, stubbing out the part of the cherry that had fallen and landed in the trampled needle grass. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

Zack’s green eyes darkened.

Kenn could tell the prematurely graying trucker was used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted it.

“And in the meantime?”

Kenn shrugged, turning away. “Anyone who wanted to watch my six would have to be an Eagle, and in charge of his team. That’s a deal breaker.”

**3**

Kenn was in his sleeping bag three hours later, cold, uncomfortable, and sure his past was catching up. He could feel Angela hunting for her son at night, searching the vast darkness for their location. He was livid that she wouldn’t answer him, even though she’d heard him calling. He was no stranger to what she could do. Kenn had done his homework before trapping her, but he couldn’t accept it with her in control. She couldn’t come here, not ever.

*She’s already on her way*, his mind insisted brutally. *When she arrives, she’ll not only rock your boat, she’ll sink it. Adrian will find out what kind of man you were before, how you dishonored the Corps repeatedly. You’ll be banished*.

Kenn hated Angela for the worm of fear growing deep in his heart. *If she makes it to this camp, I’ll lose everything.*

# Chapter Seventeen

**Decisions**

**A close up of a bird

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**M**onthly meetings were mandatory for everyone except guards who had duty right then. Kenn was impressed by the tarp roof that provided more room, the snacks and drinks, the neat orderliness of it. This didn’t feel like the apocalypse.

All the seats were taken as Adrian stepped under the awning.

A dozen men lined the corners of the gathering. Kenn now knew they were off duty guards being trained to do their jobs even when not on a shift. Adrian explained it as civic service, and from what Kenn had experienced here so far, it was succeeding. It didn’t hurt that it also gained Adrian’s respect. Everyone wanted that. They didn’t know it was standard Marine training.

The big crowd waited for Adrian to get a cup of coffee and a few cookies. He had a thick red notebook under his arm as he made his way to the table in the center of the crowd; he shunned the one in front that had been left for him.

Kenn recognized the bonding moment as a clever political move, but he also recognized the danger. He kept his hand near his holster. He noticed a few of the others–Kyle, Neil, Seth–did the same while easing closer.

Adrian remained standing as he got started, meeting tense glances to calm them. He could smell the reeking rot of bodies in the towns around them, even over the odors of their cooking and port-o-lets. *This is winter. What will it be like in July?* “This is the third meeting of Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We have ninety-one people.”

Safety in numbers was mentioned through the crowd, producing a pleased ripple. Few of them realized it was President’s Day. Those who did know didn’t care. That world was gone. Safe Haven didn’t need it. They had Adrian.

“We also have a doctor now!”

A cheer echoed. People scanned the organized mess, but not the Eagles. Kenn saw their attention stayed on their surroundings. Kyle and his team never slacked.

“We’ll sort out a schedule.” Adrian gestured. “For now, sign the sheet Neil has; put your problem on it if you can. The doctor will use it to decide who needs to be seen first.”

Neil passed the clipboard while people chatted.

“You gonna run those tests now?” An eager voice echoed from the rear of the crowd. “The ones to tell us if anyone here’s sick?”

Adrian chose his words carefully as people turned to stare. “I’d like to, yes, but–”

“And we’re gonna kick ‘em out right? Like we voted on?” Tony, a low-fare grease monkey, interrupted him again.

Adrian frowned at the short, balding mechanic. “We won’t be so nasty, but yes. They’ll be asked to leave.”

People talked to each other, some sulking, some agreeing.

The drunkard sat down, satisfied.

Adrian flipped the page, smothering a curse. *That won’t encourage anyone to get checked out.* “Our new crew of guards has passed into level two, and that means we need another twenty men to try out for rookie level. Neil will pass that sheet around next. I’ll let you know my choices in a couple days. Next, our reserves aren’t growing. I understand that’s because no one feels safe. While I can’t take away all the danger, I can give you some protection. Kyle and his team are hereby on loan to protect any supply mission of six or more people that has been approved a day in advance.” Adrian’s tone hardened. “They get their orders from me. If they say no, it’s not safe, you’ll pick a different site. If something does go wrong, their priority is to get everyone back to camp. Also, schedule switches will no longer be handled by me. Kenn and Kyle will cover all changes. I’ll still make out the original, then give a final approval.” Adrian paused to light a stale smoke.

Kenn was almost positive Adrian was judging the reactions of the camp. People seemed fine with his choices, though there were a few words being exchanged among some of the Eagles over the order of the names. *How important is that?*

“As of tomorrow, there will be a third meal. The appliances Kenn and Doug hooked up run great, so from now on, we get *three* squares, Monday-Friday. Saturday and Sunday will remain the same–lunch and dinner, with the truck open for coffee, toast, and cereal. A through L will be served the new meal first; M-Z will go thirty-five minutes later, starting at noon.” He flipped another page. “Effective immediately, everyone is back on full water rations.”

The cheer was louder this time. Adrian waved at the grinning Marine. “Thank Kenn. His idea of searching trucks on the highway was great. We’re good as long as we find at least one each week.”

Kenn soaked up the good vibes like a thirsty plant as he was slapped on the shoulders and congratulated, but he didn’t miss the gleam of satisfaction on Adrian’s face as the leader continued.

Neither did Charlie, or Tonya. One of them was thrilled; the other was furious they weren’t going back to Ohio for his mother.

“We have four new loads of clothes, shoes, blankets, and a lot of other gear we’ve been low on or were out of. The trucks will be open right after this meeting, M-Z goes first. A-L is twenty minutes later.” He paused, skimming his notes. “We have the photos from NORAD. They’re bad; they blow away the idea of getting help there. This odd weather is holding in some warmth, though. I say we keep hunting. If we haven’t found anything by the fourth of July, then we should pick a place to try rebuilding on our own.”

“You mean in the mountains?” someone called.

Kenn noticed the people here never really settled down. *Tense sheep, waiting for the dog to bite*.

Adrian had to raise his voice to be heard as stiff wind ran through camp, causing tents to flap. “Yes. The bunker under the base in Montana won’t hold us all, but this country is full of caves. I hope for something aboveground, but if we have to, we could take a big set of caves and block them off, make it work temporarily.” He waved a dismissive hand, demeanor calmer than his stomach as his people muttered and frowned. “It’s just something to think about. We’ll have a final vote on it in July. For now, we’ll stay here tomorrow and have our contest, then leave the next morning. Where to from there? We’re picking that tonight, and voting on new rules.”

Adrian met nervous gazes with calm, reasonable words. “We have a lot of people here now; we pick up more nearly every day. That’s great, exactly what we want, but many people aren’t pulling their weight. The current rules say everyone has to help, but I’d like to be more specific. We need each person here to pull three shifts on sentry duty, and one shift on any other chore of their choice. We all want things to be better, right?” Adrian waited for a reaction, noting halfhearted agreement with faces a mix of resignation and suspicion. “Before, better was earning the finer things, the luxuries. Now, better means working to survive, to keep what we have–this second chance. These things have to be done, and we have to be the ones to do them. There is no one else.”

The tone had become scolding. Kenn was impressed, sure there would be extra hands for at least the next week. No one liked Adrian to be disappointed or unhappy.

“I’d like to have more of us taking the gun classes. There’s a large group of guerrillas moving up Interstate 25, as most of you know. We need to be able to defend ourselves.”

“Do you think we’ll be attacked?” Cynthia wiped her brow. She was squeezed into the front with the elderly so she wouldn’t miss a single word or reaction.

Adrian shrugged, expression unreadable even though he knew her from before the war. She hadn’t placed him yet. She might not if fate was on his side, but Adrian hadn’t considered refusing her entry, or worse, getting rid of her. That was the difference between him and his father. “I hope not, but it is a part of why we need more hands for guard duty. That reminds me–people are getting out of their cars in unfamiliar places way too soon. Many times, the Eagles haven’t cleared or roped off the area yet. I’m telling you now, someone will end up getting hurt because of it.” Adrian went to the beaded doorway of the mess, nodding to the cook. Hilda was a plump German woman they’d picked up in central Nevada, and another one he wasn’t sure about yet. Like the reporter, Adrian didn’t know where she fit into his plans for their future, but he had little doubt they both did. If one of these two alert females discovered his secret, it was fate. They wouldn’t, though–at least not until these people were able to survive without him. Then, it would be open season on all Mitchels. “Can I get a Bud?”

The big shouldered cook did it immediately.

Adrian continued his meeting. “This area is bad. We all feel it. We can’t stay long or we’ll get sick. After the contest, I’d like to make some real miles to get away from here now that we know NORAD’s gone.”

Faces darkened at the second mention of the compound many of them had hoped would be standing and ready to accept survivors.

Adrian took the towel-wrapped beer from the cook. “Okay, any new business?”

“Yes.” Alex, a young math teacher from Montana, stood. “Are we going to... I mean... Can we celebrate the holidays? Some of the kids have asked, but we’re not sure what to tell them.” The well-dressed bald man sat down.

Adrian appeared to be considering, but this was easy. It was one of the things he’d covered in his notebook a month ago. “Just the ones that matter to us as a country, I think. The Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, New Years. Memorial Day.”

“What about Easter and Christmas?” Cynthia didn’t look up. She was hand copying the meeting in furious scribbles.

“Not as a whole camp. Hardly anyone believed in them. They used them as an excuse to indulge or buy off loved ones instead of spending real time with them. I won’t even get into the money and stores, and what it did to our lives. Each person can do what they want. I won’t be upset by kids hunting eggs or dressing up for Halloween, but I won’t let a few people force it on everyone else either.”

There were shrugs and scowls, again about evenly split. Adrian took a moment to open his beer and take a healthy swallow. It would give his camp a few seconds to settle into the idea that even the holidays had changed for them. “Guess we might all like Halloween a little more if one of you could do some magic.”

His common joke drew chuckles.

“All right, anyone else have new business?”

“I have some suggestions.” The doctor’s voice was respectful.

Adrian liked the intelligence he read in the short, rounded man’s face. Fresh out of a self-imposed quarantine, John had already made a few friends. Adrian gestured. “Suggest away.”

The aging healer stood, sending a strong menthol whiff of BenGay over the gathered crowd. “There should be more fruit and juice for everyone, plus daily vitamins. We’re being exposed to a lot of poisons, especially in places like this, and the antioxidants in the fruits and juice will boost immune systems.”

Silence greeted his words.

John went on, hoping he wasn’t about to step on anyone’s toes. “I’ve only been here a couple days, but I’ve been a doctor a long time. I can tell you what illnesses we’ll face in the coming months, and how to prevent some of them.”

Adrian gave a barely perceptible nod of approval, pleased by the man’s use of *we*. “What can we expect if we ignore your suggestions?”

“Scurvy, rashes, colds, weak immune systems that will let the sniffles last for weeks instead of days. Migraines, vomiting, diarrhea that lasts for weeks at a time. The list gets bad after that. We’re absorbing the chemicals from the bombs, and what was released by meltdowns after the war. Once enough builds up, we’ll start getting sick...and dying.”

The crowd stirred uneasily, but Adrian did nothing to calm them. *All of you need a reality check.* Adrian remembered idiots catching rainwater on their tongues the last time it stormed, just to see if it would burn. They knew less than nothing.

John noted Adrian’s expression and recognized the unspoken order. Adrian wanted to scare them. That was easy. John used the truth. “Our biggest threat is the radiation. It’s fatal at high doses, but it’s the low doses we have to worry about now. It’s a slow death that finds each person’s weak link. It wakes up dormant genes, like cancer or MS, and since exposure kills the immune system, we’ll be attacked from the inside even if we recover. The immune system is our army. The radiation can’t be stopped, but it can be slowed by an army that’s strong. For us, that it could mean only 30% will die, instead of 70%.”

“But the bombs came months ago. The toxics soaked into the ground. Why are we worryin’? We ain’t even found any radiation vics.” A slender, older woman in the front delivered a dismissive wave.

“I did.”

“We have.”

John held up a hand.

Adrian was pleased when the answering crowd fell off to mostly silence.

“People who were exposed during the war are gone. Our threats are coming from the weather dropping it on us, and from radioactive debris on the ground where we sleep and need to grow food. It takes a long time for the toxics, as you call them, to go away. You know that layer of smog above us when it’s daylight, the one that makes it feel like dusk all the time? It’s the toxins. Until that dissipates, we’re not safe. Near the bomb zones, that’ll take thirty years or more.”

The crowd muttered and murmured, whispering, worrying. Adrian finished his beer before he spoke, pleased. He would have no trouble getting a good day’s travel out of them now. “So, you want responsibility for our health? You want to care for us? The right to add to our laws, once voted on, comes with that job,” Adrian both offered and warned.

The doctor was aware of what was going on. He was just surprised it was being offered so soon. “Not the laws part. I’m no politician, but yes to the rest. My oath didn’t die with my country.” John slid his glasses back on as he sat down.

“Well said. You’ve got my vote, but it’s theirs that matters.” Adrian waved. “All those in favor of putting the doctor’s suggestions on the ballot?” Adrian held up his own hand.

Both men were relieved when nearly everyone else did too.

“So be it.” Adrian held up a sheet of paper. “The bottom of the ballot is blank. Fill it in as advice. A-D-V-I-C-E. Okay, any other new business?”

No one spoke.

Adrian motioned Neil to pass around the pens and papers.

Neil was emotionless while grinning and saying all the right things. Something was going on with Kenn and Adrian. Neil could feel it. What came to mind was the reason his mirth didn’t reach his eyes.

“All right, last thing.” Adrian got attention again. “Members of the moral board need to stay after the vote. We have a possible violation to judge.”

Kenn, like everyone else, wondered what unspoken rule had been broken. The big ones went to trials that were witnessed by the whole camp, or so he’d heard. There hadn’t been one since Kenn had been here; there hadn’t even been a case of thievery, but the moral code was strict. There had been a single private vote since he’d joined Safe Haven; the stalker was no longer a member.

“Which rule?” Roger Sawyer, the current moral board foreman, waited for an answer without smiling.

“None directly. That’s why we’re doing a closed hearing. I won’t ruin an innocent man’s chance for a new life here.” Adrian said it for ear candy, but he was sure the man would be gone before he did rounds tonight. Leon and the words *not guilty* hadn’t been on speaking terms in a long time.

Roger grinned. “Okay.”

Adrian hated the sudden eagerness in the ex-Pinkerton detective’s face, but he understood the deep need to punish those who were even the smallest bit responsible for all they had suffered.

Adrian waited until Kenn dropped his vote into the metal lockbox, then joined him at a small, empty table in the rear. The rest of the camp crowded around the front tables to watch as the votes were counted.

Kenn kept his voice low. “That was some of the slickest shit I’ve ever heard.”

Adrian scanned the guards. “Thanks. Maybe you’ll MC for me sometime.”

Kenn laughed. “I’m not a public speaker.”

Adrian let it go. He was already sure the Marine would be exactly that, and there would be no one better. “How about coming by my tent an hour after everything’s done? We’ll have a conversation.”

“Sure.” Kenn kept his tone casual, heartrate picking up. *This is it.* “Should I bring anything?”

Adrian grunted. “Just your stamina. I’m going to need to get drunk when this night’s work is over.”

Kenn snickered. “You got it, Boss.”

Adrian’s heart eased. *I have my XO.*

Tonya slipped away, satisfied her plans now stood a chance.

Charlie stomped away, fuming that his didn’t.

**2**

The vote went Adrian’s way on all the issues. As the crowd broke up, their faces were confident he was doing his job, but the sly eyes also said they would find out what rule had been broken and by whom.

In a brief time, the mess emptied as everyone settled in for the night. Kenn wanted to stay and watch the moral board trial, but he caught Adrian’s eye instead of waiting until he was asked to leave. “I volunteered for a double on sentry duty tomorrow. I’m going to hit the showers, then the rack. Call me if you need anything.” Kenn was showing humility he didn’t feel.

“Hang around, will ya?” Adrian took the opportunity, telling them all his status had changed. “I need someone on my right.”

The words held a ring of magic.

Kenn kept triumph out of his voice by will. “You know it.”

Adrian gave Neil a nod before motioning to the thirteen men and women waiting together.

Neil left, scowling. It was as he and Kyle feared. That coveted position was being given to Kenn.

Adrian led the small group. “We’ve set up a hooch near the parking area. Follow Doug. He’s the one with the red vest and shoulders so wide we could land a plane on them. Let’s get this done.”

The mood turned somber, but Kenn couldn’t help the swagger in his stride as he walked on Adrian’s right. They followed the board members, who had no trouble catching up to Doug. His limp was the only reason Kenn didn’t consider him competition.

Kyle was on Adrian’s left. Kenn wondered what the stocky goon thought. *Probably hated it. Nothing he can do but suck it up.* It made Kenn feel like laughing. He and Kyle hadn’t spoken a word to each other in two full days, not since the first gun class he’d taught where they’d both said too much and barely avoided a fight. Now Kenn was about to be given authority; he planned to rub it in every chance he got.

“Stay on this guy. He has a nasty temper. I’m sure this type of proceeding isn’t new to him.”

Kenn hid disappointment at Adrian’s words. *We’re just chasers for a prisoner?*

“The punishment might be new.” Kyle pulled his black cap tighter over dark curls.

Adrian nodded. “Don’t let him intimidate the girls. They’re already afraid he might sneak back to hurt them in retaliation.”

Kenn saw them exchange a glance that said the violator wouldn’t be able to return because he would be dead. Jealousy flared up in Kenn. It made him push, testing his new place before it was official. “Can I ask, or should I wait?”

Kyle listened. A refusal would mean they had read too much into Adrian’s words. Kenn might not be empty clothes, the bird attack proved that, but something was wrong with him.

“Sexual assault, threats against women and kids, two counts of physical assault. Those are all death penalty crimes here; he already knows it.”

*Sorry about your luck.* Kenn gloated silently, but he brought the inner Marine out when they entered the big tent and spotted the defendant’s huge body. Leon was easily three hundred pounds and little of it was fat.

As he and Kyle strode to each side of the sullen biker, they exchanged a look that said truce, for Adrian’s sake. It wouldn’t take much for this to get out of control. The suspect wasn’t even handcuffed. Neither man liked Adrian being in the tent with him. Anything could go wrong once the verdict was in.

**3**

Nothing did. Less than an hour later, a sedated Leon was being escorted out of the tape by men who had orders to kill him and piss on his body–a request from one of the victims.

Adrian wandered afterwards, worrying over the order. He walked in the darkest shadows around the flapping tents, occasionally listening to his people. Leon wouldn’t be missed. He had contributed almost nothing, but the loss of life still made Adrian feel like a failure as a leader.

Not that he would change his mind. He could still call Kyle, but he knew the mobster didn’t want the biker to get a stay of execution after what they’d listened to him admit, and he wouldn’t. The entire world was better off without Leon. Right or wrong, Adrian had made a choice based on what was best for everyone here. It was how he made all of his decisions now. It was the only way his people would survive.

Adrian’s feet carried him toward the medical tent, but he hesitated to go in despite knowing he needed to invite the doctor onto his payroll. Doctors were notoriously temperamental, and this one, having been here only a brief time, couldn’t be pleased. It had taken nearly a dozen men to hold Leon down, and though John had done what was asked without protest, the hypocrisy of it had to be fresh in his mind.

Headlights flashed.

Adrian shifted deeper into the shadows as Tonya rolled into camp in a very red, very new convertible that was not easy on gas like they had voted for at the last meeting.

She parked in front of her tent, making him grumble at the second rule violation. As she disappeared into the deluxe vinyl structure, he scribbled a note in his book, wondering which sucker had helped her put it up. Tonya would gas her own car all this week, and maybe the doctor’s idea about a mandatory quarantine zone would work. She could be–

“…new place, Anne. A hard new world, where everything has an uglier price.”

Adrian didn’t budge as the husband and wife talked about what had happened, unknowingly approaching his hiding place while they cleaned up the large two-sided medical tent.

“But it’s barbaric, Johnnie! Branding him like an animal! It’s...barbaric!”

“What else is there? No jails, no drugs, no mental help, and really, those things never worked on men like that anyway.”

Adrian heard her frustrated sigh and understood that criminal justice was an old discussion between them.

“He couldn’t just let him go, Anne. He had to make sure that everyone who meets that monster will see what he really is.”

“It isn’t right! We heal. We don’t hurt! This isn’t how America’s supposed to be!”

John gave a harsh snort that made Adrian tense.

“This is exactly how it should have been, and maybe we wouldn’t have destroyed ourselves.”

“But the whole word?”

“It’ll keep him from easily hiding or removing it.”

“It’ll get him killed and you’re responsible. You did it.”

“This is a good place, and I’ll do what I have to so that we can stay, but this sin I’ll pay for willingly. It’s the only way now, and let me tell you a secret, my dear sweet wife. I won’t carry the burden alone. That young man feels it a lot more than he shows. Adrian values life, all life. It’s in the way he cares for his people, for his farm of exotic humans. I’ll give him my help in any way he needs, and I hope you will too. He’s the few, the good, and I suspect we were allowed to survive because he needs us.”

*Definitely right to offer John a place on the council.* Adrian moved away from their tent. That old man had his head on straight. Adrian had used it at the meeting and heard it just now, but he had witnessed it during the punishment too. John had handled not only himself, but also Anne and the Eagles around him with a calm sense of leadership. Because of that, the branding hadn’t been as ugly as the members of the voting board had expected. Most of them would be able to sleep tonight.

It only eased Adrian’s mind a little, though, that he now had at least two of the six or seven he’d been promised in his dreams. He spent a lot of time worrying over the rest. Had he passed them somewhere? He hoped not because he and his grunts couldn’t keep doing all the work. Eventually, they would miss something that endangered these people and cost them the right to lead. The weight of this was heavier than anything Adrian had ever carried before the war and he was starting to feel a bit winded.

**4**

*Life is good*. Kenn was sitting in an uncomfortable folding chair in the center of Adrian’s perfectly neat tent. The camp was calm, and he was with the boss. *It doesn’t get any better than this.*

“Here ya go. Try this.” Adrian handed him a cool metal cup and a cigar.

Kenn noticed Adrian’s five o’clock shadow and bloodshot eyes. Clearly, their leader had gotten a head start.

Kenn smelled his cup, liking the vanilla more than he would ever admit. He took a large swallow. It burned its way to his gut despite the sweet smell and aftertaste. He sucked in a breath, coughed.

The two men shared a snicker.

“Good?”

Kenn nodded, noting the patriotic designs on the cups. With Adrian, everything was about love of country.

Adrian studied Kenn, facade unreadable as the tension thickened.

Kenn forced himself to stay still, sensing if he was too eager now, he might lose it all before it was actually his.

“Do you have any idea why I asked you here?”

Kenn shook his head, instinctively knowing this was part of the ritual of being brought in. “Have I done something wrong?”

“Just the opposite. The guys tell me you like to stay busy.”

Kenn emptied his cup and sat it on the small folding table as the potent alcohol burned its way to his gut. “There’s a lot to be done...” He gasped, making Adrian snicker again.

“Ain’t that the truth. How long have you been here now?”

“Fifteen days.”

The quick answer made Adrian grimace. “You’ve done doubles on guard duty, taught two gun classes for the Eagles, helped find supplies, set up camp, broke down camp, and gassed up all the vehicles. There’s been something every day, all on top your regular schedule. That’s a busy two weeks.”

Kenn shrugged. “Unleaded is my new cologne.”

“Smells like a hard worker, someone with ambition searching for a mountain to climb.”

“I’ve got a lot to offer.”

“And I want it.” Adrian handed Kenn a thick black notebook and a silver pen. “Others recognize it too. Some have hinted you should be invited onto the payroll.”

“But?”

“It’s not up to some or even most of them. It has to be unanimous; that depends on you.”

Kenn met Adrian’s pointed look with one of his own. “I’m working on it.”

“Not fast enough, but I can’t wait any longer.” Adrian finished lighting his cigar. “We have to get these people ready to defend their freedom.”

Kenn asked himself if he could start out as a lowly drill instructor. He glanced up to say that wouldn’t hold him for long.

Adrian was ready with careful wording. “I have important work for you. You’ll be higher than any other here now. Together, we’ll save some of what matters. If you have the time?”

“You make the schedules. I have the time if you say I do.”

Adrian stiffened at the flippant tone. “This is no game. Be sure.”

“I’d never treat it that way.” Kenn was horrified he’d come across as anything less than serious.

Adrian knew, but the warning came with the offer. “I know why you survived. I know your destiny in this hard, new world.” *The only thing I don’t know, is if you’re strong enough to pull it off.* “Effective immediately, you have the place at my side you began hoping for the day we found you. You’ll always be my second in command and more trusted than anyone else. I’m offering you what the Corps couldn’t–your purpose, the reason you were born, why you survived.”

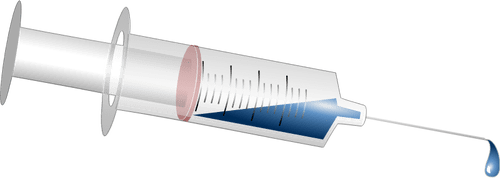
“What’s the catch?”

“You’re mine.” Adrian’s harsh tone said no going back would be allowed. “Be the anything and everything I need to keep these people alive. I make every choice based on what’s best for the entire camp and nothing else takes priority, not even me. I’ll do anything to keep us together, and I will expect your complete, immediate support, no matter the chore or situation.”

Kenn didn’t consider refusing. He held out a hand. “It’s my honor to serve.”

# Chapter Eighteen

**A New World**

****

Devils Head, Colorado

**February 21st**

**1**

***A****rrrooooooo!*

Samantha’s eyes flew open at the howling, drawn away from dreams of duty and honor.

She groaned. “You’ve got bigger things to worry about than wolves or coyotes.” The pain in her leg was agony, and her hands and feet were so cold she couldn’t feel anything in them but pain. It was dark and drafty in the cabin.

Samantha forced herself to scoot over to the fireplace. She clenched her teeth at every jar of her leg against the hard floor. She needed heat, but all she could think about was how much she wanted to shoot up. It was the same craving that made her drool when she woke with only flaring misery to comfort her. So she made herself wait. *I will not come out of the war an addict.*

It was frigid in the hunting lodge, but the front glass windows had survived the cold wave with only small cracks. The thick line of birch evergreens in front of the cabin had taken the brunt.

*And the birds*. She shuddered.

Samantha hadn’t realized the birds were there until the freeze came. The larks had been huddled on an upper branch for warmth. She could still just make out the faint yellow hue of their snow-covered bodies. It was a mirror of her own fate, had the windows not held.

The temperature was a little better now. She could even go to the outhouse. Samantha was glad the freeze had let up, but she still had plenty of nasty weather to travel through. The feeling of wrongness invading this place said it wasn’t safe here anymore. She needed to get moving.

She stacked some of her dwindling supply of wood into the charred fireplace, adapting to the thick, groggy feeling of the morphine upon waking each day.

She surveyed the dark corner, but didn’t spot the animal. She had noticed a cage in an SUV as she’d come up the driveway to this hunting lodge, but it hadn’t registered then. She had mistaken the ferret for a mouse in her fear of doing self-surgery. The fur had hung from its narrow frame. She’d been feeding it whenever she ate, and leaving water out in a jar lid. If it would come to her, maybe she would have a companion.

Samantha squirted the lighter fluid, then struck a match. She had to use three before the fire roared to life, singeing her fingertips. Sam pulled the blanket tighter around her thin shoulders and huddled as close to the heat as she could get, vaguely thinking she had never smelled worse in her life.

Needing to know how her wound was doing, she pried off the bandage, being careful not to disturb the forming scabs.

It was ugly, but improving. She could even put a little weight on it now. Her shaking hands replaced the material. It had hurt–

*Arrrooooooo!*

Samantha froze at the sight of red, malevolent orbs glaring through the front window.

She stared back for a long moment, evaluating her situation. It had been three days. It was blizzard cold, the snow was still falling, and the wolves were still out there…stalking her.

*Sscccraatch. Sssscchh.*

Paws dug at the small gap under the front door.

Samantha got moving, but her eyes stayed on the window, where more hungry snouts had appeared. She was in trouble once again, and there would be no rescue except for the one she provided.

Sam squared her shoulders, feeling the helpless anger that always rose when she thought about the old world now. *Fine, if they want a war, I’ll give them a taste of what they’re in for.*

The first thing the storm tracker did was give herself a light dose of morphine. Then she used the bedpan, glad her leg felt stronger. She would need that. She dressed as fast as she could, hoping the layered shirts would protect her from bites and scratches. The sweatpants went on over her jeans for the same reason. After tying her dirty blonde braid up, she strapped the gun belt around her hips, wishing the weapon had more than two bullets.

Samantha chose to make her stand in the corner, to the left of the stone fireplace. She was crying hard tears by the time she had tumbled the cumbersome desk onto its side and pulled it in like a three-sided wall. The light dose of morphine wasn’t helping now.

After stowing all her things behind the desk, she filled half a dozen syringes with morphine, leaving the caps off. She added them to the knives already in the wide pockets of her trench coat. They made a comforting clink. When the wolves came, it would be through the windows that had been weakened by the first strong wave of the blizzard. It would get cold in here, fast.

“Sure could use a solid.” Sam was aware this was probably where her luck had run out. “If I’ve got any credit left, I’d like to use it now, please.”

She took a little more of the morphine she feared she would crave forever, recapping that needle with shaking fingers. *I’ve already survived worse.* Wolves, no matter how determined, were nothing compared to Melvin and Henry, both drunk, wanting sex. She would survive.

*Scratch. Paw. Sniff.*

Sam counted two shadows under the door, four pairs of eyes at the window. Six animals, and probably a few others hanging back, waiting. *But not for much longer.* She could feel their hatred as they glowered through the frosted glass. The storm had piled up a foot of thick snow, giving the wolves a ledge.

She glared back as she put the torches near the fire, not sure why she’d made them. They were a last–

*Smaaaaash!*

The front glass shattered under a huge black wolf. It landed on its side. Sharp pieces of glass flew across the floor; snow blew through the jagged hole.

Snarling as it gained its feet, the wolf padded her way, promising death.

*Crack! Thud. Ccrrassshhh!*

The second window failed. Snow and wolves streamed through the gap.

Sam jerked two needles from her pocket; adrenaline squeezed her heart.

Long claws dug into the slippery wooden floor as the wolves advanced.

Sam waited. They had to get close enough for her meager weapons to be effective.

*Craasshhh!*

A third window exploded under the weight of a large white wolf. The animal didn’t slow as it hit the wooden floor, using it to jump again instead, mouth open in anticipation.

Sam slammed both syringes into the white wolf’s furry chest as it leapt on her.

“Ahhh!” She pushed the double dose in, cringing away from the heavy, reeking weight and snapping teeth.

A second wolf had lunged with its leader and was hit by the first animal’s convulsing body. It knocked them both into the corner of the desk.

The heavy marble slid against Sam’s good leg, shoving her away from their snaps. Pictures crashed to the floor behind her.

Sam quickly looked up to find a lanky wolf flying through the air, with two more about to launch.

She fired the last bullets in her gun, with only one of them hitting. She jerked a kitchen knife from her pocket.

The third animal flew toward her, growling.

Sam leaned into the lunge and impaled it, ripping upward.

*Yiiipe!*

She let the bloody blade fall with the body as she grabbed the Taser she’d found refill packs for. She shocked the wolf she’d missed with the gun. She hit it in the muzzle as it went for her injured limb.

The wolf fell, whining.

She kicked the animal that had recovered from hitting the sharp corner; blood flew from its ear.

*Iiippe! Iippe!*

Her boot crunched against its ribs as the wolf continued to yelp.

The rest of the animals fled, retreating before the injured prey that had taken out half of their pack.

Sam rotated in time to see the remaining three wolves jump through the snowy window and vanish into the cold drifts of slush, tails tucked between their legs. Bloody paw prints marked their path of retreat. Their howls were haunting.

Samantha lowered her arms, struggling not to puke at all the blood.

The white wolf at her feet twitched, trying to recover.

Samantha lunged down and plunged her last knife deep into its thick neck.

*Scratch…*

Sam swung around, shoulders relaxing when she spotted the ferret.

It stared at her, tail twitching.

Sam’s body pumped more adrenaline. *Why is it even out here? There was a lot of noi–*

The ferret charged.

Sam stomped with her injured leg as it lunged for her ankle, saliva dripping from its fangs. The ferret’s body crunched under her boot, guts squeezing out as stabbing pain shot up her thigh.

Sam ground the ferret into the bloody floor, taking bitter satisfaction in every snap, crack, and splatter. “Slam you too!”

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Sam gathered her gear. *I don’t care if my body isn’t ready yet. I’m leaving now.*

# Chapter Nineteen

**Cabin Fever**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

Illinois

**February 23rd**

**1**

“**N**o, please. No more bodies. There’s no room for them!”

Angela’s haunted tone instantly brought Marc awake. He rose up on one elbow and found her tearstained cheeks in the dim lantern light.

Dog whined, also watching her cry in her sleep.

“Angie?”

There was no answer. She was having another nightmare. It wasn’t the first time she’d woken him this way. It bothered Marc that he couldn’t protect her in her dreams too. The small part of him that had suspected she was faking was gone. She’d been affectionate, passionate, loving. He loathed her man for changing that.

“It’s how he was raised. He didn’t know any other way to deal with someone like me.”

Marc gave her an awkward smile, prying his gaze from the dark curls messed sexily over her shoulder. “You would have made a good Marine.” Marc switched topics, not wanting to hear her defend someone who had obviously hurt her so much.

“Not me.” Angela sat up, pulling the thick quilt around her shoulders. She scanned the dusty pictures of foreign, seductive landscapes and the dark, dirty windows instead of looking at him. “I don’t kill. I won’t.”

He grimaced at her argumentative tone, wondering if it was caused by the dream or something that she had picked up from him. “You okay?” Her face was pale in the orange glow of the propane heater.

“I will be. Rough night.”

Marc grunted. *Five or six this week.* “Wanna talk about it?”

Angela tried to imagine telling him about her life of rape and assault, and total, unforgiving control. She shut her eyes against the shame. “No. How about you tell me something from your life that I don’t know. Shouldn’t be hard.”

He ignored her bitter tone. “Like what? After the war?”

“Tell me the answer to one of the questions we used to ask each other.”

“Why?” Marc’s mind screamed *ambush* from the resentful words. He could almost hear her telling herself to let it go, to preserve the careful peace they’d been sharing, but he couldn’t allow it. “The truth is all that’s left now. Tell me why.”

She opened her eyes; he was only a little surprised by the coldness there.

“I need to know what was more important than the way we felt. What was worth more than the love you left behind and forgot about?”

Marc pulled in a wounded breath. “I’ve never said it was worth it, and I never forgot you!”

“Clearly it was, or you would have at least had the decency to tell me where we stood!” Her words fell like chips of frosted glass. “You weighed the old life against the new one and if you ever looked back, I never knew. Last thing I heard was *I’ll find you.* And don’t give me that *it was for the best* crap because it wasn’t.”

“I wouldn’t. I did a lot, helped a lot of people, but I’ve never considered it a fair trade. For the most part, it’s been lonely…cold. I’ve spent the last decade aware that I made a mistake.”

She shrugged, not interested in his apologies, and too angry and hurt to be afraid of arguing with him. Her life with Kenny was all she could think about at night while Marc was being nice to her, seeing to her needs. The pain in his voice was finally a balm to the old Angela. “Tell me something I don’t know about your life.”

“I don’t... Okay. You remember how we wanted matching tattoos? I have four now. Three can be shown in public.”

Her rage began to calm. “I’m public. Let’s see ‘em.”

Marc pushed up his camouflage sleeve to reveal a simple, thin green band around his upper arm, edges artfully spiked. The other sleeve hid a neat eagle on top of the earth. She stared at his thick arm as she wondered where the politically incorrect one was. *His ass?* “And the third?”

Amused when he hesitated, she threw a rare grin. “Come on. You said three were politically correct.”

Marc stared. *It’s been so long!* He was immediately sorry her already swinging mood was about to take a hit. He uncovered slowly, hating the fear on her face when his hands went to the buckle of his dusty jeans. He only slid the waistband over his hip a couple of inches as he rolled toward her.

“Those are Recon wings! Kenny has the same–” She stopped, heart clenching. Kenny had the traditional *Mother* in the center of his. Marc had *Angie Forever*.

Their eyes met, locked. Memories swirled between them, old and powerful.

*“You’ll love me forever?”*

*The boy kissed her tenderly as his hips pushed between her long legs. “Just that long. Not a second more.”*

*She smiled, leaning into his thrust.*

Marc turned away with a heavy heart. That moment had been a long time ago, but right now, it felt as if it were yesterday. He had to fight with himself not to go to her, not to tell her how he felt or that he had come back for her. It had been too late by then, and it was too late now.

The big timber wolf stretched, yawning widely before following his master.

Angela studied Marc’s big shoulders as he lit the stove. Her name on his tanned hip flashed through her mind; she slammed her eyes shut. She was sure it had been done when he was fresh into the Marines and still pissed at his mother for putting him there. *If our love meant so much, he would have come back for me.* He hadn’t, and in the years that had passed, he’d changed. The boy she’d loved had been her willing slave on most things, her ally and best friend. This new man was closed off, adept at keeping to himself. She missed their intimacy, and hated the circumstances preventing them from having it again.

*It’s for the best*. *What if friendship isn’t enough?*

Angie gave the old dream only a brief glance before shoving it away. *The question doesn’t matter. Kenny will never let me go.*

Marc was certain any of the things he might have said would only cause more tension. Until tonight, they’d been avoiding old wounds while concentrating on sorting out an efficient travel routine. In that way, he knew he’d pleased her. They’d made one hundred twenty-seven miles in the week since leaving the wounded brothers behind, compared to the one hundred twenty that Angie had made in nine days alone.

They also rotated the cooking and cleanup chores. She had expected to do all the work despite the agreement, and it bothered Marc to see her staring, wondering if he was up to something. She was jumpy, always reaching for the comfort of her gun. She never asked if they were safe; she wouldn’t have believed him anyway if he said yes. He was doing things to make her feel better, like walking the perimeter often and always using the motion alarms. Marc was determined to show her that he could keep her alive, that she could count on him. He also kept his distance and kept his mouth shut, sure that when she relaxed a little more, she would remember he was the man who had taken her virginity with sweetness and care.

Feeling himself stir at that hot, shadowy memory, Marc motioned the wolf to stay as he pulled on his coat, then stepped into the cold Illinois air.

They were camped in a large, one-room log cabin deep in the Eagle Creek Recreation area. This particular building had been chosen for its complete lack of Christmas decorations. The area he had chosen was on the farthest edge of the resort complex, away from the main clubhouse and lavish apartments. He’d shunned the golf side, choosing to hole up in the campground. It was almost serene here, with no visible damage from the St. Louis quake zone, thanks to the thick forest.

The cabin had a tiny yard lined in dense willow and oak trees that hung over the rustic porch rails. Marc hefted himself into the canopy, wanting to see who was around, but even with his scope, the leaves were too thick to see the wealthier area. Only the shadows of blackened foliage told him Angie’s words of a huge fire were true. Not that he’d doubted her.

Frowning, Marc stayed in the tree. Their first week together had been smooth. He tried to make things easy for her, but she was stubborn, always insisting on the hardest path. The tone of desperation in her voice begged for another mile each time he asked if she was ready to stop for the night; he always gave in. As a result, she was exhausted and he was tired–so much that they weren’t unpacking anything but bedrolls and the heater most nights. Marc sighed again. She needed a break. *Soon, we both will.*

**2**

Angela awoke abruptly, instantly sure she was alone in the chilly room. She concentrated, worried Marc had tired of babysitting her and left.

She found him outside and tried to relax. Between the fear of Kenny’s reaction hanging over her like a noose and her dreams of the twins, she was freaking out a little. Marc did things to make her feel better, but there would be hell to pay once Kenny–

*Something’s coming.*

A door appeared in her mind, pulling.

She immediately twisted the knob. *The brothers?! Are they coming for me now?!*

An icy wind blew her hair around as she waited in the doorway, knowing not to go further. She shivered as she peered into another world.

This landscape was blanketed by a thick blizzard and dotted with the shadowy forms of people, but only one of them–a dirty blonde with a nasty limp–appeared alive as she plowed determinedly through the drifts. She came toward where Angela stood on the threshold; the edges of her filthy trench coat dragged over the deep snow, leaving a clear trail.

This world was solid white except for the people; even the trees were bent, covered in ice. Angela thought she saw a pack of dogs in the far distance, but she wasn’t sure.

The other freezing souls paid no attention to the open door, but the blonde limped straight toward Angela, frozen eyelashes glistening like jewels. *It’s coming. Get ready.*

A radar map glowed in the woman’s eyes like an old weather broadcast.

Angela’s heart raced as she realized she and Marc weren’t the only ones in the path of the massive winter storm moving in from the south. Her son was in danger, along with all the other people Kenn had joined.

A strong wind pushed against her. The door slammed shut.

Angela jerked upright, eyes flying open. Fear raced through Angela. *I have to call Kenny.* He was about to find out the first rule she had broken. He would know for sure that she was on her way.

Angela rose, pulling on her coat. *I need to get stronger, fast.*

**3**

Angela went out to the porch. She found Marc instantly, though she couldn’t see him from the doorway.

When she came into view and peered up with a hand over her eyes, Marc frowned. “Did you sense me?”

She shrugged, not entirely comfortable talking to him about the things she could do. “I’m not sure.”

Marc dropped down onto the ground by the porch. “You all right?”

“I’ll be better when we’re rolling again.” She lit a smoke, preparing herself to take a chance. *Will he believe me?*

Marc knew something was wrong. It was in her body language. “What’s up?”

Angela drew in a deep breath. “There’s a bad storm coming. A winter storm.”

“Snow?”

“A lot. And it’s going to get very cold.” She didn’t look at him. “I’ve got a roll of plastic.”

“Okay. I’ve got a staple gun and duct tape.”

His unquestioning acceptance brought her eyes up. They stared, able to feel that old connection wanting to grow again.

He glanced away before she could. “What smells so good?”

“Omelets.” She went back in to the stove. “It’s all rehydrated or powdered, so don’t expect much.”

*Powdered eggs suck.*

Angela continued cooking with a chuckle of agreement, not searching for his thoughts but not blocking them either.

“Can I do anything?” He hung up his jacket and followed her, mindful about keeping his distance. *Did she cook a satisfying meal to soften me up in case I got upset at the news? I’ll bet that’s why she put on the thicker coat too and hasn’t removed it yet–a cushion for any blows.*

Angela winced at his accurate guess. She slipped out of the coat and draped it over a chair. *He’s smart. It took Kenny months to figure out those defenses*. “Teach me some fighting stuff today after lunch?”

Marc didn’t push, though her reaction was a confirmation. It was important that she learned to trust him first. “Sure. We’ll start with the basics and go from there.”

“No. I need something I can use now.”

Her insistent tone bothered him. “I know quick ways, but they’re for Marines. Not pretty.”

Angela shrugged, brushing a stray curl behind her ear as she shut off the stove. “Pretty doesn’t matter. Results do.”

He shrugged. “Remember you said that.”

Angela frowned at the second warning, but she didn’t ask for details or change her mind as she handed him a plate and sat on the farthest end of the couch. “I will. Let’s eat.”

Angela wrote in her journal during the meal, then bundled up and slipped out the door without a word.

Marc gestured Dog to follow her, worrying. Where was the carefree young girl who had insisted on building a clubhouse in the middle of a snowstorm? Where was the innocent enchantress he had eased into womanhood and how could he get her back? *There has to be a way.*

When he stepped out, Marc was surprised by how much gear she already had stacked on the porch. Obviously, she was serious about the storm. He kept his eyes from lingering on the rounded ass sticking from her Blazer each time she retrieved something. He carried her things inside instead.

Coming back out for the last load, he noticed the temperature. It had dropped nearly 5° in less than two hours. That definitely wasn’t normal, and it confirmed her warning. Again, not that he’d really doubted. Her gift had always been a part of their lives and one of the reasons his mother had been so against her being in the family, but it didn’t bother him anymore now than it had then. Her gift was useful. Marc had often wondered what it would be like to experience things the way she did, but he didn’t envy her abilities. He knew she paid a terrible price for them. “Need some help?”

Angela hadn’t known he was right behind her. Marc saw her hand flinch down before she stopped herself.

“I’ve got it.”

Her tone was sharp. Marc backed off, stepping through thick Bermuda grass to get his things. She was keeping the wall up between them. He would respect her wishes. *For now.*

It took them half an hour to improve the cabin’s temperature, using large sheets of plastic to enclose the area around the couch. They worked together in silence, Angela anticipating his needs as she had when they were kids. When they dug out warmer clothes, Marc tossed a plastic-wrapped pouch on her bedroll. “Thermal blanket. It was a part of my sniper gear.”

She tossed a similar package onto the couch, trying not to frown. “He left some of his things behind this time.”

Their similarity, from supplies to transportation, made them both sad. It also increased Marc’s uneasiness about the future. *Her man has sniper training too. Great.*

**4**

Angela tried to stay calm. She hoped Marc wouldn’t hurt her; she flinched as the door opened and he came in from doing a walk of the perimeter.

“Ready for your first lesson?”

She rubbed sweaty palms down her jeans. “In here?”

He motioned at the small area, aware of how uncomfortable she was. “Warmer in here, more room out there. You pick.”

“Outside.” Angela hoped the cold might distract her from her fear of being touched, of being hurt. She was already shaking. She drew in a deep, calming breath as she stopped at the foot of the stairs.

Dog moved through the brush and debris around their location, ears straining for sounds that didn’t belong.

Marc took off his gun belts and set them on the porch. He studied the fear as he stalked toward her. “We can start out slower.”

Angela shook her head. “I can do this.”

Marc began to circle her, steps barely making any noise. “I believe that too. Just remember to think.”

She nodded.

He rushed her.

Marc swung a leg behind her knee and gently took them to the ground. He braced on his own arm, not letting his weight fall on her. His mind switched into cadet training.

Fear burst through her like a rocket. Angela struggled thoughtlessly.

Marc clenched his teeth in an effort to stay soft. *She feels good!* “Rubbin’ that body against a man won’t make him stop, honey.”

Angela froze, cheeks bright red. “I don’t want–”

“You can’t talk your way out, either. You have to think and then act. Lock your ankles together and try to throw me off.”

She did as he said, heart pounding, mind screaming.

Marc forced her to meet his eyes. “You have to get in control of it, Angie. Being scared makes you human, but you have to think. Your hands should be trying to find a weapon, while your legs keep trying to throw me off. Your gun, my knife, a rock–anything in reach–and don’t waste your time yelling. It’ll only tire you out.”

Angela sucked in air, closing her eyes against the fear.

“I’ll be saying things, pawing at you, but surprise is *your* weapon. Distract me and then bite, punch, kick; do whatever it takes, but don’t let me roll you over.”

It was hard to concentrate when she wanted him off her.

Marc raised a brow. “Make me.”

She surprised him with a gentle head butt to the chin. They struggled against each other, Marc using only pressure, no pain. Her fear was intense, preventing his body from responding. After a full minute, he let her roll him over and off.

She was on her feet in an instant, hair wild, eyes flashing.

Marc didn’t let her call it quits. “Lesson two. When a man corners a woman, he waits to see if she’s a runner or a fighter. Your body language will tell him how to prepare for you. Again, surprise is your weapon. Keep your hands at your sides. Make him think you’ve frozen, and when he moves in, cup your hands into a fist and bring them up at the same time as your knee. Pound his nuts into his stomach and run for a weapon or your car. If you miss, you’ll be on the ground again. Ready?”

Angela was glad he had given her the warning this time, but she couldn’t help freezing when he rushed her. They were on the ground again a second later.

“Lock those ankles. Use your knees! You can’t hurt me, but I could hurt you, if I were a bad man. You need to pretend that I am.”

She answered him with a harder hit to the chin that sent tiny stars across his vision. He let her roll them over again.

Angela quickly gained her feet for a second time.

Marc did a quick scan of the area as he got up. *Clear*. “Very good. Ready?” He moved in before she could respond.

Angela remembered to drop her hands, but she was afraid to hit him, terrified he would hurt her, as Kenny had so many times.

Marc tripped her easily, taking them down again. This time, her arms were pinned by his chest and the heavy weight of his body. “Don’t roll over and don’t unlock those ankles!”

Angela twisted her hips to loosen her hands. She flung a handful of dust halfheartedly in his direction.

Her knee brushed his groin, and again, he let her roll free.

She got up slower this time, winded as she tried to remember his instructions through the fear.

Marc realized he was going to have to use a different method to circumvent her terror. She had to handle him as a stranger.

He retreated a bit, ignoring the heart that didn’t want her to be afraid of him for any reason or length of time. She froze whenever he got close, obviously afraid of what would happen afterward if she hurt him, which she couldn’t. He needed to reach the place inside that came out when survival was on the line, so she would remember how to handle herself when it counted.

“Not going to the ground means the difference between rape and escape. You have to stop me by *any* means necessary.”

Angela frowned, retreating as he advanced. “I can’t just attack you.”

“I’m gonna make it so you can. Remember to think.” Marc gave an honest leer. “Pretty bitch.” He mimicked the brothers’ menacing tone and words perfectly. Marc hated her reaction, but he didn’t stop, forcing her to deal with it. “How ‘bout a kiss? Been alone a long time.”

Angela carefully retreated, observing his face and not his hands or body. At least she knew that much. He rushed her.

Angela brought a hand and knee up together. Neither said a word, Marc only letting his body strain against hers.

It took him a full minute to get her off her feet this time, Marc not trying, of course. Once on the ground, he kept her there, showing her where to hit, scratch, kick, punch.

A few minutes later, Angela knew she was done and stilled. She shut her eyes so Marc wouldn’t see how afraid she was. “Done now… Let me up.”

To her great relief, his weight was gone an instant later. There was no way she could have stopped him. She knew he felt her shaking when she allowed him to pull her to her feet. She let go and put some distance between them, stomach aching.

“You okay?”

Her words were breathy. “Good...exercise, even if I don’t...learn anything.”

“You will.”

Their eyes met, sparked. Hers darted away, making his brow pucker. He had provoked real fear to teach, but it had taken so little!

“I’ll work on it. Again...tomorrow?”

He was surprised she wanted to. “Absolutely. You did great. Next time, I’ll teach you ways to keep anyone from getting close enough to grab you.”

She nodded, sweating despite the chill in the gusting wind. She didn’t notice the wolf on the porch, but Marc did and was glad. He was never completely sure the animal would return from his runs.

“Cool. Guns now?”

He considered. He had shown her proper cleaning and hand positions, and they’d done some dry fire exercises, but she needed to practice, and that made noise. It would draw attention they weren’t ready to handle. “Not until we leave. For today, we’ll use something quieter.”

Pulse and respiration ragged, she only motioned agreement as they headed in, unwilling to ask for more. She needed to get used to caring for herself. *Isn’t that why I called him, to teach me?*

“You mean that?”

Angela was surprised he was picking up her thoughts. The expression on his face said he hadn’t been expecting it either. The moment hung between them like a flame in the darkness. Back in the old days, they’d been open to each other in every way.

“Yes. Will you?”

He glanced away. *Her eyes are still the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen.* “Absolutely.” He dug in his kit. “I found this in Mattoon.” He handed her a small, purple gift bag from his kit. It held an orange dart gun with half a dozen darts and a paper target.

Angela saw the benefits even as she laughed at the toy. “I’ll treasure it always.”

Marc taped the target to the wall.

She loaded the bright orange weapon and began to practice.

Marc stayed in a rear corner, occasionally offering corrections while trying not to sniff his hands. They reeked of her vanilla scent. He kept a groan to himself. *Damn, I’ve got it bad.*

When Angela looked around a bit later, Dog was at the door, gray ears up, reddish-black nose down, observing contentedly.

Marc had settled on the couch to clean his guns.

Angela felt peace and bitterness battling for space in her heart. *This is how it should have been for us. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.*

**5**

After a quiet meal of beans and Bambi, they went outside for bathroom breaks before the storm hit. It wasn’t quite dark yet, but they were nervous upon moving outside. The amount of snow that had already fallen was amazing. It was coming down in thick sheets, with six inches of the dirty grey flakes covering everything in only two hours. The wind swirled flakes into tiny tornadoes that raced across the cornfield and slammed apart against broken stalks and their tarp covered vehicles.

The pair split up wordlessly.

Marc waved the wolf after her as she stepped out of his sight behind a wide, icing tree. The wind howled, growing stronger. Snowy wind whipped, producing a whiteout effect the flashlights around their necks barely penetrated. Marc made a fast round of the perimeter to uncover alarms, then joined her on the porch.

Angela didn’t look at him; she didn’t want Marc to see how scared she was. *I have to warn Kenny this is coming*. “I’ll be out here a few minutes.”

Marc heard both statements. He wanted to listen somehow. He shut the cabin door instead, jealousy burning in his heart. A moment later, a powerful wave of energy vibrated in his teeth as it rushed over miles and miles of broken ground. He was hit with the urge to interrupt, to make his presence as her protector known, but that would give away the element of surprise. The Marine inside held him in check.

Marc sat on the couch to clean his guns. *Again*.

**6**

Angela slammed the door in her mind, trying to stop crying and shaking. Kenny was so mad! His anger had always terrified her. Today was no different.

She wiped at her face as she went inside. He wanted her to go back to Ohio; he said he would come get her when he was ready, but she could hear him wishing she would die anywhere along the way. Under the layers of fear, she was furious and more determined than ever. *I’ll never give up. Never!*

Marc saw her face as she and Dog came in. Acid began to burn a hole in his gut. Her man couldn’t reach her physically, but he could emotionally, and he had. Her face was tear-streaked; her beautiful black hair was flecked with dirty snow. “You okay?”

“Not even, but I can’t fix it from here.” She hung up her coat, voice emotionless. “Montana by the end of March sound right?”

That was exactly what he’d figured. Marc nodded. “Faster if we do some night traveling.”

Angela sat on the couch and pulled the quilt around her shoulders, unable to stop hearing the threats, the ugliness. Kenny had been angry from the start, but he had spun out of control suddenly and started screaming. She tensed. *Did he see something when I showed him the storm?* Icy terror sank into her heart. *Does Kenny know I’m not alone?*

Angela flinched as Marc pushed the heater closer to her.

Marc wished there was something he could do to make her feel better. When he looked up, she was staring at him with a desperate glare in her eyes.

“Tell me you’ll support me, no matter what. Tell me the code, the Corps, and everything else comes second to me.”

Marc sighed bitterly. “Wasn’t it always that way? According to our family, I went against them and God to have you, and there was never a second that I wouldn’t have come if you’d called.” He snorted. “Obviously, there still isn’t.”

Angela gave him a shaky smile. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Marc clamped down on another attempt to get her to change her mind. “Me too. Fifteen years was a long time.”

Angela shuddered, closing her mouth on the hell she’d been through. Only the future mattered, and that was Kenny. He was a violent man. Finding her and Marc together might be enough to send him over the edge, especially if he snuck up on them and saw the sparks. Blood would spill then; her son’s parentage wouldn’t even be an issue.

**7**

The frustrated twins watched the couple, both unhappy with the fighting lesson they had witnessed through shared binoculars.

The snow had Dean and Dillan pinned down in a thermal tent. They were unable to get closer because of the wolf and the tracks they would be too injured to cover. Forced to wait until the storm broke and their wounds healed, the brothers were studying every move the man and woman made as they plotted their revenge.

Shooting was talked about, as was an open ambush during the next fighting lesson, but neither plan was put into action. In their conditions–both their wounds were angry and leaking–they couldn’t be sure of victory. The twins chose to keep waiting for their moment of triumph.

**8**

Angela’s dreams were worse than usual. She jerked awake to find Marc already sitting up, staring at her in concern.

“Is there a problem?”

“Just in my brain.” She kept the thick quilt around her shoulders as she stumbled to the door. She slipped outside, not bothering with shoes.

“Dog, guard.”

The wolf followed her, eager to be outside where he could smell things.

Marc got up. She was jumpier now than she had been when they were reunited. She couldn’t sleep more than a few hours without nightmares interrupting. It made him nervous, and pissed him off. Her man would be taught a lesson. How harsh, was the only unknown.

Marc slid his guns into his holsters with a feeling of completeness he knew not to put faith in. Being good with a weapon wasn’t enough now. Instincts mattered, and his was telling him the time had come to fix this mess. He was a United States Marine. It was his duty to give her freedom.

Angela sat in the rear seat of her Blazer; the open door let dark flakes swirl inside. Her mind was stuck in the past. Kenny’s violence, childhood demons, and the horrors since the war mixed together to create a vision that made her wish she didn’t have to sleep. She would never have an unbroken night’s rest again until she was back with her son.

*The arms of your new guardian might ease these things. His heart is pure.*

Angela frowned at the wolf. She had little doubt it would work, but Marc would never offer, and she couldn’t imagine asking. It went against everything she’d had beaten into her.

*This man is not the same. He is yours.*

She shook her head. “Not anymore. That was a long time ago.” *So why does it feel like it was yesterday?*

Her heart sobbed, giving the answer Kenny could never be allowed to discover. *Because I lied. I still love Marc. I never stopped.*

# Chapter Twenty

**Once a Liar…**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

Wyoming, near Kemmerer

**February 24th**

**1**

**K**enn listened to the early morning chatter at the boss’s center table with half an ear–something he usually never did. He was searching for a way to tell Adrian about the coming storm. He had seen the snow drifts around the tarp covered outlines of *two!* vehicles, but he couldn’t convince Adrian without telling him about Angela.

*It’s too quiet.* Kenn glanced up to find everyone staring at him. “Sorry, what?”

Adrian frowned. “Supply list.”

Kenn handed it to him from the stack in his notebook, being careful not to let the stiff wind rip it from his fingers. “Here ya go.”

Adrian scanned it. “Who’s going?”

Neil handed Adrian a smaller sheet of paper as a bird call echoed. They all looked up at the grit-covered sky.

Tension gripped the crowd in the mess. Air horns came out...

When the bird wasn’t spotted, normal noises resumed. Wind blew, tarps flapped, dishes clinked, footsteps crunched, and vehicles rolled into line for a full day of travel. Adrian hated their jumpiness as much as he approved of it. “These names are good. Do you want…”

Kenn let their conversation fade away from him again. *Angie is getting closer. I can almost feel–*

Adrian slapped his cup on the picnic table.

Everyone jumped.

Adrian gave Kenn a hard stare. “Is there something I should know?”

“Yeah.” Kenn braced. “It’s going to snow tonight. We’ll be caught out in the open unless we get ready.” Kenn waited, dreading the coming questions that would force him to lie to Adrian.

“Snow?”

Kenn squared his shoulders. “From the south, at least a foot by midnight, maybe more. We need to hole up somewhere.”

Kyle, Doug, and Neil all gawked with open mouths.

“What do you suggest?” Adrian’s tone was thoughtful.

“We passed a mall in Green River, and there’s a roller rink in Rock Springs, but really, Kemmerer’s only a few miles away. It has a mall across from a bowling alley. We’ll hook up heat, maybe even get a few lanes going.” Kenn ignored the suspicious guards. Only Adrian’s opinion mattered.

Adrian was weighing the options. “You’re sure?”

“I must be.” Kenn’s face darkened. “I’m risking my new place here on it, right?”

“Yes, you are.” Adrian cocked a brow. “The bowling alley in Kemmerer?”

“Yeah. Sage Lanes. It could snow for a week, and we’d be okay there.” Kenn saw the snow-covered vehicles in his mind again. Not one, but two. *Angie isn’t alone. What wife-stealing piece of shit agreed to bring her out here?*

The other men at the table wanted to ask Kenn questions, but didn’t. They also knew it was Adrian’s call. They could feel him considering the choice.

All five men paused to watch a large number of tens go blowing by in the gusty Wyoming wind. Two of the men still felt the urge to gather the cash.

Adrian glanced around. They had a relaxing view of the Rocky Mountains, where grizzly bear and elk were no doubt hiding from the survivors, but down here in the basin, there were bodies of lizards and gophers scattered around mesquite shrubs and cactus. There were barbed wire fences, rows of unplowed fields, and garbage littered the area, but as for civilization, there wasn’t any. He could see two farms, but they were both boarded, as if they’d been condemned before the war. They were very exposed here. If Kenn was right, they were in danger. “Notebooks open. Plans have changed.”

The guards did it reluctantly.

Kenn gloated silently. *A Gulf War Veteran, a State Trooper, and a Mobster all getting a taste of crow*.

“We’ll need three generators, a full fuel truck, the big tool chest, and a crew for bathroom setups, since those scheduled for here already did theirs.” He gestured to Kenn as the wind blew a fresh wave of recent decay over their table. “You’ll do the hookups?”

Kenn nodded. “You know it.”

Adrian lit a smoke. “Go spend some time on the radio. Tell Mitch and Matt I want them.”

Kenn went right then. He heard it while monitoring the radio would be his excuse. While he was glad that he hadn’t had to lie to Adrian yet, he knew the questions would come. *I better have an answer ready.*

Adrian gave his closest men understanding looks, sure their beards hid suspicion and dislike. “I know you don’t trust him. That’s all right, as long as you trust me. Do you?”

“Of course,” came the unanimous answers, but all three men were indeed hiding disapproval under stubble and blank facades. They didn’t even like Kenn, let alone trust him.

“Good. We’ll see what happens.” Adrian finished his cold coffee and stood. “In the meantime, a day in a bowling alley with heat and real electric sounds good. Who wants to be on my team?”

There were boasts and offers, with Adrian in the thick of it. His inscrutable face didn’t hint at how much he needed Kenn to be proven right. It would cement the Marine’s place here, but more than that, the ability to predict dangerous weather was invaluable. Adrian hadn’t suspected the man of having skill.

The camp had no problem getting a break from the expected full day of traveling, but nearly all the Eagles cracked jokes about the calm skies and temperatures that were above freezing.

Kenn only told them to wait for it, but inside he was terrified. He knew Angela wasn’t trying to trick him, but if the storm had dissipated or changed course, he would lose his place. Kenn’s jaws hurt from forcing himself to laugh at the remarks, but through it all, he could feel Adrian’s thoughtful blue gaze on him, watching and waiting.

**2**

Kemmerer appeared to be empty. The narrow roads were surprisingly clear of abandoned traffic, but looters had done heavy damage. Even the animal population hadn’t been spared. The town pound was the site of a horrific battle that made Adrian drive faster past the decaying canine and human cadavers littering the courtyard of the brick complex.

Like the other towns they’d been through, Kemmerer also held dozens of rotting, gruesome corpses. The town itself housed burnt frames, broken windows, and looted stores, but no wrecked military vehicles and no kicked-in doors. Riots, not the draft, had conquered this American town.

The parking lot at Sage Lanes was deserted. Adrian steered into the hard breeze as he keyed his mike. “Back the mess truck up near the door. Supply trucks go in the rear. Double the duty guards. Eagles ten, seven, and twelve, secure our site. Eagle three, escort and assist Kenn. Everyone else, stand by.”

Adrian walked through the waiting vehicles while the Eagles cleared their shelter. He saw only bored people who were eager for him to let them out; he felt their fear, however. *A night of fun is exactly what they need*. Lying or not, Kenn had given him an answer to a problem he hadn’t known existed.

Adrian stepped into the building a few minutes later, sweeping arcades, cleaning machines, rows of welded tables and hard swivel chairs behind racks of heavy, dusty balls. The maroon carpet, with a fine layer of dust devoid of footprints, led to separate bar and food areas. Wooden counters in front of brick walls were covered in glittery signs and unopened party favors. Adrian’s sharp gaze picked out mouse droppings on the bar and a ceiling still pre-lined with canopies of New Year’s confetti. He sighed, tired of the heartbreaking reminders of a world that was gone. “It’ll do. Set us up.”

**3**

It took them an hour to get everything in and set up. Dozens of lanterns gave the spacious room a dim, flickering light and a harsh odor Adrian knew wouldn’t mix well with the other smells. He hung smoke detectors, air fresheners, and signs ordering the bathroom doors to be kept shut.

He went toward the basement door while the camp ate lunch and picked out sleeping areas away from the doors and windows. Adrian gestured at Kyle.

The stocky Eagle fell in step.

The two men stayed alert as they traveled the long, dark hall, flashlights on their belts casting eerie shadows.

“You been out since we got here?”

“Few minutes ago. Might be snow coming in. Temperature’s dropping fast.” Kyle wasn’t exactly gunning for the Marine, but he would never be one of Kenn’s many supporters. He liked it that the mean Marine had been behind the 8 ball, even if only for a few hours. “Don’t think it’ll hold till dark.”

“It won’t matter if Kenn can get the heat on.”

Adrian’s words were still hanging in the chilly air as a deep rumble started under their feet, rattling the building. It grew louder, drawing yells; dust flew from vents. It changed to a long, loud hiss that gradually faded.

A few seconds of tense silence lingered. Adrian stayed still in the darkness, hand on his holster as he listened to the unease of his people.

The rumbling came again, quieter this time. The two males got moving as dusty light bulbs flickered halfheartedly, then glowed bright and beautiful. They now had electricity.

A hearty cheer spread through the bowling alley, echoing to Kenn and Neil, who had heard steps coming and drawn their guns. No one else was allowed down here.

“Stand down.” Adrian came into view.

Kyle hung back to observe and guard.

Kenn flipped a switch as he holstered, killing the lights and drawing a loud moan of protest from upstairs.

Adrian joined him “What about heat?”

Kenn wiping stinging sweat from his eyes. “Our cords aren’t strong enough. We need something heavy duty. After that, it should just be a matter of bleeding out the system. We’ll have to make sure all the vents and ducts stay cleared.”

To Kenn’s pleasure, Adrian wrote it in his book while the Eagles watched.

“We rolled by a big laundromat on the way in. Wouldn’t they have the industrials?”

Kenn was glad it had been Neil who suggested it. He and the trooper got along better now, but Kenn couldn’t make peace with Kyle at all. He had officially given up trying.

“Good. Give them lights, then go get what we need. The space heaters will hold us a bit longer.”

Kenn got another cheer when he flipped the switch.

The four men were happier as they went up the hall together under full neon bulbs for the first time in nine weeks, but it was an odd feeling. No one spoke until they got to the rear loading dock where the supply trucks were lined up.

The guards tensed when four men exited through the rear doors. When they saw Adrian, they scanned the landscape harder, paying more attention. Kenn’s words had drawn them to an awareness of their unique positions. They were protecting their leader. By doing so, they were also securing their own places in this new world. Kenn had guards on Adrian almost all the time now. Even the new guy, Seth, was doing it, and he wasn’t even an Eagle. The guards were all relieved when Kenn and Neil left, but Kyle and Adrian went back inside, where it was safer. As far as they were concerned, Adrian was the last of his kind.

**4**

By the time full darkness fell, dinner was half over. Those already finished were enjoying the twenty-five lanes Kenn had managed to get working. Beautiful, warm heat gushed out of the vents while snow fell heavily outside. Nearly everyone who’d cracked a joke earlier had now given Kenn apologetic words for saving them. If they had been caught out in the open, even a little snow might have cost lives. The story of hearing it on the radio had already spread through camp. Kenn was their hero.

Adrian, Kenn, Kyle, Doug, and Neil were at a round table on the top deck of the bowling alley. The Eagles were watching the games below, laughing, letting the camp have their fill first, but Adrian’s attention stayed on his right-hand man.

Kenn was playing with a deck of cards, fanning them out in different shapes and scooping them up like a professional. His face was pale. At that moment, Adrian found it hard to believe the Marine might be special. Loyal? Hardworking? *Yes.* A descendant? *No*, and it wasn’t because Adrian believed he was the last of his kind. He longed for one of his top men to have gifts, but he couldn’t place it with Kenn. *Then how did he know?*

The answer that came made Adrian grimace. Kenn was in contact with someone, and he was either lying or about to.

Almost as if Neil had caught Adrian’s thought, he turned to Kenn. “So, how’d you know?”

Neil’s question got the attention of the entire table.

Kenn dropped his head. “I’d rather not say.”

Neil frowned. “Why? You’re the hero now.”

“You won’t believe me.”

Everyone looked to Adrian in the thick silence.

Kenn understood his moment of betrayal had come when those sharp eyes dug into him, searching. He sucked in a breath. “I feel things. Sometimes.”

It was the answer Adrian wanted; it was the magic he’d been hunting for, but it fell awkwardly from Kenn’s lips. *He’s right. None of us believe it.*

“Oh.”

“Okay.”

No one questioned yet despite the disbelief. That was Adrian’s job.

Kenn chose a topic change when the silence continued. “Who’s ready to bowl?”

Everyone except Adrian rose, ready for a break from the tension. “You guys go on. I’ll catch up after I do rounds.”

Kenn opened his mouth to offer company. He snapped it shut, sensing Adrian’s unease. Let the boss man have some time to consider how big an advantage it would be to have a severe weather alarm that was never wrong. With that skill on his list, he would never lose his place here.

*Until the real deal arrives.*

Kenn pushed away that fear. Angela wouldn’t make it this far, even with help. None of her weak hospital friends would be able to keep two people alive through a thousand miles of hell. *She might even be dead now.* Kenn went to join the bowlers and bask in the admiration of his followers.

**5**

Adrian did continue to think about it–not about how great it would be, but about the lie he’d been told. He stood inside the front glass doors as the snow fell harder, feeling the guards scan him as he sorted through it. Kenn was in contact with someone, but he didn’t want that someone here. It was the only answer that made sense. Why would he do that?

*Because they know the old Kenny*. They knew whatever it was that Neil and Kyle suspected, so Kenn was leaving them out there to die.

Adrian’s face darkened. If that were true, he would have to change his plans for the future. By his own actions, Kenn would be unworthy. *The one I gift leadership to must value life the way I do.*

Thick, dark flakes fell harder. Adrian pushed Kenn from his mind for the moment as he scanned the town around them. His Eagles were doing Recon nearby–taking pictures and widening the perimeter as they’d been taught. He concentrated. *A foot or more. Are we prepared for that?*

No. Livestock trucks would have to be heated and covered; water and main supply trucks would have to be brought around front. Warmer clothes and shoes were needed, shovels too. Mind racing, Adrian went back inside and began putting his people to work.

As Adrian got them moving, he noticed Kenn’s boy, Charlie, hanging around. When they were alone for a moment, the leader stepped over to him. *The kid needs to eat more and have some fun.* “You okay?”

The teenager nodded but said nothing.

Adrian lowered his voice. “You sure? I’m all yours right now.”

“No big deal. Just bored.”

Charlie’s expression said differently, though. Dark circles under the teenager’s eyes said he wasn’t sleeping well, but Adrian was encouraged that he wasn’t constantly standing at attention anymore. “Sounds like you need a job.”

Charlie agreed right away.

Adrian wondered if he should give the boy make-work or something that mattered.

Charlie’s head came up. “Something that matters?”

Adrian frowned slightly. “Everything matters now, son. I’ll change your schedule when I do the next set. In the meantime, how about some snow shoveling? We need to keep a clear path to the trucks.”

“Sure. Now?”

“No. We have to get some supplies first. You can beat me up at a game like your dad will.”

Adrian chose not to question the boy’s grimace.

Charlie forced a smile through the resentment. “Sure. Can I be on your team?”

“Absolutely. Lane 17, in half an hour. Bring coffee.”

Charlie shoved his hands into the pockets of the baggy, hooded shirt he wore over dusty jeans and left Adrian alone in the dim hallway by the main office.

Adrian was almost certain Charlie had wanted to scream something at him. That Kenn wasn’t his dad? *Maybe.* Adrian yawned and stepped into the cool darkness. It was yet another sign that something wasn’t right with his XO.

Adrian moved into the stale darkness of the office. Before he could flip on the light, a fake southern drawl mocked him.

“Avoidin’ people is bad for ya image.”

Adrian rotated with an annoyed scowl.

Tonya retreated from his glare of distaste.

“Not if they’re bad news.”

The sexy redhead gave him a knowing smile. “Wasn’t what ya were sayin’ when ya were between my legs.”

His body was tempted. It was peaceful right now, and the office was pitch black, but his face was emotionless as he returned her mocking tone. “Musta dreamed it. Never happened.”

Tonya gave him a sexy smirk, but her voice was unsure now. “We’re alone. Ya can’t deny it ta me.”

Adrian gave her a tight smile. “Yes, I can. Prove it.” He gave the door a gentle shove with his boot, unable to resist a parting blow. “Find someone else to spread those legs for. I’m busy.”

“Maybe I will.” Tonya’s accent faded as she returned to her sleeping bag near the basement door. “And maybe you’ll be surprised by who.”

Adrian was more worried about Tonya than he’d let on. He was glad no one had heard the short exchange. She was searching for a way to pay him back. Hell had no fury and all that, but even more, her kind had been a bitch before the war. That hadn’t changed.

Adrian tensed at the creak of steps outside the open door.

“Can I talk to you?”

Adrian flipped the switch, then waved Neil in. The small room held a chair, a messy desk, a single filing cabinet in the corner, and a layer of dust on the floor recording their tracks. *Good thing I didn’t take Tonya up on her offer.* Those heeled black boots she wore left unmistakable prints and his Eagles were getting sharper. “What’s on your mind?”

“Kenn.”

Adrian brushed at the layer of dust, then sat on a corner of the cluttered desk. “As in, how did he know?”

Neil was full of suspicion. “Exactly.”

Adrian had already gone down this road with himself. The camp would believe Kenn had heard it on the radio and that was what mattered. They would never hear the honest answer. “How do you think he knew?”

Neil shrugged, restless hands twisting his hat. “I don’t have a clue, and that bothers me. He saved our ass, that’s for sure, and these people love him now, but…” Neil paused before pushing on carefully. “Something isn’t right with him, Boss.”

Adrian lit a smoke, waiting.

Neil stared at the man he respected more than anyone he’d ever known, hoping he wasn’t about to make a big mistake. “I know he’s your choice, and you have my complete support, but I plan to keep track of him. You should know that.”

“Good.”

Neil blinked. “What?”

Adrian snickered. “Didn’t expect that, did you?”

The trooper’s normally stern face was confused. “No. I thought I’d be in trouble.”

Adrian’s voice sharpened. “I want to be told about the smallest thing that catches your attention, Eagle. The smallest thing.”

“You know it.”

“He knows what?”

Neither man flinched, but both were caught off guard. They turned with identical frowns and thoughts. *What is it with women and lurking around doors?*

“You need something?!”

Cynthia’s shrewd brown eyes lost some of their eagerness at Adrian’s bark. “Yes. Sorry. The door was open.”

Adrian flipped from pissed to bored in seconds. He stared at the Asian American reporter with a cool smile. “Yes, it was. What can I do for you, Ms. Quest?”

Cynthia thought better of asking Neil to get the hell out. “I have some questions.”

“There’s a surprise.”

The dry tone made the normally unshakable reporter flush, then hesitate, unsure if she should go on. Adrian was a hard man to read.

“What, Cynthia? Tell me your deepest desires.”

The words hung in the dusty room, and now she was the one caught off guard, unable to give him anything except the honesty his tone had insisted on. “You. What kind of monster were you before? What are you atoning for?”

Cynthia missed Adrian’s flinch, horrified to hear the secret accusation spoken when she had no proof to back it up.

Neil noticed it. He felt the instant change in the man at his side. Neil scowled, automatically protecting his boss. “None of that old shit matters anymore, in case you haven’t noticed. Only our survival does. You should wake up before you piss off the wrong person and find yourself on the outs. See ya later, Boss.”

Cynthia retreated as the angry trooper stomped by her.

Adrian let her squirm for a long moment in the tense silence.

“You have questions?” he asked finally.

Glad he was willing to pretend she hadn’t crossed the line when they both knew she had, Cynthia took a small step into the dusty office. “Yes. I’d like to volunteer to teach a class when you get them going.”

Adrian’s cool eyes never left hers. She could feel his pull, woman’s body softening under his gaze. “Maybe a teacher’s aide or something?”

Adrian opened his notebook and wrote it down.

Cynthia stood there stiffly. She was hard too, an old dirt-digger, but she wasn’t immune to his spell any more than Kenn or Neil. Like them, she wanted to be by Adrian; she wanted to be useful to him.

“What class?”

“I’m quick at basic math. I have a Pulitzer Prize for my writing.” The reporter controlled herself, itching to ask, demand, trick, trap, or badger until he broke. She knew he wouldn’t. Even if she didn’t care about being banished, which she did, he wasn’t like the others. He wasn’t part of *before*, as far as she knew, so treating him as if he was wouldn’t work. “Those should be worth something, right? My contribution to your New America.”

Instead of correcting her wording as he might have done with anyone else, Adrian used the moment to pay back a little of what she’d just given him. “And what do you get out of it?”

She flushed. “The chance to teach a journalism class once we get settled somewhere.”

“You realize that’s a public vote because of the material?”

Cynthia shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket. “Why do you think I came to you? With your support, they’d agree to almost anything.”

He didn’t confirm or deny, but Adrian was pleased she knew that. Cynthia had been a Washington reporter before the war, a good one, and while she had only been in Safe Haven for a few weeks, she already understood how things worked. Then, there was Tonya. She’d been with him since Nevada, but still had no clue how to legally get what she wanted. “Deal. Maybe I’ll have more important things for you later. If you’re interested?”

Cynthia was instantly surprised, suspicious, and grateful. “I’d be happy to.”

He smiled at her, one of his genuinely beautiful moments that made her heart thump. Not a man in camp could compare.

“Anything else?”

She swallowed the drool, nodding. “Yes. I’d like to go to the mall across the street. I’m out of supplies.”

“Alone?”

Cynthia hesitated again, not wanting to tell him she hadn’t made any friends. She did have the interest of one of his Eagles, Jeremy, but he was on duty outside. He would never leave his post. “No one wants to walk in a blizzard for notebooks and pens.”

“It’s nasty out there. I might be able to find you an escort.” Adrian watched her hide the relief. He was glad to know the Ice Queen could feel fear. They had found her sleeping in a school bus, and she hadn’t hesitated to speak her mind even then, alone, with only one bullet left in the gun she hadn’t known how to use.

“That would be great. I’ll be ready when they are.”

He glanced at his wrist, wishing she wore less perfume. The office now reeked of flowers she’d probably never smelled in reality. “The truck leaves in ten minutes. Kenn and the Eagles are going out to collect our reserve. You’ll be expected to help. Do what you’re told.”

“No problem. Thank you.”

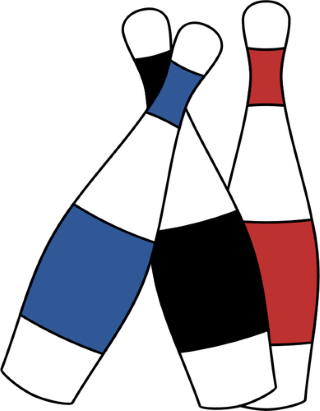
“Anything else?”

“No.” Cynthia left quickly, glad she’d heard good words about her future here, but also disappointed she hadn’t gotten anything new. She had no clue who he had been before and that mystery ate at her some nights. *If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll find out.*

Adrian made a mental note to reward Neil for the unknowing distraction, but Cynthia wasn’t going to give up because of a warning or even a mysterious possible offer somewhere down the line. Cynthia was going to keep digging; he would have to be careful, because that female *was* smart enough to figure out his puzzle if given enough pieces.

# Chapter Twenty-One

**Coming Together**

****

**1**

**T**he noise in the bowling alley was almost deafening, but beautiful to those making it. Pins fell, balls thumped and rolled, voices talked, laughed, argued. Arcades dinged wildly; music blared from the speakers. Snow fell in heavy sheets, blanketing everything. Other than the guards doing duty in snowy trucks, and the plastic hanging all over the inside of the alley, it looked like their old world. Adrian was pleased they had handled it so well.

Chris, Daryl, and Jeremy were on guard outside, all level two and uneasy. The noise was loud even through the muffling effect of the snowstorm; their lights glared in the darkness. If anyone was around here, they were hearing and seeing it. The Eagles kept a constant watch on the dark town and the bright bowling alley.

“Strike! Beat that, kid!” Adrian sat down to record his score as Charlie took his place on the sparkling, confetti covered lane. Zack had cut the canopies down before dinner. Adrian hadn’t wanted them trying to eat while the decorations hung over them like a neon sign that read *Your world is dead; you’ll never get this back*. The other paraphernalia had already been put in bags and tossed in the dumpster.

Adrian hid a wince as more pins fell. He had a terrible migraine. He longed to spend some quiet time in his silent semi, but it pleased him that everyone was happy. He wouldn’t tell them to tone it down for a while. They needed this, and right now, he was trying not to be skunked by a fourteen-year-old with the arm of a pro. The boy was better than Kenn.

Adrian frowned. *Where is Kenn?* He scanned the crowd, surprised when he didn’t see the Marine. Kenn liked to be the life of any party. When he wasn’t, he was working on things they needed. *Did he go back to the basement?* Adrian stood, meaning to send someone for him.

Heavy footsteps echoed over the noise. A ripple of unease ran through the camp.

“Adrian! Headlights!”

Jeremy and Seth ran toward him.

People moved out of the way; everyone stopped bowling. Strikes and cups fell unnoticed.

Adrian found Neil and Kyle in the twitchy crowd. When he motioned, the men rushed toward the front doors. Both their teams fell in behind them without being called. This was their job.

Adrian pulled the plug on the music. The silence was almost a relief. “If you’ve passed the gun class, form a line inside the door. Do *not* draw your weapon. Everyone else, stay behind them.” Aware of Seth on his heels, Adrian pulled on his jacket, then opened the holsters of both guns. *Just in case*. He was hoping for survivors, but the odds were high that they’d drawn a threat.

**2**

Kenn walked through the basement, checking cords and connections. So far, none of it was overheating. He heard the music stop and assumed Adrian had tired of the noise. He also noticed the lack of balls and pins falling. *Boss called it a night earlier than I thought he would.*

“All by your lonesome?”

Kenn spun, gun coming out and up.

Tonya liked it that he was dangerous. “Easy there, big boy. It’s the one ya been watchin’ when ya thought no one was lookin’.”

Responding to the sexy accent, Kenn holstered his gun. His gaze crawled up slender ankles to creamy thighs. “The party’s upstairs. And I’m no boy.”

Tonya sauntered toward him. “I’ve noticed.”

Kenn huffed at her, senses straining to hear if they were really alone. “What do you want?”

“I never got to congratulate you on making XO.” She wiggled a finger, other hand sliding her short skirt up.

Kenn didn’t hesitate.

Tonya melted against him, lips finding a sensitive spot on his neck. He lit up, arching against her.

Nose full of pot, whiskey, and woman, Kenn locked their mouths. He’d gone without for months.

Kenn’s jeans fell to his ankles. He groaned as Tonya’s soft hand closed over his hard flesh like a glove. His big hands tangled in her thick curls, pushing her to her knees.

**3**

“Where?” Adrian strode into the storm with Doug and Neil flanking, but he didn’t need them to point out what could only be the headlights of a big truck moving through the heavy snow. Adrian signaled to Doug, storing the fact that Kenn was still nowhere to be found. “Tell the doctor he has patients. Put up tents in the lea of the alley. Get some heaters in them. Have the cook start a fresh batch of meals.”

Doug was still scribbling the information as he and Neil left, dividing the list.

The semi pulled into the lot, weaving around deep drifts that were as hard as concrete blocks. The inside light of the rig was on. Adrian counted four middle-aged males crammed in, their hands in view. “Lesson three, Eagles. Move.”

Nothing happened for a second, then Kyle reacted, drawing his Glock. “Weapons out. Don’t shoot unless I do.”

The other eight men immediately dropped back to form a neat, wide V, aiming their guns at the windshield.

The driver reacted fearfully. Gears squealed in protest as he stopped the semi a good forty feet away, sliding a little in the thick slush.

Adrian said nothing, waiting.

Kyle motioned his team forward. “Secure and disarm. Go!”

They went in a hurry, like professionals from before the war. The truck was surrounded before Adrian finished grinding out his smoke.

**4**

“Damn, that was good. I wanna do it again!”

Kenn kissed her neck as his body twitched inside hers. He moved out and let her slide down the wall, mouth running before enough blood had made it back to his brain. “Later. We got lucky no one came down.”

Tonya hadn’t expected to be claimed right away, but his quick reluctance hurt her. The pain drew claws hunting a taste of his blood. “They’re busy in the parking lot, talking to the new refugees. He’ll wonder where you were, but he’ll understand leadership comes with...perks.”

Kenn barely kept himself from hitting her.

Tonya sensed it. She ducked under his arm, moving away.

“If I lost ground with Adrian, I’ll claim you just to make you pay. Don’t ever come between us!”

Tonya gave him a seductive smile as she tossed his shirt back. “I won’t. You gonna cum to me tonight?” She leered at his chest as he pulled on the shirt.

Kenn jerked her against his hard body, grinding his mouth on hers.

Her arms curled around his neck. *He knows how I like it.*

Kenn shoved her away. “Yeah. Here, late. I’ll bring a blanket.”

**5**

“Hi! I’m Chris. This is Tim, Carter, and Paul. We live here.” The man paused, bright façade cracking for an instant. “Or at least we did. Now we hide here.”

Kyle held out a hand. “Give up that shotgun and you can talk to the boss.”

Chris did without hesitation. He motioned the others to do the same. “Give ‘em up, boys.”

The other men were less trusting, but they obeyed. Without their guns, they all appeared scared, desperate. Tired eyes and thin bodies said they were.

Adrian greeted the men with friendly handshakes and smiles that hid disappointment. *Just* *survivors in this batch, no shepherds.* “I’m Adrian. Welcome to Safe Haven. You come in peace?”

All the thinly jacketed men nodded, but Chris was in charge; they let him speak. “You bet your ass. Peace and hope.”

Adrian was aware of Seth’s matching disappointment as he waited by the front doors with the other men who weren’t Eagles yet. Whomever the undercover cop was searching for, he sensed they weren’t in this group. Adrian felt a bond with him. “Then you’re welcome here. What do you need?”

Relief fell over Chris’s face. “Help, son. We need help.”

“We need food! We’re starving!” Paul blurted.

“I’ll beg if I have to.” Chris’s voice broke. “We’re dying.”

Adrian shook his head. “Not another one of you, if I can help it. We offer sanctuary, as long as you follow the rules. We consider ourselves a Red Cross convoy. We gather survivors while we search for safety. We travel four days out of seven, sometimes more.”

All of them bobbed heads again, relaxing a little at his words. Adrian was glad they weren’t a problem, but it confirmed he wouldn’t find any of his own kind in this group. His kind would have already taken charge and begun helping themselves, even if it was to control.

Neil leaned in, whispering.

The four townspeople shifted nervously as Adrian scowled at them. “Who’s in the truck?”

“It’s just our families.” Chris hurried to explain. “We couldn’t leave them alone while we came to see you. It’s not safe.”

“You should have mentioned them already.” Adrian gave Neil a gesture to watch the men as he moved to the rear of the long vehicle.

The locals followed at a distance, aware of guards who had yet to holster weapons.

“Eagles, what is part B, of lesson three?”

Kyle’s dismayed voice answered Adrian’s disappointed query. “Never assume cargo or storage areas are empty. Approach and handle as if they are harboring an enemy.” They hadn’t secured the entire threat.

“No harm this time, and while you’ve done okay, this won’t be considered a success.” Adrian put a hand on his gun. “Open these doors.”

*We just lost level three status. Fuck!* Kyle smothered his disappointment to unlock the heavy door and shoved it upward. He did a quick scan, then moved aside to allow Adrian access.

The reek of unwashed bodies hit him hard, but Adrian could tell the strangers had attempted to make themselves presentable. He studied their worried, hopeful faces, recognizing hunger but not starvation, need but not the desperation that had been alluded to. *Why the lie? Protection from raiders?* He could provide that. “Eagles, these are our newest camp members. We’re going to feed them, give them medical care, and protect them. In return, they’re going to follow our rules and help each other survive.”

The five women and three children were huddled on blankets on the truck’s dirty floor, with four elderly women sitting in blanket covered chairs. The oldest among them, her long hair almost silver, lifted a thin, arthritic arm. “Will you help an old woman up?”

Adrian and Kyle reacted at the same time, with Seth waiting on the foot rails to assist.

“Yes ma’am; so will any of us. Welcome to Safe Haven.”

**6**

When the truck was empty, Adrian joined Chris, who was waiting by the tailgate. The other males had gone with their families. “You lose your boys to the draft?”

Chris dropped his eyes to the left. “Yeah.”

Adrian frowned. *What else is he lying about?*

“Thank you for taking us in. I’ll make sure they behave.”

“No, you won’t. That’s my job now.”

Chris gave in quickly. “And thank you for that too. I thought I wanted to be in charge, but I’m not strong enough.”

“It’s my honor.” Adrian moved toward the fullest tent, glad to see the doctor wasn’t being overwhelmed. “Come on.”

Kenn appeared at his hip.

Adrian didn’t mention his tardiness. “We have twelve new members. This is Chris. Chris, this is Kenn, our second in command. There’s little he can’t handle. If you need something, he’s the one to talk to about it. Kenn, we’ll need names, ages, and occupations. They’ll need the medications John prescribes, a copy of rules, clothing, and sleeping gear for tonight. Chris will go along to help to get them settled. They’ll also need port-o-cans and kids to run errands for them–your boy too, if you’re okay with it.” Adrian paused to let him catch up. He saw the corner of Kenn’s shirt was untucked. *That’s why he was late.* If Kenn found a woman here, all the better. “We’ll sort out tent arrangements first. Double the sentries again, then tell everyone to go back to what they were doing. Lights out at 1am, XO.”

Kenn’s chin lifted. “You got it, Boss.”

Adrian’s other men, those who had been with him longer and wanted what was no longer available, would be forced to accept that he saw something in Kenn they didn’t–something they themselves were lacking. The desire for his approval and recognition would make them awkward with Kenn at times, but only Neil had spoken against it and not openly. Adrian had made his choice. Now, Kenn had to give him what the job demanded–everything.

**7**

The tired leader was back in the office hours later, writing in his journal. He paused at another creak of footsteps outside the open door, where over a hundred people were finally calm enough to sleep.

“You busy?”

“Nope. What’s up?”

Charlie swept the dim hall, then entered. “I heard something while I was shoveling snow…about the new people.”

The question was in his tone. Adrian nodded. “Tell me.”

Charlie stood in front of the desk, not sitting because he hadn’t been told to or invited. “It wasn’t just the draft. Their boys left to find help.”

Adrian added up the clues. “The adults tried to stop them?”

Charlie nodded. “Some of them escaped and died. They chained the others.”

Angry, Adrian opened his mouth without knowing what was coming out. “Should they be allowed to stay?” Once it was out, he didn’t take it back.

Charlie shrugged, aware that it had become his choice. “They’re sorry. They hope some of the kids might come back. They left notes about us.”

Adrian considered. Sometimes guilt would make changes where little else could, and sometimes instinct was all you had. The boy thought they should be allowed to have a second chance. Charlie would feel guilty if his words got them thrown out. “Removing a threat isn’t wrong.”

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t want their blood on my hands.”

“So you can’t be unbiased about them.”

Charlie shook his head. “Not really.”

“It’s okay. I’ll make those choices. It’s my job.” Adrian enjoyed Charlie’s quick smile of relief. He locked eyes with the teenager. “Is there something else? You can talk to me about anything.” Adrian was taking a substantial risk by pushing, but he needed more help.

Charlie wanted to trust, but the fear of Kenn’s reaction made him turn away without offering.

Adrian sighed, returning to the office.

Charlie nodded to Kenn as they passed in the hall, heart thumping. If he’d given in, Kenn would have shown up right in time to hear everything. He headed to his bedroll, wishing his mom was here.

Kenn set the mousetrap in the corner. He had to hitch up his jeans as he stood. He spotted Doug and Neil moving toward the basement door to do a second security sweep. The huge, limping redhead in the green army jacket was shaking his head in response to the tall, thin trooper. Kenn caught Zack’s attention.

Reading him easily–the career trucker now wore the clothes of a rookie Eagle trying to make level one–Zack trotted across the wide, dusty room. “Hey! Neil, wait up. I got a question about yesterday’s lesson.”

Satisfied there would be no unauthorized plotting done with his rookie’s attention on them, Kenn checked on Adrian, then returned to overseeing the new refugees. His mood remained good despite missing the rendezvous with Tonya. Kenn was confident his place here was sealed. Right-hand man belonged to him now–had all along according to Adrian, but the camp’s approval could make you or break you, and now he had it.

*I also have a new secret to hide.* There was no defense for what he’d done. If Adrian discovered the truth, he would be banished.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

**Defense**

**A close up of a coral

Description automatically generated**

Outside Versailles, Illinois

**March 5th**

**1**

**A**ngela watched as Marc slammed the hatch on his Blazer again. He was trying to get it closed over a full load of gear. “Can’t we do something else, even though it’s muddy? What can you teach me that won’t land me on my back?”

Marc swallowed his first thought. “How about a new weapon today, instead of hand-to-hand? We could try a knife or even a crossbow. I have one.”

“Okay. Knives are quiet.”

Before she could blink, he drew the blade from his boot and threw.

It landed deep in a nearby oak tree, handle vibrating. “They’re also deadly.” He pulled it out of the tree. “This is a K-BAR. Marine combat knife. You try.”

Angela took it and threw too quick. The knife bounced off the tree’s rough bark and skidded across the ground, landing in the dirt.

Bracing for a correction, she was relieved when Marc only got it for her and handed it back.

Angela slowed herself and tried to aim, but she was nervous with his big body standing behind her. The blade skidded into the dense undergrowth next to the bare squares where their tents had been set up along US 51.

“Sorry. I’ll get it.” She shifted out of his reach, wading through the sticker bushes.

Marc studied her, remembering a blizzard and their house of snow. That had really been the beginning of them, of stolen, stunning moments. He hadn’t forgotten any of it. *Has she?*

*No.* Angela threw the knife harder than she meant to, wrist twisting. It bounced off the edge of a different tree and flew back. The sharp edge hit Marc’s arm. Deflected again, it slid into the stickers as blood welled.

Angela gasped, retreating. “I-I’m so sorry! I’ll get my bag.”

She didn’t seem to hear him say it was just a scratch. When she came back out, he saw her hesitate and knew she expected to be punished.

“Can you slide your arm out?” She knelt at his feet to dig in the bag, tense body waiting for the blows to begin.

Marc did it quickly, not in pain despite the increased bleeding from the movement. The air was thick with tension.

When Marc didn’t get mad, it calmed her a bit. Angie let the doctor inside take charge. *If I do a good job, he might not hurt me.* “Bend here, please, and keep your arm up.”

He did what she said, observing her face as she tied an elastic band around his upper arm. Blood dripped from his elbow in scarlet splatters while she opened the sterile packages with an ease that said she’d done it many times. *She’s a nurse?*

Angela dumped water over the wound, then spent a moment examining the cut. She placed a large gauze pad over it, pressing hard. “Hold this while I thread a needle.”

Angela made five neat, overlapping stitches. As she finished, she became aware of how close they were standing. Her hands shook as she put on the medicated bandage. “I’m sorry. I guess knives weren’t a good idea.”

“We’ll keep working on it.” Marc smiled, tossing his torn coat into the open window of his Blazer. “I’ve gotten worse from new recruits.”

Angela stayed tense. *Kenny would start using his fists on me for drawing his blood, intentional or*–

“I’m not him.”

Her eyes flew up.

Marc shrugged. “Sometimes, I can read it. I know what you’re expecting, but that’s not me, not ever, for any reason.”

Angela allowed herself to open up a little. “I used to know that, but I… I’m afraid.”

“I’m going to keep proving it to you.” Marc forced a snicker. “What were you aiming at? A rain drop?” He went to hunt for the knife, enjoying her laughter. It was good, genuine. “So, how much medical training do you have?”

“I’m an MD.” Angela couldn’t help the defensiveness that had crept into her voice.

“A doctor. I never would have guessed. Didn’t you want to be a writer?”

“Yeah, but I needed something dependable. Then I realized I could help people who couldn’t figure out what was wrong.” Angela handed him a pain pill.

Marc dry swallowed without asking what it was.

“How can you be a doctor and a battered woman at the same time?” The question came out of Marc’s mouth before he could stop it.

Angela flushed. “People become masters of disguise. To do anything else means bringing the wrath down. And I had a powerful reason to do what he said–my son.”

“Wasn’t it a challenge to his…authority, for you to be a doctor?”

“Not when he got to take credit for it.” Angela pushed aside her bitterness to give him more details. “Kenny would say it’s because of our deal, that I had no choice. That’s partly true, but mostly, it was the money. He hated my name on the check, but he didn’t mind spending it on war games or a new gun. He insisted I finish my medical training. He said any woman of his had to *contribute*.”

Marc heard no anger in her voice; he was offended for her. “So, keeping your career was part of the deal, but not marriage?” Marc wanted confirmation of his suspicion. He hadn’t heard her say husband even once.

Angela shuddered. “He wanted it to be, but even back then, I understood if I said yes, he really would own me.”

Marc was unprepared for the wall of guilt her answer caused. *I left her to handle the world alone, pregnant. I’m a piece of shit.*

Angela scanned their surroundings instead of his guilty face. *Corn*. “You going to work out before we leave?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m ready to do it too.”

Marc said nothing when she began to set up the course, but his expression was full of questions.

Angela didn’t want to tell him *or anyone!* about her baby, but he would know soon. She wasn’t sure how well she was going to hold up under the routine he did every day, but they were about to find out.

Marc sensed her doubt. “Should you be doing this yet?”

She winced. “No, probably not.”

“Then why are you?” He frowned “You don’t think I can handle things?”

She scowled. “If I thought that, I wouldn’t have called. I have to get stronger and I can’t do that while I’m resting. Time is a luxury I can’t afford.”

Marc studied her, like he’d done with every man he’d trained, but inside, she continued to impress him. “Quit when you know you should. I do a hard run. You’ll need to build up to it.”

When she agreed absently, not listening, he waved a hand at the steady drizzle that had begun to fall. “After you.”

**2**

“You should go back now.”

The rain was coming down hard; the slick ground tossed up gooey brown sprays as they traveled the course.

“Not...maxed out yet.”

“Fine.” Marc picked up the tempo as he always did for the last ten minutes of his workout. He was surprised when she managed to keep pace. The situps and pushups had been hard on her, as were the meditation positions, but she hadn’t complained once. He’d enjoyed her quiet company.

Angela winced as she stumbled against a muddy rock, catching herself awkwardly.

“You okay?”

She nodded, not using her breath for talking.

He frowned. “You’re a very stubborn woman.”

The respect that laced his tone gave Angela the last bit of determination she needed to hang the full hour. When pain radiated through her abdomen, she hid it.

Marc knew she was struggling as they went over the end of the obstacle course, but he didn’t realize how badly until they hit the end and were done.

Angela shut her eyes, body cold, foreign. She swayed on her feet, hands going out to clutch at the nearest support.

Marc froze as her hand gripped his arm. He felt her legs fold...

Marc swung her into his arms, ignoring her feeble protests. *She’s too light. I’ll feed her more.* “Are you okay?”

She muttered something indecipherable against his shoulder.

“Angie?”

“...can walk.”

He ignored her, only putting her down when he got to the car.

Her hand grabbed at the handle for support; she missed.

“Angie!”

Her lashes fluttered briefly, then she was falling and he was scrambling to catch her.

**3**

Marc’s handsome face was the first thing Angela saw as she came to. His deep frown sent her to other waking moments of not knowing if the pain was over or the break had just ended. Fear flashed through her mind; her hand went for her gun.

Marc stayed still, waiting for her to wake enough to realize it was him and not her abuser.

Angela dropped her hand, controlling it. *Marc won’t hurt me*. *I have to believe that.*

Marc kept waiting for the fog to clear. She appeared weak; the heavy bags under her eyes were purple and black, making his heart clench. One of the things that caused her symptoms was pregnancy. *If she’s carrying her man’s child, this has just gone from bad to unwinnable.*

“I’m not.”

“Say it again and mean it.” Instead of the anger he wanted, unfathomable grief oozed off her in waves. Marc knew before she said it. There had been another child.

“I lost a son during the war.”

She’d been pregnant, but her man still hadn’t come for her. “Miscarriage?”

She nodded. “It was a lot to handle. I wasn’t strong…before.”

Knowing how much she must ache and burn inside allowed him to put her need in front of his fury. “You were alone?”

“Before, during, and after.”

Marc was sure she needed to talk about these things, and not just in her own mind. “You should have died too, right?”

Tears welled. Angela controlled herself, not telling him she sometimes wished she had. “I assisted in more than fifty births at the hospital. It saved me.”

Marc gave a comforting smile. “I’m glad.”

“Me too, sometimes.” She smiled back, wondering who would die when they reached Kenny. He wouldn’t miss the sparks. She stood up slowly.

“You should rest.”

“I’m fine. I just pushed a little too hard. I’ll ease into it from here.” She smoothed her curls down. “This first time, I just...” She hesitated, not telling him the ache to hold her baby was almost as overpowering as her fear. The torment had to have an outlet that accomplished something.

Marc finished it for her. “...had to do it all, like me.”

Angela tried to seal that gaping hole and failed. She was maintaining a kind of radio silence with her son now to keep Kenny from knowing she was still alive. The lack of contact was awful. “I needed to prove that I could.”

Marc snorted. “Not to me, honey.”

“No. To me.”

**4**

“I have to make a stop.”

“Copy, on your six.”

Marc wanted to tease her about the near perfect response, but he had car trouble.

They pulled into the deserted parking area of the Versailles, Illinois RV resort. Gravel crunched under the tires. The large lot was empty. Not a single camper sat on any of the concrete pads. Marc rolled to the main complex of shadowy cabins and sheds. He stopped near the largest building, recognizing an older spigot setup.

Marc got out and opened the hood, avoiding broken glass and piles of muddy rubble. Pockets of steam billowed from the hood of his Blazer.

Marc turned around to tell Angela to stand watch.

She was already doing it, with Dog pacing a wide perimeter around them both. Her face had better color, but her movements were still careful, as if she was hurting. He tried to hurry.

Angela ignored the rotting bodies–an old woman, young boy, and three adult males, all with bullet wounds–to sweep the traffic and trees, then the distant outline of yet another dead city. Nothing looked alive here, not even the bluestem prairie grass Illinois was famous for.

Marc broke the plastic end from his screwdriver and held the flat side against the top of the 6x3 water tank. Using two sure hits, he drove the metal shaft into the tank. Water came rushing out around the tool.

Marc got the jugs while Dog helped himself to a drink from the ground.

“Are those recent prints?”

Marc glanced away from the sign in the lot’s main office that wished them a *erry mas & ne year.* Heeyed the deep ruts. “Yeah. You can tell from the depth and clarity. Elements haven’t changed them much. They’re a day old at the most, probably only a few hours with the way this wind is blowing.” He frowned, noticing more tire tracks nearby. “Movin’ fast too or they’d have taken the water. Stay alert.”

Angie did while helping him collect the valuable liquid.

Marc scanned for trouble, then gestured toward the lifted hood. “Fill me up, just like yesterday.”

Angela was self-conscious, though proud she had learned something. As she finished adding the coolant, she wished it were more. They’d been together for weeks, but she had spent most of that time just regaining her strength and adjusting to his routines. A third of her journey was over, but she wasn’t anywhere near ready to face Kenny. “Can we do some shooting? With real bullets this time?”

They’d had to spend five days at the cabin, waiting for the rain to melt the snowdrifts so they could drive. As a result, he had only gotten to show her basic gun care and hand positioning. “Okay.”

Angela smiled.

Marc turned away. *Being a man of my word is hard.*

**5**

“Ready to shoot something?” With her help, it had only taken half an hour to set up a shooting range.

Angela gave him a rare, genuine grin, pointing at his bandaged arm.

He laughed. “I said shooting, not stabbing.”

They chuckled as he set up the last dozen empty Coke cans on a long, muddy log.

“Is your weapon loaded?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Check it again. Always look for problems. Try to expect them.” Marc held up his weapon, demonstrating. “Curl your finger a little more. Good. Hold it a bit higher. Now, see where you want it to go and put it there.”

Angela pretended not to be bothered by having him so close, but she couldn’t help but think maybe Kenny was around the corner–

“Angie?”

She tensed. “Sorry. I’ll pay attention.”

Marc tried a challenge. “Maybe you can’t do this.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I can. I will.”

He shrugged as if he had little faith, tone patronizing. “Aiming makes all the difference. Go on.”

Angela’s hands were shaking despite her efforts to be steady.

His sigh made her flush. Embarrassed, she pulled the trigger without aiming.

Marc moved behind her as the recoil rocked her back into his waiting arms.

The bullet slammed into the hood of his Blazer.

Marc dropped his cheek to her sweet-smelling shoulder. “The cans, honey. The cans!”

His breath on her neck gave her a chill. Angela eased out of his arms, waiting to be punished and still hating to be touched.

“Do it again.”

His tone was more amused than anything else. She moved back to him, not as afraid. If he hadn’t hit her for drawing his blood, what was a bullet in his car?

This time, Angela expected the recoil. She managed to keep her feet on the ground. The slug dug into the log, rattling the cans.

“Better. Aim a little above your target until you don’t jerk as much. Go on, empty it.”

Angela felt the zone this time, that moment when the gun was perfectly in tune with her hand. Cans flew off the log. “Yes! Third time’s a charm.” She reloaded.

Marc swept the area, impressed by how fast she had settled in. He hadn’t expected her to hit anything yet, though she had adjusted well to the size of the .357 during their dry fire sessions. *Challenge is definitely the way to calm her down.* “That’s great. I’ll see if you put my Blazer out of its misery, and then we’ll go.”

She blushed.

Marc grinned at her. “Accidents happen, honey. Don’t worry. This woman I was sleeping with gave me a–” Marc stopped at her stunned, pain-filled expression.

Angela marched away before he could try to take it back.

Marc cursed his thoughtless tongue. None of those women had compared to Angie. Even after all these years, she still made him feel more with a single look than anyone else ever had. It hurt to think their chance had come and gone. *What a hard, lonely future waits.*

**6**

They traveled west, both seeing the wrecked limousine on the side of the road, its plates (*J. Lo U NO*) smeared in reddish mud. As they rolled through miles of empty farmland, Angela caught a chill that quickly grew into a bad feeling.

They had made almost ten miles today, despite flooding that had kept them detouring. She should be happy. The sky was calm, the temperature was in the forties, and she hadn’t seen much in the way of damage or mutations here. All of it was good. Versailles appeared clear on the other side, and that was good too, but the feeling of danger was strong. Angela was torn, doubting herself. She said nothing to Marc, not wanting to raise an alarm without having an obvious reason.

Just before dusk, Marc pulled them up to an Amish schoolhouse surrounded by barns, sheds, and empty, weed dotted soybean fields. Lofty willow trees in front of the school hung over the long, white fence, partially obscuring a rustic bell. There were no homes in sight, only the barely visible outline of the city they’d come through.

Marc drew his gun at a shadow. A white rabbit darted from under the stairs. He relaxed.

The rabbit dove under a broken board in the decrepit shed behind the school as they got out of their cars.

In the moldy shelter, the hare drew up too late and was caught. Large hands broke its neck with a brutal motion.

**7**

Marc secured the one-room school, then scanned their surroundings again. There was a barn almost half a mile behind them, but nothing else. *We’re good.*

“I can take our stuff in, if you want to go check that coop we passed. I’m almost sure a couple of them survived.”

Marc lit up at the thought of fried chicken. “Deal. I’ll go after I set the disks.”

Angela got busy, smiling as he carried the heavier items to the porch for her, then set the alarms. It worried her to think of how close they might be by April.

“Stay, Dog. Guard.” Marc gave Angela a questioning glance, uneasy all of a sudden, but not sure why.

She waved. “I’ll be fine. You’ll pluck it, right?”

Marc slid behind the wheel. “That’s woman’s work!” He laughed at her mocking glower and was gone a few seconds later, leaving a trail of dust.

Angela looked around, suddenly scared. She shook it off and picked up a box to take in, telling herself she was jumpy, as usual. This time she was worried over nothing. *There are no open doors, no voices whispering. Everything is silent, dark. That means okay. ...right?*

A dirty man came from behind the barn, stalking with cool calculation. When he saw the man leave, he moved quick and quiet toward the woman. He held the dead rabbit in one large hand. As he entered the schoolyard, breaching alarms, he flung the meat by the wolf’s nose.

The animal went for it.

The man ran across the porch before the wolf understood the trick.

Angela jumped at the sound of the front door slamming. Something heavy hit it hard and yelped.

“Was that Dog…?” Angela froze, heart squeezing as death bells echoed in her mind. She sent out a silent scream for help, retreating toward the gun she wished she hadn’t taken off. “What do you want?”

The filthy mixture of man and nightmare came closer, making her skin crawl. His dead eyes told her he’d been alone for a long time even before the war.

“Pretty, pretty...”

Icy terror overwhelmed her. Frozen, all Angela could do was scream for Marc as Dog hit the door again and again.

Marc dropped the pecking chicken and threw himself into the Blazer as Angela’s piercing screams echoed through his mind. *Think, Angie! You have to think!*

Dirt and gravel spewed from his tires as Marc hit the gas, but he already knew he would miss most of whatever was happening. *I’m coming!*

Angela lunged for the gun on the table as the stranger shoved her to the floor. His nails ripped her shirt off one shoulder and sank into her skin, drawing blood.

He fell on top of her, pinning one arm under her stomach. She tried to roll over, but he shoved against her, hands fumbling with her jeans.

“Get off me!”

He punched her in the cheek and back, curling her into a familiar ball. His rough hands pulled at her pants as he humped her from behind, biting her neck.

He yanked on her jeans, ripping the zipper.

Angela cried hot tears of hate and shame as his hardness touched her bare thigh.

*Distract him! Get the gun*, her witch ordered.

Angela continued to grapple with him; she couldn’t reach it

*It will come to you*.

The man thrust against her. When he shifted to get a better position, Angela locked her ankles and was able to lift him enough to roll over into his surprised arms.

The man ground his nasty mouth against hers, teeth scraping her tender lips as he shoved between her legs. His hands grabbed at her shirt, ripping it again.

*Now!*

Angela extended an arm toward the table above her head...and curled the other arm around her attacker’s neck. She pulled hard, stealing his energy.

When the gun began to slide, they both heard it and glanced up–him in disbelief.

The man saw it falling and realized she would catch it, butt first.

Angela’s arm tightened like a band of iron around his neck as he tried to retreat. The witch’s furious red orbs blended with hers as the gun fell into her hand. “Oh, no! You wanted me!” She shoved the barrel against his throat. “You got me.” She pulled the trigger.

Warm wetness sprayed her.

The man collapsed. His blood ran over her neck.

Angela rolled him off, gagging.

Outside, tires slid to a stop; footsteps crunched.

Angela staggered to her feet, spitting, wiping at her bloody face.

“Angie!”

She wanted to answer but she was still gagging as she pulled up her ripped jeans. She stumbled to the door, jerking it open as Marc flew up the steps. She fell into his arms, coughing and crying as Dog streaked into the cabin.

“Angie!”

She clutched Marc’s shoulder, smearing blood onto his shirt. “He tried to hurt me! I shot him!” Her mind spun from the beating she’d taken. *I’m a killer now.*

Her battered face told Marc it had been a fight for survival. He swung her into his arms, taking her to the passenger seat of his Blazer. His rage increased upon seeing all the bruises, scrapes, and cuts on her hands, arms, face. Her clothes were ripped, shirt nearly off, hair wild, jeans ripped and undone. *How far did he get? Was she raped?*

“No, but I feel like it. Give me a minute, huh?”

Marc ignored her sharp tone as he slid her onto the seat; he dug towels and water out of the duffle bag at her feet. “Up, Dog. Guard.”

The wolf leapt to the hood, then to the roof as Marc locked and shut the door on her pale face.

He was only in the cabin for a minute to gather some of their things–the heater, the gun she had dropped. Marc was horrified at the death scene.

Marc came right back out and began hooking her Blazer to his. She didn’t need to be alone right now.

Angela got out of the vehicle, moving like she was sleep walking. She hadn’t cleaned up at all. Marc watched her take the one remaining gas can from the luggage rack. He was surprised by her strength as she dug a lighter out of her torn jeans and staggered back into the reeking cabin, tilting the gas can.

Bright flames shot up. Angela used the rest of the gas as she came back out, fire following. She tossed the empty can into the sweltering flames; she didn’t flinch at the explosion of plastic, though she was showered by hot sparks.

Marc stared. *This hell isn’t new to her.*

The heat where she was standing was beginning to scorch the ends of her wild hair when Marc finally took her by the arm and led her to the Blazer. He understood she’d needed to see it burn to have closure. “Come on, honey. Let’s get out of here.”

She didn’t respond, but she also didn’t flinch or resist when he put her in his passenger seat and shut the door.

A minute later, the cabin fell behind them. When she began to cry huge, silent tears, Marc shifted a roll of towels closer and left her alone. This was her first kill. He ached for her, remembering his own. He’d thrown up afterward until his stomach hurt.

“Stop!”

He hit the brakes.

Her door swung open in time to avoid the hot streams that flew from her mouth.

Marc put it in park, then got out to give her privacy while she emptied some of her pain. He watched the fog roll over a dark, foreign landscape where anything or anyone might lurk. *She was hurt on my watch. I’ll never forgive myself.*

Angela sat with her knees to her chest, sipping water and pushing away flash after horrible flash. She was hurting, horrified, ashamed, guilty, and still full of furious rage. *I want to go back and shoot him again!*

Her years of abuse had filled her mind as she was attacked. It had been Kenny in her grip when she pulled the trigger, always Kenny. In that instant, she had seen the true feelings she now held for him. If he ever hurt her again, she would kill him.

Angela shuddered as her attacker’s cold eyes slammed into her mind; she wished again that she could kill him twice.

Marc walked a wide perimeter. After a while, he heard sounds that told him she was changing, cleaning herself up. *Good.* She’d have to feel a little better with the man’s stink off her skin.

“Will you help me with my hair?”

Her voice was shaky. Marc moved to the jugs at her feet. “Sure. Hold the door and tilt your head back.”

She did it with a large, white towel around her naked body. He was shocked by her trust in him as he lathered her hair, face, and neck. He avoided her bruised shoulders, not wanting to make her uncomfortable.

Red suds soaked into the towel; pink water pooled at her feet as he clipped her clean hair up. When she got another jug, letting the drenched towel fall to the ground, Marc spun around and mentally recited the phonic alphabet. *Alfa. Bravo. Charlie. Delta. Echo.*

“Rinse, please.”

*Foxtrot. Golf. Hotel. India. Juliet...*

*Damn!* Marc poured the chilly water, her gasp pulling at his male side. He recited faster. *Kilo. Lima. Mike. November. Oscar. Papa. Quebec. Romeo...*

Marc saw her sexy outline under the water–pert nipples and creamy, water-flecked skin. He dropped the empty jug and the distraction attempt. She wasn’t in danger from him, but he didn’t need the severe case of blue balls that would come from stealing looks at her. There wasn’t a worse time for it.

**8**

Angela smoked, drank, and chatted as the dark houses rolled by, but her tone wasn’t normal. Everyone dealt with death in their own way. It was harder for someone who’d sworn an oath to protect life, but she hadn’t had a choice. Marc hoped she would realize that and not let it eat her up inside. Killing wasn’t easy, even for a Marine. He would help her if he could.

*Thank you for understanding, but I’ll be all right. I just need some time.*

Marc sighed miserably. Even her voice in his head didn’t sound right. “I’m sorry, Angie. I never should have left you alone.”

“It wasn’t your fault. You’re always telling me not to let my gun get out of reach. I should have listened.”

Marc said nothing, sure her weapon would never be forgotten again.

Angela put on a Pink Floyd CD and leaned back, eager to escape into sleep; she only got darkness for a brief half hour and none of it was comforting.

“Marc!” Angela jerked up, lids flying open. She stared around wildly, fingers dropping to the gun on her hip.

“It’s over, honey. He’s dead.”

She grimaced, wild feeling slowly fading. She lit a smoke with shaky hands. “I need to talk it out.” It was something Kenny couldn’t do for her.

Marc switched the music off. “You can tell me anything, Angie. You know that.”

She nodded. *I do.* “I thought it was you at first, when the door opened and then I froze, like I always do.”

The longer she talked, the guiltier and angrier Marc felt. He never should have left her alone. He should have swept the other buildings. *I should have been the one to pull the trigger!* All Marc could think of to say was the same thing his CO had told him after he’d finished throwing up. “He was the enemy. Don’t doubt that. This is war and he got what he deserved for his crimes. He should have made better choices.”

Angela let his words help her. When she shut her eyes this time, sleep came without dreams.

**9**

Around three in the morning, Marc pulled them into a far corner of Siloam Springs State Park, an isolated nature preserve. He wasn’t surprised when Angela woke the instant that he shut off the engine.

“Where are we?” She pulled her sweater on with slow movements.

“Couple miles from Stonington. I’ll set us up. Dog will stay here until I’m done.”

She leaned against the seat as he got out, hitting the door lock.

Dog took his spot.

“Marc?”

He stopped. “Yeah?”

“I don’t want to be alone. Y’know?”

Marc hadn’t planned on separate tents or vehicles again until her voice and eyes were back to normal. “No problem.”

Marc used his key to get in and out of the rear. He set up the small tent, then put the blankets and heater inside.

When he stepped to her door, she opened it.

She didn’t hesitate as she came out into the chilly fog and stiff breeze, but she stumbled and almost fell. Marc swung her into his arms. *Her face looks like the man used her for a punching bag.*

Marc took her into the tent, loving the curl of her arm around his neck.

Angela gasped in pain as images of holding her attacker this way flashed. *Holding him tight so I could*–

“Angie?” Marc had stopped. When she nodded against his shoulder, he got moving again.

For a brief minute, Angela was distracted from the pain in her mind by the man against her fingers, able to feel his strength as he ducked into the tent and laid her down.

He retreated too quickly.

She stopped the old Angela from asking if he still loved her. Her heart clenched as she covered herself up, shivering. She didn’t have to ask. She already knew and it changed nothing.

*Clink!*

Her eyes flew to his in alarm.

Marc pushed the heater closer to her as drizzle began to fall. “It’s just Dog, sniffing for his dinner. I’ll be right outside.”

Angela shivered harder, feeling small and alone as he left.

Half an hour later, Marc had placed three rows of disks, secured the area more fully, and was sitting outside the tent flap, finishing a smoke while beating himself up. It would never happen again. *If there’s danger from here on, I’ll face it, not her!*

Marc sighed, knowing he couldn’t make that promise, even to himself. This new world was a nightmare. He couldn’t protect her from all angles.

“I can stop being stupid, though.”

His mutter caused the wolf to stare.

Marc snorted. She would insist on doing a workout tomorrow. He had no doubt about that. She was stronger than anyone he’d ever known, and that included hardened Marines. *Because she’s already lived through worse.* *Her man will pay!*

It was dark, cold, and silent when Marc finally crawled into the bedroll. The wolf was asleep just inside the doorway.

Marc took off his coat and crawled in next to Angela. His matching Colts went under his pillow.

When he curled his body around hers, Angela relaxed against him and fell into a deeper sleep. Her fear of Kenny was overpowered by the need for comfort that only Marc’s arms could give her right now.

**10**

“Do we keep following?”

Dillan grunted, wrist aching with the rain. He was studying a wrinkled map while Dean fanned a fire to life. The cabin below smoldered hotly, so their smoke would appear to be part of it. They had been running a cold camp every night to avoid being spotted. Both men were ready for a hot meal and a strong cup of coffee. “They’re moving northwest, like every time they head out. We’ll be able to track them. He’s not covering their trail at all.”

“Back to Cesar, then?”

Dillan nodded. They had been following the couple, waiting for the right moment, but it had never come. The witch and her soldier were too careful. The one time they might have ambushed them while traveling, the two Blazers had stopped for a moment, then took a different path–like they’d known trouble was waiting.

Tonight, the brothers had been nearby, set to try again after dark. When the hunter had distracted the wolf and snuck in, they’d gotten even closer. It had only taken a few seconds to feel the power in the air and realize the woman was the only one coming out of that encounter alive. Dean and Dillan might have gone in anyway, if not for the single gunshot, which either meant the woman was dead and they had no reason to, or the hunter had given his life and the witch would be ready for anything. She had stumbled through the door looking like easy, terrified prey, but they knew she wasn’t.

The twins needed help. It was something they’d rarely faced, even when only a cell had stopped them from doing whatever they wanted. Now, a mere woman had hurt them, had made them feel fear. They loathed her for it.

“Where do you think the deformed bastard is?”

Dillan’s glassy stare went to the map, then checked his watch for the date, wincing. He had splinted his mangled wrist, and it was healing, but it would always be useless now. “He said every big town along 25. Maybe three days each, four on the bigger ones, skip every other, empty... He should be near Denver. We’ll follow Interstate 80 until we pick them up on the CB.”

“Or until we see smoke after a storm.” Dean stood up. “‘Cause where there’s a storm, there’s a Cesar.”

**11**

*Ccrrraaackkk!*

Thunder from the fading storm rattled the ground, shaking the tent.

Marc woke suddenly from his dream of thick smoke and desperate screams. *I’m alone.*

Surprised he hadn’t woken when she got up, Marc stepped out into dawn’s dimness, finding Angela by the open passenger door of her Blazer. Medical supplies were spread across the seat; she was using the mirror to clean the injuries on her face.

Dog was sitting nearby. He looked at Marc, expression concerned. *She’s in pain. Can’t you help her?*

Marc went to her, making sure she was aware of him. He took the alcohol pad from her trembling fingers, wincing when she winced, heart breaking at her pain. She didn’t seem nervous about his larger body, but he was careful not to crowd her as he applied the gel she held out. “Good morning, Baby-cakes.”

He saw her tears, felt the agony coming off her. When she tried to turn away, he wrapped his arms around her. “It’ll get easier, in time.”

Her tears fell thickly, but even in her misery, Angela noticed the body pressed against hers. Noticed it, and compared it to what she remembered. She retreated.

“You want to stay here a day or two?”

Angela sniffled, carefully wiping her bruised, swelled cheeks. “And do what?”

Not expecting the question, Marc pulled up a thoughtless answer. “I could teach you to hunt.”

He heard the words and braced for anger or more tears.

Angela gave him a tiny, rueful smirk. “Might as well. I just passed the gun test.”

They spent two full days at the preserve. Angela improved steadily, telling herself repeatedly that she’d had no choice. They passed the days working on defenses and then drilling on what she’d learned. Marc’s arms during the nights kept her nightmares at bay and his heart frustrated by the walls keeping them apart.

They were back on the road soon after, and then back to separate tents without a word spoken about it, but things had changed between them again.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

**The Future**

**A close up of an umbrella

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**T**housands of people were here. It was a joy to see.

They came to pay their respects to the man who had made their new lives possible. Groups were streaming in from all corners of the globe in an endless succession of happiness and grief. More were still on the way. The founder of Safe Haven was near the end of his time, but the vision he had created would live on through his people. The son of a traitor had given them peace, honor, and safety.

There were no jails, nor any need for them. There was no hunger, no pollution, no dying planet trying to kill them first. The methods he had used to achieve utopia were brutal, but forty-seven years after the war, America was flourishing again, and spreading back into the wilderness. Even the years they had spent in foreign lands had been ones of happiness and light–because of Adrian and his Eagles.

In the heart of Safe Haven City, surrounded by rolling farms and playing children, they gathered. Adrian would talk to them one last time, and they would listen well to his final words.

Weak, thin, and glowing with fulfillment, Adrian only spoke for a moment. A cheer echoed as he stepped proudly from their lives. It swelled from the arched walls around the stage and grew into a noise heard over more miles than anything since the Yellowstone eruption right after the war. It was a celebration of the hope that he had given them, the second chance to get it right. They would honor his memory by keeping America in their hearts. It was his last wish.

In the early morning hours, the happy dream faded, allowing restless minds to sleep easier.

Along Interstate 25, a man with hate in his heart snapped awake. His scream of rage brought men running to him.

“I will never let them rebuild! That bright future will never exist!” Cesar delivered a brutal kick to the girl chained at his feet. *I will sacrifice every son and daughter I own to prevent it!*

He kicked his slave again. “Get up! There is work!”

A short time later, a plump Mexican woman rode out on one of the few horses. The cries of her two young children reassured Cesar that she would do what he wanted. She would be missed here for her cooking skills, but at Safe Haven, she would be an invaluable tool waiting for his use.

Cesar’s army was drunk on their successful invasion of America, but the guerrilla captain understood confidence and courage wouldn’t be enough to defeat the man from his dream. The blond had been hard. Cesar recognized the future battle. When it came, he would be ready.

There was a feeling of importance around the woman now disappearing into the fog. Cesar stared until she was out of sight. Maria might be the key to that battle.

Cesar summoned his slaves to care for the two young boys now weeping for their mother. When his sons were older, they would also be sacrifices for the cause, as his other children had been over the years. The evil slave trader let out a battle cry. “Muerte a Estados Unidos!”

It was immediately echoed by his men. “Muerte a Estados Unidos!”

*Death to America.*

# Chapter Twenty-Four

**True Grit**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

Wyoming

**March 7th**

**1**

**A**drian woke with the feeling that something valuable had been stolen from him. He listened for the sounds of his camp. Tents flapped, dogs yapped, footsteps crunched softly, voices murmured. The sounds were there, normal.

He sat up, reaching for his smoking box. Clad in boxers, Adrian lit a joint, not cold but aware of the chill in the tent. His watch said it was 5:33am. It was time to get his busy day going. The list was almost double what it usually was. Everyone would be busy right up to the contest after dinner.

Adrian hit the joint hard and rubbed the sleep from his face. *My goatee needs a trim.* He coughed at the lungful of potent smoke. Tonya knew how to grow it. Too bad pot wouldn’t be allowed when they settled somewhere. If he let in one drug, the rest would follow. In the meantime, stashes and supplies would run out like everything else, forcing unhealthy habits to be broken without him having to be cruel.

Adrian inhaled harder, holding it until his lungs burned. He was tired and worried–his usual state since the war. It only took a few hits for him to feel the effects. He gathered himself, lower mind planning the day, fitting things together for convenience while his higher mind searched for those he had to believe were still on their way. *Maybe they’re already here. Maybe I passed them by.* *I need others like me!* *I can’t keep doing this alone!*

The leader let out a harsh sigh. He would keep trying until he was used up and beyond. He wouldn’t give up like his father had. Guilt rolled over Adrian. Behind it came the overwhelming need to right the wrongs that he could. Adrian got up, still listening to his people. They were the reason he worked so hard. He dressed fast, eager to be among them.

Pulling on his jacket against the chill, he stepped out into the strong wind. His attention went straight to the sky. Adrian frowned at the ugly look and feel of it. Something was racing their way. *Rain? Snow? Both?* He would have to use his gifts, something he only did here while the camp was sleeping.

Adrian did a sweep of the area. Only the guards were watching him right now. *Time to give them a little more trust.* He concentrated. *Show me!*

The wind gathered strength. A two-foot dust whirl rose off the dry ground, spinning toward him. It broke apart against his legs, covering his jeans in grit.

Adrian’s heart thumped. *A sandstorm.*

Kenn joined Adrian. He opened his notebook without being told, erasing his neat mental chalkboard for the day. He wasn’t sure what had just happened, but it gave him a flash of the determined woman on the way to her son. He kept his attention on the page so Adrian couldn’t read his guilt.

“We’ll have an hour. It’s moving fast.”

Kenn swept the area. The mountain view to the south was becoming obscured by a wall of sand racing toward them. Sandy wind was starting to beat on their tents, tarps, cars. The dogs were barking in an agitated manner; panicked sounds came from the livestock. Kenn’s gut unclenched from the boring resignation that had woken him. This wouldn’t be an average day. “I’ll keep ‘em rolling.”

Adrian lit a smoke, sorting details.

Kenn gave a negative gesture to a level two Eagle from Neil’s team who’d stopped nearby.

Jeremy kept walking at the denial, scowling.

“We have to roll in the camp by half a click. It’s too big to protect.” Adrian took the knife from his boot and knelt to draw in the dirt. He made deep marks to keep the wind from distorting it. “Put the mess in the center. Line seven rigs up on the redline in front of it. Pack them in as close as you can. Make the wire tight, with a bathroom camper on each end. The weight of the water will hold them better than a semi. These two ends here have to be right up against the corners of the mess, then line the other vehicles up behind, sideways, big down to little. It’ll create a dissipating barrier. Put tarps on the sides to wall it off. Tie ‘em to the trucks, but be careful of gaps. If they billow in the wind, we’ll be one big sail.”

Both men looked up at an odd whine to the wind.

A tornado of dust as high as a car slammed into them. The dirt map disappeared.

Adrian wiped his face with a gritty hand and continued as if it was still there. “Put the ends under the tires and heavier stuff. Make sure it’s well secured. Everything else has to be broken down and shoved into the outer trucks to add weight. Cover the livestock and the dogs. They go in the front.”

Kenn copied orders and the map.

People going by stopped to watch as the wind increased. The sense of something big about to happen was spreading.

“The camp in the center trucks?”

Adrian’s blade flashed through the dirt again, ringless fingers nicked, scarred. “Yes, here and here. Make the weight as even as possible. Do the best you can. One kit of possessions allowed. Put the stickup dome lights inside so we don’t have fumes or flames. Gear: goggles, boots, ski masks, orange safety vests. All Eagles will be on duty.”

Kenn finished writing. “What about the perimeter?”

The brown wall of sand was advancing noticeably. Excited voices echoed as people spotted what he and Kenn already had. Danger was coming.

“Only put guards in the front trucks. Anywhere else is voluntary. I don’t recommend the rear. Even in cabs, there could be flying glass and debris. Make it clear anyone crazy enough to do that had better bring the right equipment.”

Kenn wanted to volunteer for the credit, but he knew Adrian needed his help with the camp. Kenn hid a grin of excitement as he waved Eagles over. *I thrive on this shit. I can’t wait for it to start.*

**2**

The dust storm headed toward Safe Haven like a missile racing for a target. The sky darkened as it came over the last ridge, sending out fierce winds that ripped tent pegs from the ground. The wind shrieked; buildings popped and groaned.

Adrian’s stomach churned. He hated it that his people weren’t safe, but he loved the fury of nature. Nothing else compared. “Here it comes.” Adrian and three levels of Eagles stood in the much smaller mess. Thick telephone poles made great anchors for the tarps, blocking a lot of the grit. All the men wore the gear they’d been given, ready to assist wherever Adrian told them.

“Brace for impact!”

They moved to the center as the winds picked up, tarps slapping violently, and then the air came alive with tiny, stinging bits of sand that filled every inch of the rolled-in camp.

“Damn!”

“Look!” Kenn pointed to a faded red shed breaking apart as it rolled by in the thick grit. It barely missed the end truck.

The winds increased; dust burned its way through their masks. Men began to cough.

“Bandanas up! Use your shirts!” Adrian pulled his turtleneck over the bottom of his mask, struggling to stay on his feet as the storm engulfed them. The wind was awful, whipping, slapping, pulling violently. The air around the trucked-off camp exploded with flying debris of every shape and size.

*Crunch!*

“What the…?”

*Bang!*

The men by the mess truck stumbled at the impact as the rig was hit by the storm and pushed forward. The two trucks on the end kept it from going further. Dust flew up in monstrous clouds, filling the area in a blinding whirl of dark sand the guards could hardly see through.

Adrian pointed. “Get those edges shut! It’ll rip us apart!”

Men rushed to grab the ends of the snapping plastic, retying it to the poles. It became easier to breathe as the dust sank to their knees.

Adrian keyed his mike. “Check in. One, clear.”

“Two, clear.”

“Three, all good here.”

“Four, no problems.”

There were noises in the background of each truck that made Adrian unhappy. Crying kids, voices on the edge of panic, arguments. As soon as the last guard checked in, he hit the button again. “Turn your radios up, Eagles. Let them hear me.” Adrian knew his people needed good words and calm tones. “We’re ten feet from you, watching the storm. It’s unbelievable, scary. We can’t see anything outside the mess, but we’re hearing it, same as you. A lot of stuff is flying around, hitting the trucks. That’s the noise, but so far, everything’s good here. I repeat: We are 5-by, and so are you.”

A huge sheet of wood went tumbling around the edge of the far truck, just missing it. Adrian fought to keep that narrow escape out of his tone. “We’ll do bathroom breaks in groups of four from each truck, women and kids first, as usual.” He paused, growing hazy as he used his sleep charm. With adrenaline flowing so thick, it would only calm them. “I’ll be by each truck in the next few minutes. I know I’ll find card games going and people spending time together, not working themselves or others into a panic. This is nothing we can’t handle.” His voice deepened. “Nothing *I* can’t handle.”

As if to prove him wrong, wind whipped through the mess in a billowing gap, ripping the tarp free. They were covered in a vortex of spinning sand that tried to invade every inch of space available and space that wasn’t.

“Grab it!”

“I’ve got it!” Kenn rushed to the flapping tarp and hauled it down against the wind trying to pull it back out of his grasp.

Kenn was smirking. Adrian could feel it under the mask. *Is he ready for leadership?* There was only one way to find out.

Adrian waved men over to help. Their seven rigs of people were protected from the storm, but still vulnerable because they had no one on duty in the rear where the sand was hitting the hardest. Anyone could sneak up on them by following the wake of the storm and they wouldn’t know until it was too late. Visibility was nil, and the tales from the refugees they’d been picking up were a warning Adrian wouldn’t ignore. The slavers liked to hit during severe weather; they were only two hundred miles away as of last week, which wasn’t far enough. Sooner or later, Safe Haven would attract their attention. The pictures Kenn and Kyle had brought back from Cheyenne Mountain last week had indeed been worse than the other places. They’d been keeping a weekly watch on the large group.

Adrian signaled a handful of Eagles to start the bathroom breaks, hating the thought of so many people using just two campers, but there was no other solution in this wind. It had been his experience that sandstorms took their time to pass through. He scanned Kenn, seeing the excitement held under perfect control, the leadership rolling off him in waves. Adrian gestured. “Eagle Two has point. I’ll be around.” Adrian stepped out into the storm, leaving surprise among his army.

“Boo’yah!” Kenn’s grin widened. It was official now. *I’m second in command.*

Pulling his shirt up over his mouth, Adrian ran to the camp trucks first, calming, assuring, jumping with them when debris slammed into the trucks. He didn’t hurry the stops, understanding they needed him, but he didn’t let them cling either. They had to learn to stand on their own.

**3**

The storm was still raging when Adrian stepped out of the last rig of calming people.

He went to the animal area they had covered with sheets of plastic, yanking his shirt up to muffle the dust. He was unhappy with the sloppy job Danny and Zack had done. Sand was coming under the edges in small waves. Animals were coughing, pacing, chuffing.

“On a dark, desert highway, cool wind in my…” Adrian sang as he weighted each side with the heavy cages, adjusting the edges until the dust began to settle and the animals started to relax. “Last thing I remember, I was runnin’ for the door…”

The sand he’d already been blasted with gave him a rough rasp. Adrian grinned in the dimness of the vibrating plastic dome. Kenn wasn’t the only one who felt alive when confronting danger.

Adrian marched to his semi, holding his breath. The winds here were so strong that he had to punch his way through with low, powerful steps. Doing what no one expected despite all he’d done for them in the beginning, Adrian stayed in his rig at the rear throughout the storm. He had secured the lives he needed to. The camp was in Kenn’s capable hands, allowing him to ride out the fury in his truck, marveling at the unchecked power.

Adrian concentrated, opening a mental door he hadn’t used in a very long time. His calls to bring people in had always been a part of his life, but this was a warning. Power blasted from his truck and spun through the area in a thick wave that lifted hair on necks and made stomachs churn. Anyone hit by it would know danger was coming even if they didn’t know exactly what it was.

Adrian was one of three men to take the drag position. Seth, who wasn’t an Eagle but wanted to be, and Kyle, were on either side of him. The cop and the mobster protected him while he guarded his camp. Neither of them talked about it later, not even to each other, but they both heard the warning he sent. It didn’t go over the radio but rushed out in powerful mental waves designed to get ahead of the storm. It rang through the air and into their heads until the urge to go to Adrian’s truck had them both fighting tight grips on door handles. There were times later when both men doubted themselves, but at night, while watching their leader do rounds after a twenty-hour day, they would think about it and admit the truth to themselves. He had tried to save survivors in the storm’s path; he cared enough to risk using his gifts to help survivors he didn’t know! He wasn’t like the leader from their old world. Adrian was special.

The storm blew around Safe Haven for hours, forming tiny cities of sand that vanished as quick as they appeared. The Eagles handled themselves well, rushing to anchor tarps, secure trucks, and comfort their people during the nonstop bathroom breaks. When the winds finally began to die down, everyone was glad–even those who loved the excitement.

It was almost lunch when Kenn decided it was all right for the camp to come out. The Eagles noticed Adrian let him make the call. Safe Haven had an XO.

Adrian took in the damage with worry in his heart. The landscape had been completely altered. Nothing was the same. Piles of brackish sand in feet-deep drifts covered ripped tents; thin grit blanketed everything, including his army. The damage was extensive, total. *How many more lives did we lose?* “Eagle Two will keep point. Everyone else, shift.”

Kenn nodded at him from across the camp, then motioned Seth to go with Adrian on his rounds. In time, Seth would be one of his too, Kenn hoped, like Zack. No one else knew Seth was Adrian’s undercover guard. He was good, and someone had to do it. Adrian had to be protected.

Kenn knew what his boss wanted, and he knew how to get things done. Three hours after the storm was gone, Safe Haven looked like it hadn’t been hit. It was a stark contrast to the destruction outside the perimeter. The camp was full size again, re-taped, clean, and running normal.

Adrian was pleased. *We’re getting stronger.*

**4**

Adrian came from his tent just after dawn.

Kenn fell in with him.

“You look tired.”

“I’m good.” Kenn didn’t offer any details as he opened his book. He had dreamed Angie was here. After that, sleeping again had been impossible.

Adrian surveyed the three-foot piles of sand that were now their perimeter. The caution tape had ripped away during the night. “I need Seth and Mitch around nine thirty, but make sure he doesn’t leave the radio unattended again. I need ten minutes with the doctor at noon. Then we’ll do a lesson with the rookies. We’ll have a little surprise waiting for Kyle and his team right after that.”

Kenn nodded, copying notes. Adrian had sent Kyle out following the storm to do a recon southeast. Adrian wanted to know if the slavers were closer, and of course, to collect any survivors.

“We’ll keep it simple. Use the laser tag vests.” Adrian ignored the stomach wanting toast with heavy butter. His people ate before he did, and they were low on bread. They didn’t find much flour. “We’ll need crews to clean up after the contest and to help with the targets during. You’ll have to dig through the schedules that end today to see who already has their hours in or has a shift tonight. Set the contest up like last time, over in that softball field. Those not shooting will stay behind the gate.”

Adrian paused to sip his coffee, studying the line where Kenn’s boy was waiting. All his people appeared healthy, normal. They’d been lucky to have so few medical problems after spending so much time on sour ground. They had suffered a couple deaths in the last weeks, from heart failure. An EKG machine was another item on his growing list.

“That it?”

Adrian snorted, watching the lines grow as more hungry souls came to the mess; the noise levels increased. Coughs, moans, groans, laughs–to Adrian it was the beautiful sound of normal life continuing. “Here’s some FND work: a faster mess that has them in line for less than five minutes, for both food and drinks.”

Finished writing, Kenn picked up Adrian’s cup. “Refill?”

“You know it.”

When Kenn moved toward the line, Charlie slid by and put a small plate in front of Adrian. He kept moving toward the table he shared with Timmy and Mike, two of Zack’s teenage boys.

Adrian stopped him. “You busy later?”

Looking furtively at Kenn, the boy came back toward Adrian. “No. Do we get new schedules tomorrow?”

Appearing absorbed in taking the plastic from his toast with heavy butter, Adrian studied Charlie. He’d spent time thinking about their talk in the bowling alley and concluded this quiet boy held the magic, not Kenn. Kenn claiming it to protect the child was almost an acceptable lie. *Almost*. At least it explained why Kenn had flat out refused to use his gift again when Adrian mentioned it a few days after they left the bowling alley.

“Mug of coffee, fresh pack of smokes, a cardboard box this big.” Adrian demonstrated with his hands. “Bring those things to my tent around ten thirty. We’ll do rounds; you’ll get your schedule then.”

Charlie agreed eagerly, scuffed shoelaces dragging through the inch of sand covering the mess floor. He shifted from foot to foot. “You need anything else?”

Adrian studied him from under lowered lashes. “Yeah, a ton of food and water. You get an idea, make sure I’m told.”

“You know it.”

“He knows what?”

Charlie flinched.

Adrian waved him on as Kenn returned with two full cups and sat down. “Make-work. Kids need to be kept busy.”

“True dat.”

“We have to pick the next list of places to search. Bring the maps by after lunch.”

A short time later, Adrian sat in the lea of his tent at a folding table, with notebooks in front of him. He got started making schedules for the next week, glad he wouldn’t have to spend the extra hours trying to figure out who didn’t have all their shifts in yet. As of midnight, everyone was back at zero. He worked on them in alphabetical order, trying to fit the person to the chore by their skills. He listened to people as they walked by, approving of the pants and long sleeves most of them were wearing. Both of John’s suggestions had been accepted.

“Those eggs was nasty, but it’s the best meal I’ve had since January.”

“Glad we’re back on full water rations.”

“Um. Imagine a hot bubble bath.”

“Girl, a hot shower would be heaven.”

“Yeah, that’ll happen. It uses too much water.”

Adrian flipped to a rear page and scribbled a note, then resumed working on the schedules. What his people wanted, they got. It just wasn’t always when they wanted it.

**5**

Mitch arrived ten minutes late to give the CB updates in person.

Adrian handed him a sheet of paper, still not sure he’d chosen the right person for this job. They had tested a dozen men, but only this sloppy drunkard hadn’t flunked. “This is how I’d like the radio run from now on. What we put over the air matters.”

The red-nosed man gave it a quick read. “Sure.”

“Kenn will be installing a more powerful CB system in the next week. When he’s ready, move to another truck until he’s done.”

“You got it, A-Man. I’ll catch you later.” The hungover man left, eager to use the bolder system.

Adrian was relieved when the ass kisser was gone. He hated dealing with someone like Mitch, but it couldn’t be helped. He suspected Mitch was too good to waste. Adrian planned to leave him on the radio until he knew for sure.

When he was gone, Adrian gestured Seth over and began gathering his papers. “Long wait.”

Seth gave a tight smile, taking off his cap as he sat down. “I don’t mind waiting. It’s better that we’re alone anyway.”

Adrian finished off his cold coffee with a grimace. “Because you want to know why I passed you up for rookie level again, but you don’t want anyone to know you’re questioning my judgment?”

Adrian’s words were brutally honest. Seth nodded, not sure if he was ready for the truth he’d come for, or if the things he needed to say to this man, who he respected above all others, would get him asked to leave.

“Because I’m not sure about you yet.”

The cop’s hurt eyes flew to his.

Adrian made a dismissive gesture, thinking of his surprise when it had been Seth who joined Kyle during the storm, not Neil. “Not like that. I’m not sure where I need you the most.”

“I know where I belong!” Seth clamped his mouth shut and waited to hear the conversation was over.

Adrian didn’t speak for a minute. Seth was a good man, but he had a short fuse, which was not a great trait for a guard. “Have you thought about something else? There’s a lot we need.”

“Yeah.”

Adrian examined the man. Seth was usually the first one at the tape to search through new refugees, never skipping it. His devotion had gotten attention. Adrian hadn’t been surprised to find out the undercover cop had been planning to apply to the Secret Service Academy. He’d wanted to protect the President. In time, Seth might still get that chance. “Why an Eagle, Seth? Why does it matter so much?”

Surprised at the easy opening, the thirty-year-old told the truth. “Because you need my help and I need to serve. Because there’s no one watching your six; I want the job.”

“You sure? That may be very dangerous in the future.”

Seth nodded. “More than anything. It’s what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Adrian studied him for another long moment before shrugging as if he wasn’t sure the cop could do it, though nothing could be further from the truth. The skill was there. It was the man behind it that gave him a hinky feeling. “I’ll change your schedule, but keep in mind it takes more than good aim and confidence.”

“I belong there.” Seth stood, holding out his hand. “Thank you.”

Adrian shook with him. “I hope you find what you’re hunting for.”

Seth’s expression darkened. “So do I.”

As he left, Adrian noticed Charlie coming his way, right on time and hands full.

“What do you think about him?” Adrian indicated Seth.

Charlie shrugged. “Seth’s okay. He just never found his little girl. He’s still upset.”

Adrian didn’t comment. He had to be careful how he handled Charlie. As for Seth, he was another above average survivor trying to become a shepherd. Adrian would help him make that transition, but where were those who had been born to lead? “I’ll put this stuff in my tent. Then you can go with me on rounds.”

Charlie wasn’t sure why the boss wanted his company, but he was eager to help if he could and be seen doing it–like everyone else here.

Adrian folded up the table, taking it and a chair to the flap.

Charlie carried the other chair, but didn’t go inside because he hadn’t been invited.

Adrian nodded his thanks. The boy was well trained, and it bothered him, a lot. “Grab that box and come on.”

The first stop was the mess, where thirty people were in line or already sitting down to canned chili, crackers, and applesauce.

Adrian stopped near the flagpole. “Raise our colors.”

Charlie and Adrian saluted, as did others.

Adrian searched for those who looked like they’d done it before. It might mean they had a military background. He spied two, maybe three, and added them to the list of interviews for the next set of Eagles. If they still had the desire to serve, he had work for them. He wouldn’t respect them as much if they didn’t. In the Corps, in for life, but he understood. He wouldn’t treat them differently.

Kenn fell in on Adrian’s right as they moved on.

Adrian saw Charlie drop out of eye but not earshot. He pretended to be involved in kicking a path through the sand that had blown back in during the night.

“I have a great idea.” Kenn handed Adrian a slip of paper. “That’s our next supply run. It could be everything we need for a while, depending on how lucky we get.”

Adrian clapped Kenn on the arm. *I should have already thought of this.* “Great, is an understatement. Kyle’s men will be your escort. Leave tomorrow. I’ll need a list of who and what supplies by morning.”

“You know it.” Kenn wrote it down.

Adrian saw satisfaction flash across Charlie’s face. *Did the boy help Kenn?* It was a brilliant idea. Over half of America’s goods had been transported by rail, and the massive boxcars would still be sitting there, just waiting to be emptied. Some, say half, would already be cleaned out or damaged, but the rest would be on the tracks where the EMPs or lack of fuel had shut them down. “What else?”

They moved to the parking area, Charlie trailing.

Kenn stored his notebook. “Last thing. I know you do fuel-ups by yourself on days when we’re shorthanded, like at the end of the month. I thought maybe you could change things a little. Like for the Eagles to graduate to the next level, they have to put in hours on a teaching class. That would free up six or seven short shifts.”

“We are always short ten men.”

Kenn ran a beefy hand over his short black hair as the gritty wind ruffled it. “Give me one of the extras. That’ll leave you two.”

Adrian snorted. “Two, instead of ten. I won’t know what to do with the extra time.”

“Sleep.”

They shared a grin of commiseration. Both of them averaged less than five hours a night.

“I’ve given your boy a fulltime job.”

Kenn was okay with Charlie being distracted. The whining about his mother was relentless. Kenn had found himself spending as much time away from the sulky teenager as he could. “He’s a hard worker.”

“I’ve noticed. Hey, did you take the hand-to-hand test yet?”

“No.” Kenn didn’t remind him they’d both passed one in basic training. What had happened before the war was mostly that–before.

“Doug’s class should still be going. Tell him to give you a quick run. Watch for a bit first, so you know what you’re up against.”

Kenn snapped a quick salute and left.

Charlie moved to Adrian’s side. He felt sorry for whoever Kenn was cursing in his thoughts. When he did that, someone (*usually my mom*) ended up bleeding.

Adrian didn’t care about Kenn’s mood. Kenn couldn’t help him teach the guards unless he was willing to go through the same things they did. Kenn wouldn’t have his own team of Eagles. He would serve the boss instead, but he still had to do everything the teams did to help teach them. *A little less confidence for the match tonight won’t hurt either*. Kenn was sharp. He’d only lost last time because the wind had gusted at the wrong second and ruined his shot. “Come on. Bring that box.”

Charlie did, clamping down on the request for his schedule that wanted to fly out of his mouth. Adrian would give it to him. Unlike most adults, he never went back on what he said.

**6**

An hour later, Adrian was almost sure the railyard had been the smart, observant boy’s idea. The magic fate had hinted at was already here; it had been for a while. It was just too young, too raw, to be very useful yet.

Charlie frowned as they moved to the mess line for bowls of soup and fresh biscuits. “What’s this box for?”

Adrian grinned at him. “I thought you’d ask long before now. Line it with a garbage bag and put a note on it. *Food only!* Set it by the cans. It’s for the pregnant dogs.”

Charlie finished and joined Adrian at the table. The males ate in silence, subtly feeling each other out.

Excited voices echoed, causing people to gawk.

A small group of men came by, helping Doug toward the medical tent. His face and shirt were bloody.

Adrian snorted. *I underestimated Kenn. I won’t do that again.*

A second group of noisemakers arrived a couple minutes later, Kenn in their midst.

“Damnedest thing I ever saw.”

“Shoulda seen it!”

“Two hits! Just two hits!”

“Broke it. I heard it snap.”

Kenn was grinning as they got in line.

Adrian glanced at Charlie, seeing how he’d tensed. “Ready?”

The boy immediately got up.

They slipped out of the mess before Kenn was halfway through the long, loud line.

Their next stop was the new livestock trailers, and the even newer veterinarian, Chris. The Utah man had been out of the QZ for a week, but he’d been hard at work most of that time–alone, because of his surly attitude and smart mouth.

“Anybody home?”

Movement echoed from inside, but not an answer.

Charlie lifted his hand to open the faded white door.

“Not a good idea, boy, but you do what you want.”

Charlie dropped his hand. They turned to find the tall, thin veterinarian coming from a nearby tent. His neat white coat and handsome face didn’t hide the frosty attitude of a loner.

“Star’s in there giving birth. She’s not in the mood for company.”

Adrian stepped over to him. “You see the pups yet?”

Chris tossed a small, white package at Charlie. “One. It’s normal as far as I can tell. When she’s done, I’ll knock her out and run the blood work.”

“Good.” Adrian denied the offered envelope. “That’s Kenn’s job now. He’ll be by.” Adrian focused on Charlie. “What’s your job that matters?”

Charlie smiled. “I’m a dog handler. Or at least I will be.”

“And do you know why this is a job that matters?”

Charlie’s brow furrowed. “No, sir.”

Adrian was pleased. Charlie would end up being very helpful in the future. *He reminds me of*…Adrian stopped the thought. He wasn’t allowed to be distracted by it until they hit Arkansas, and that was still a lifetime away. “When you do, come talk to me. In the meantime, Chris is your boss , so pay attention.”

Charlie snapped off a salute. “You know it.” The smart teenager approached Chris with his hand out. “Hi. I’m Charlie, your new slave. What should I do first?”

Adrian chuckled.

Even the stern vet hid a smile. “That’s a real good start. Put on the clothes and come into the truck. I’ll have her chained up by then. Today, we help dogs repopulate the earth.”

“Cool!”

# Chapter Twenty-Five

**Cool Control**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**A**drian looked up at movement in the gritty sky. An eagle flew over the camp, swooping in odd circles as if it was lost. Adrian mourned the bird and the country it unknowingly represented. Like the eagle, America wasn’t doing well.

Feeling weighed down by the burdens he was carrying, Adrian went to the medical area. He wasn’t happy to discover all the seats empty. People were afraid to hear what might be wrong. Unless he thought of another way, he would have to enforce the testing law.

“Coming in.” He ducked inside. Adrian chuckled at the uniformed doctor and nurse kissing in a dim corner.

They parted slowly.

Adrian smiled when Anne left to give them privacy without being asked. “Guess you’ve been a good boy.”

John was grateful. “Me and you both. She’s glad we came here. It does my heart good to see her happy.”

Adrian perched on a stool, noting the slight shake of his hands as the stocky man sat across from him. “I’m glad too, John. We need you both. I guess by now you’ve pretty much got things figured out.”

The doctor shrugged. “Enough to know we came to the right people, the right leadership.”

“I appreciate that. There’s a question I need to ask. Any idea?”

John agreed without hesitation, glad he could. “Yes, and you have it. We’re with you. *I’m* withyou.”

Adrian handed him a glossy black notebook and an envelope from the unusually light inside pocket of his jacket. He was used to it being full of papers to decipher later. “These are some things I need answers for. I’ll get the equipment; just tell me exactly what you need. Most importantly, this stays between us.”

John took it, slipping his glasses on to read. “These are smart questions. I have some ideas I’ve wanted to try that might help with this, especially treatments. I’ll need specimens.”

Adrian moved toward the flap. “I have a few coolers in the rear of my semi. I’ll tell Kyle to give you access.”

As he left, John hid the paperwork. Adrian was being careful. He knew how to sing to his herd and get things done. The doctor was sure their young leader bent out of shape would be a sight to see.

As Adrian left the medical tent, Kenn joined him. “Kyle is three hours out. Mitch just talked to them.”

“Good. He say where they are?”

“No. Call them back?” Kenn made a note to never give the same answer again. From now on, he would gather all the information.

“No.” Adrian climbed under the broken fence, moving through the sand he’d had two boys rake and clear of debris. The dust storm was a burial for those who wouldn’t otherwise get one. “Game?”

Kenn shrugged, a bit disappointed that Adrian hadn’t said anything about him beating Doug. “If you like.”

Adrian dug through the dusty but otherwise untouched box of sport equipment they had put out this morning and came up with a football. “Go long.”

Kenn took off running.

Adrian threw the ball high and hard, hoping to draw some interest from his people. These games were good for them, but hard to get going. Most of the refugees kept to themselves as they dealt with their grief, so he scheduled regular times for things like this. They needed it as part of their recovery.

Kenn hurled the ball with a hard spin that made Adrian pay attention. For the next few minutes, he left the heaviness of leadership on the sidelines and lost himself in fun. The passes were hard and long, the catches punishing. The echo of their laughter and taunts drew people. A small crowd slowly gathered. When there was enough for teams, Adrian waved them in.

He and Kenn were the quarterbacks; it got rough from the start. Kenn, who still struggled to hide his true nature, slammed his way through three other players, knocking them aside to run by for a score.

“If you bleed, you’re out. Eagle Two’s team has six points.” Adrian smiled coolly. “Our turn.”

Adrian’s team let out a shout of approval.

The game became an outlet for them as they tripped, shoved, elbowed, and harassed each other.

It brought more people who were sensitive to loud noises now. When Adrian glanced up a short time later, nearly fifty camp members were watching, with about half waiting to play.

“Time out!” Adrian signaled Kenn over as he headed for the sidelines, stiff wind cooling his sweaty skin. “Pick your replacement. We have a level test to give.” Adrian threw the ball to Zack, knowing it would please Kenn. “Take my place, will ya? I’ve been knocked down enough.”

Everyone was laughing as the two men left. The leader had been tripped and hurried, but he hadn’t hit the ground even once due to great protection, deft footwork, and respect.

The game continued behind them.

Both men were pleased. Kenn, because his side had been up by twelve points when they stopped. Adrian because he had gotten his people to come out of their shells for a moment. “Gather the level ones. Seth, too. Send ‘em to that barn half a mile down the road; have them put on the vests. Neil is a supervisor, not their team leader. We’ll find out who that is today. Their mission begins with securing a 200’ perimeter and staying out of sight. If anyone sees them leave camp, they fail. You can meet me at the house next to that barn in half an hour.”

Kenn gave Adrian a paper as he left. It was his first attempt at tests like these, though he had worked with *the man* before the war. Nobody had been better than Marc Brady at high casualty ambushes.

Adrian gave it a quick read, then put it away, going to the guard on the parking area, Daryl. The level three Eagle wasn’t out of camp with Kyle. “Anyone come in?”

The tall, thin football coach sighed. “No, it’s all quiet.”

Adrian grunted, not showing his disappointment. The magic he needed wasn’t coming today. “Kenn will be by for the paperwork. That’s his job now. When’s Kyle due?”

Smothering a frown, Daryl checked his sheet. “Little over an hour.”

“Great. Let’s give them a call. Message is to put on the vests and pay attention. Mission objective, shake my hand to pass to level four status.”

Daryl keyed his headset, one of a dozen that Kenn had upgraded this week. “Base to Eagle Four.”

There was a few seconds of silence, then Kyle’s calm voice echoed, “This is Four, base.”

“I’ve been instructed to tell you to put on the noisemakers and look alive before you hit camp.”

“Copy. What is the mission objective?”

“Physical contact with Eagle One.”

“Copy. Four out.”

Daryl did a quick scan of the dusty landscape before turning to Adrian. “Can I help?”

“Absolutely. You’re the instructor, then the hostage. Location is the barn half a mile back. The rookies are going there now. Go and entertain them the way I did at your first test.”

Daryl grinned at the memory and the responsibility he’d been given. “You got it.”

Adrian slipped into his truck as the guard left. The leader changed clothes, made contact with the next shift coming on, then snuck away to play with his army.

**2**

Adrian and Kenn reached the dusty farmhouse at the same time, both easily avoiding the level one Eagles clustering behind the sandy barn. Daryl was nowhere in sight as the small group of men talked for a minute, with Neil refusing leadership as instructed. When the rookies advanced, Adrian saw it was Seth who led them.

The small team swept the barn and shed but avoided the house, as Adrian had known they would. When they disappeared into the barn, he and Kenn moved to the long porch of the farmhouse to observe the show and watch their surroundings.

This was a draft area, with wrecked army trucks, uniformed dead already stripped of their weapons, and doors kicked in, but there were no longer dried bloodstains, and the charred frames in the distance were mostly covered in sand. Thanks to the slight sloping hill, the camp’s view was blocked, but Adrian hated it even as he used it. To be out of sight was to feel out of control.

As he and Kenn watched, Daryl, with hardware on his back, slid behind a tree near the barn’s blind side. He edged around the corner to the front doors and picked up a 2x4 from a tall stack along the faded cowshed. He slid it into the front door handles, blocking an easy escape without drawing attention. The men inside were peering through the single window of the second-floor loft, unable to see anything below the overhang. Without a guard posted outside, Daryl had full access to the building.

Daryl unslung and hefted the grenade launcher to his shoulder in one smooth movement, entering their line of sight as he aimed at the window.

Faces ducked; men yelled a late warning as he fired.

“Incoming!”

“Get down!”

Glass shattered. A loud hiss of smoke echoed as the canister exploded in a cloud of gas. Everyone bolted for the blocked doors, shoving and throwing themselves against wood that wasn’t quite rotten enough to break.

Adrian and Kenn joined Daryl in front of the barn as thick, gray smoke rolled through the broken window and from under the molding door.

“Door’s blocked!”

“Shoot us out!”

“Can’t see!”

“Someone light a flare; do it now! Everyone else, shut up!”

Immediate silence came, then that same assertive voice echoed. “There. Up and out the window. Move! Alex, Jack, you two go first to provide cover.”

Adrian identified Seth’s voice this time.

The men began climbing out, dropping from the loft’s overhang into the thick sand. Everyone had a laugh at the sight of Adrian holding up his watch.

“That beats the last team. New record! Gather around.” Adrian lit a cigarette, noting Seth was now the center of his men. *Good.* “Eagle Four is due through here in thirty minutes. Your mission is to keep that team away from me. I’ll be somewhere in the house. Daryl is your hostage. He goes in the middle of the road. Set the rest of it up as you will. When the vest goes off, you’re out. Questions?”

There were none.

*That’s a mistake they won’t make next time.* Adrian turned to Neil. “Who took charge after the smoker?”

“Seth.”

“You’re the leader for this test. Seth is your second in command. Weapons go under the wheelbarrow. Move ‘em out.”

Neil gave Adrian a glance that said he had questions, but he knew this lesson was to instruct the other men, so he didn’t ask any of them. Neil was delighted at the unexpected thought of himself as a drill instructor in Adrian’s army. That was usually Kyle or Doug’s honor.

“Let’s go, in the barn.” Neil got things rolling. “Seth, make us a plan. Alex and Jack stay on guard. One on the roof, one in a tree. Move out.”

Adrian and Kenn watched from the dust covered porch of the farmhouse as the battle plan emerged. One Eagle took cover behind the huge concrete planters to the side of the loosely bound hostage in the road. Two men stayed inside the open barn doors. Two more ducked under the dusty bushes to the left of the big shelter, with a final man lurking in the shadows of the wide, paint-chipped shed. They spread themselves into a wall of strength between the road and the gritty porch where Adrian and Kenn were standing.

“Who’ll make it through?”

“Kyle, for sure.”

“You want an extra body guard?”

“Of course. The last set of gear is for you.” Adrian handed it to him. “You’ll be in the house somewhere too, as a surprise.”

They watched the men fidget. When the faint sound of engines came, they both recognized the quiet Safe Haven setups. Adrian pointed. “I’ll be in the room above us. Have fun. And keep track of Seth. I want to know how he handles himself.”

From his second-floor vantage point, Adrian saw the lone shadow sneaking toward the house, and knew who would win.

Kyle’s invading men slid through the unharvested hayfield behind the dusty yard. They’d left the engines running for a distraction. Adrian wondered if Kenn had noticed a lone shadow coming in the rear door. Probably. Kenn didn’t miss much.

Kyle’s team eased closer. When they were in range, Billy gave a short whistle.

Daryl rolled the chair onto its side in the sand, clearing a line of fire for the level threes, who began to shoot. Vests flashed as the attack started. No one yelled or called out orders. They followed their training.

Kyle’s team mowed them all down and rescued the hostage in four minutes flat.

“Let’s go get that handshake.” Kyle led the way to the farmhouse.

Kenn opened fire from inside the front door as three of Kyle’s men approached; he got them all. He darted to another window and hit one of two men running by.

Kenn took up a defensive position a few feet from the stairs that led to Adrian; the annual paintball competition he’d won at Fort Defiance this year made his movements smooth.

Floorboards creaked to his right. Kenn shoved his gun around the corner, firing in a sweeping motion that sent blue lights flashing off gritty windows and faded gifts under a drooping tree. It lit up the house and allowed Kenn to see the shadow he’d missed. He had time to catch the deep satisfaction in Kyle’s pale eyes, and then his vest began flashing too.

Out, Kenn flipped him the finger.

Kyle smirked, easing up the stairs.

The door at the end of the long hall was open. There was only one blurred set of prints on the dusty floor. Kyle relaxed at the sight of Adrian sitting on the edge of a cluttered, cobwebbed dresser.

“Congratulations on making it by Kenn.”

“I lost half my team to do it.” Kyle grinned, entering the small room. “We won?”

“As soon as we shake on it.” Adrian held out his hand, body language full of warning.

Missing the clues, Kyle’s arm moved...

He froze as the flashing blue lights of his vest began to bounce off the walls. *I’ve been shot!*

Kyle searched the shadows in disbelief for his assassin. The Genovese Captain had never been beaten with just surprise used, not even by Kenn. “Who is that?!”

Seth came out of the dusty darkness, trying not to gloat. He holstered and removed the black cap that had hidden his red from Kyle’s sharp eyes. “The last man standing.”

“Excellent.” Adrian clapped as he stood. “Come on. Let’s get back to camp.”

Kyle turned to Adrian, gesturing wildly. “Was this your plan? Was he here the whole time?!”

“I came up two minutes before you did.” Seth motioned to the Marine in the doorway behind Kyle. “Kenn was the only one who knew exactly where I’d be.”

“But I saw you…”

They followed Adrian while they talked about it. When Kyle laughed at something Seth said, Adrian decided it had gone well. Both teams had learned lessons, especially Kyle’s, and they’d bonded a little. When the time came, they would have these exercises to guide them.

The men reentered camp the way they’d left, with Adrian and Kenn following more slowly.

“No one asked any questions. Big mistake. Seth’s team got lucky to win.”

“True.” Kenn was eager to help another of his picks. Zack was about to graduate to level one and he had Kenn to thank for his name being on the list. Now, all the truck driver had to do was live up to it. Slacking off wasn’t allowed. “Seth sure surprised ‘em all.”

Adrian lit a smoke. “Yes, he did. Give him a level test tonight. If he passes, bump him to level four and we’ll catch him up. I always thought that team should have been ten strong. I just didn’t know who went there. Do it after dinner.”

Kenn didn’t look up from writing, glad for Seth and hating the jealous part of himself that wanted to say he’d done well against Doug. *Where’s my reward?*

“Who’s the MC tonight?”

Kenn gave a tight smile. “Doug said he’d give the name to you at mess.”

Adrian met his eye, feeling his man’s need, meeting it. “That’s your job now. Once an evening you’ll do rounds and collect envelopes. Organize it into something I can read quickly.”

Kenn realized he was being rewarded; his heart eased. “Sure! That’s it for the list. See you at mess?”

“You know it.”

Their radios crackled to life. “Mitch to Eagle One. Just took a call, A-Man.”

Adrian’s heart thumped. He and Kenn exchanged a look. The tone wasn’t encouraging.

Adrian keyed his mike. “Still on the air?”

“No, low battery. Said they’d call back later.”

“Copy.”

Kenn stayed at Adrian’s side as they headed to the COM truck, where Kyle and his team were now on duty.

The truck cabin reeked of whiskey. Mitch rewound the tape without saying as much as usual, able to feel Adrian’s disapproval. “This one sounds legit to me, but I just roll your waves.”

Adrian had to force himself not to grimace. Mitch Hopkins was one hell of a radioman, but he was too often loud, crude, arrogant, or intoxicated–all things Adrian and the camp had little tolerance for because it reminded them of what had been wrong with the old world. “Play.”

The fat-faced man hit the button and smirked at all the people watching, seeing him be useful to the boss.

“This is Safe Haven. We are a convoy of American Red Cross survivors who will help if we can, no matter your age, race, location, or injuries. Does anyone copy?”

There was silence after Mitch’s loud voice. Adrian could feel the alcoholic fingering the button, wanting to be done with this round of calls. Then, there was a pause where Mitch had known instinctively an answer was coming and waited instead of garbling the transmission. *Definitely one of the best before, and despite his glaring flaws, probably is the best now.*

“SOS, Safe Haven! We need a military escort to the nearest compound! Will pay any price!”

The words were surprisingly clear considering the thick squelches of background noise and static.

“Americans help first and ask questions later. Stand by while I get the boss.”

“Can’t. Battery’s dyin’. There must be some place taking in refugees.”

“Yeah, us.”

“But if you’re Red Cross, who do you get your orders from? Where are they?”

“Those aren’t questions for me. I just work the radio. What’s your situation?”

“Bad. People are hurt, sick. Supplies are gone, food’s low. Where are you?”

“That’s another one I won’t answer on open waves. You need to talk to the boss. Call back and we’ll get him quick, but for now, what’s your message?”

There was another long pause, and then the tired stranger answered in a voice so full of despair it made Adrian’s heart hurt.

“I’m overloaded. I can’t describe it. We need protection, and a way out to someplace safe. Tell him we’re American citizens begging for his–”

The transmission ended suddenly. Mitch shut off the tape. “Figured their battery went dead.”

“You did an excellent job. Get me right away when he calls back.”

Mitch was all shit-eating grin. “You got it, A-Man. Catch you later?”

Adrian forced himself to agree; he was glad to leave the drunk’s company.

Kenn and Adrian went to his semi. The leader climbed behind the wheel, leaving the door open. Time was running out. He could feel it threatening all he held dear, but he couldn’t ignore the call. He motioned at the glove compartment. “Find out how far to Cheyenne, and what’s between here and there.”

Kenn got the maps out as Adrian picked up the mike.

Adrian keyed the truck radio without taking the mike from the holder. “Let’s do a count, Mitch. Eagle One, here and clear.”

The count off always took a while, due to people forgetting or going in the wrong order. Adrian usually straightened them out; today he let it go, waiting.

After a full minute of not getting by number thirteen, Mitch took control. “Okay, fourteen, we know you’re ready, but thirteen goes first. Thirteen, you ready?”

“Roger that.”

“Good. We know fourteen is ready, so let’s keep going.”

“Rogetssscccfourteenssch.”

“Fourteen!” Mitch’s voice boomed over the radio. “Put your mike down! Hang it up now!”

“Roger.”

The two men shared a grin as the check in continued. Everyone knew Mitch had little patience, but now, he also had Adrian’s blessing to keep people in line.

“Three hundred miles. Laramie and Casper are the big towns.” Kenn peered at the small writing. “Damn. Only a couple of reservoirs. Not a good excuse.”

Adrian scanned the dusty Wyoming land around them as Kenn got his notebook out, shaking his head at the radio.

“Come on, twenty! Why are you calling out of order?”

“Because I’ve got too many kids in my area!”

“Did you check the passenger list?” The radio went quiet for a moment as the guards straightened out the mix up.

“Your impression?”

Kenn’s voice was flat. “The caller said protection before food or water, like we might have to fight for them.”

“Are we able to?”

“Maybe we could be.” Kenn shrugged, sounding more confident than he felt. Marines, these people were not. Most were more like shower shoes–not even a boot graduate. “Kyle’s team might be now.”

Adrian gestured. “Draw up a simple plan, with a team of a dozen.”

“We’d need more men as Eagles, a long-range communication system, full time gun classes…” Kenn’s pen started moving, copying his own words as he settled into the groove and gave Adrian exactly what he needed at that moment–signs of progress. “Wish we could locate ammo for the rifles, but we’ll make do.”

Adrian waited, wanting to see if Kenn would get the most important part.

“Also need more practices for the camp, a drill of some kind.” Kenn glanced up suddenly. “Cheyenne is along the slavers’ path, on 25. Will the camp go?”

Adrian stared out the dirty window. He had been manipulating people all his life, but never on this scale or with these stakes. “The Eagles will. The camp would feel very unprotected while we’re gone.”

Kenn said nothing at the threat. Those words wouldn’t be used, but the message would be clear. Adrian was helping the strangers and those who were with him would agree. The rest would have to fend for themselves until–*if*–he came back for them. “When will they be told?”

“Right after the next call, but it’s best to start with little hints. Have people overhear the men say it’s our duty. If not for that, none of us would be safe right now. Remind them that Americans don’t refuse to do what’s right just because it’s hard.”

**3**

“It’s chow time, Safe Haven.”

The purplish green sky was vivid, mesmerizing. Adrian spotted people taking long looks at the mysterious beauty as he headed to dinner. There was a large crowd in and around the mess, with most people talking of the shooting contest to come or discussing Kenn’s match against Doug.

Yells and groans came from the late running football game; garbage cans of trash burned at the corners of the camp. Two warmly dressed women played guitars at the large center bonfire. It felt like early October as Adrian got his tray and took it to his full table. The smell of salt came to him, bringing flashes of an angry sea. He wondered where and how many they would be come fall.

The rookie Eagles were at a double table nearby, congratulating and welcoming Seth. The level threes were on the other side of Adrian’s center table, looking glum as they listened to the other happy voices.

When Adrian pushed his mostly finished tray aside, the others did too. “Mini meeting now.”

Notebooks and pens came out.

Adrian got busy, not lowering his voice. It was crucial to his plans that the people here thought they knew how he ran things. “Sitrep on your run.”

Neil gestured. “We got everything on the lists, except gas. All the stations were dry or destroyed.”

“Alpine?”

“Just like all the rest. We took pictures.”

Adrian wrote it down. “Okay. That’s it. Who’s ready to shoot something?”

Men laughed; the boasting grew loud.

Doug handed Kenn his nightly envelope with apologetic words.

Adrian was glad when Kenn accepted it as if Doug hadn’t insulted him, when clearly, he had. Things were looking up.

**4**

“All right, let’s get to it.” Bonfire warming his legs, Adrian stood in front of two teams of men and lifted his bottle. They were in the training area behind the workout tents. “Rookies! Congratulations on passing!”

All the men cheered, but one group was louder than the others. They all drank together.

“You are now level one Eagles. You get to pick your leader tonight. I’ll need a name before this meeting is over.” He lifted his bottle again. “Level three Eagles, congratulations on passing!”

Surprised looks and cheers came at his announcement.

Adrian shrugged at Kyle. “You made it by Kenn, and while there were mistakes, you couldn’t have won. Seth was the wild card you can’t always be ready for. I consider it a success.”

Both groups cheered this time and drank.

Adrian held up a hand as the yells lingered. “We have one more challenge tonight, a personal level test.” He gestured. “Come up here, Seth.”

The cop left his beer and new friends, approaching Adrian with pride and confusion.

“You have demonstrated great thinking skills, excellent teamwork, and an above average slyness that Americans have used to protect this country for centuries. As a reward, Kenn will give you a test. If you pass, you’ll graduate straight to the top level and start working with Kyle and his team.”

The men all cheered, glad for him.

Seth lifted a brow. “When?”

Kenn stood.

Adrian tossed his dog tags at Kenn’s booted feet. The wind immediately began trying to cover the shiny metal with sand. “All you have to do is pick them up and hand them to me.”

“That’s it?”

The newly crowned level four men groaned and snorted at Seth’s question.

Kenn waved. “Just get by me.”

His look was menacing enough to make Seth realize this wouldn’t be a give-me. Kenn had beaten Doug.

Seth handed his gun to Adrian. The second he let go of it, he spun and dove for the tags.

Kenn kicked Seth’s shoulder with the flat of his boot at the last second, sending him rolling through the grit.

Seth got to his feet, eyes on the prize. He rushed Kenn again.

The Marine used Seth’s momentum to throw him across the ring of standing and shouting men.

Seth rolled as he landed, and gained his feet. The cop rushed a third time.

Kenn planted a hard fist in his ribs. “This is for real! If you don’t want it, quit now!” Kenn didn’t take it easy on Seth even though he hoped for an ally in him.

Seth shook his head, heart waking at the challenge. His body language became intent.

Each of the level men watching him remembered their own tests, and that one moment when they too had realized they wanted it almost more than anything–because of Adrian.

Seth advanced as he circled, no longer eyeing the metal under Kenn’s feet, but keeping track of it. Seth rushed low and hard, making Kenn retreat as they shoved against each other.

Kenn delivered a vicious knee kick, then another to Seth’s ankle.

Seth fell, grunting in pain.

“Just quit. Give up!”

Seth’s face hardened.

Everyone knew he wouldn’t. The feeling of failing Adrian would never go away, not in this new life.

Seth got to his feet a fourth time. Adrian observed with real interest as fire grew in the cop’s eyes.

Seth stepped straight at Kenn, as if he meant to rush again, but instead swung a roundhouse that landed on Kenn’s jaw. The other fist came around, slamming into Kenn’s cheek.

Then, Kenn started hitting back. Seth fell to his knees in the sand while the Marine beat on his face.

Seth sank his head into Kenn’s hard gut, shoving with his legs. As they rolled, his fingers clutched at the dusty ground.

His pinky snagged the chain... When he got to his feet, the dog tags were securely in his grip.

Seth flashed them at Kenn, who was still moving in his direction. “I got ‘em! It’s over.” He ducked as Kenn swung. “But I’m done. I–”

No one spoke, waiting for him to figure it out.

Seth glared at Adrian’s outstretched hand, then he moved–ducking, darting, shoving his way to the man whose life he dreamed of giving his own for.

Kenn spun him by the shoulder.

Seth punched him.

Kenn swung back, rocking the cop on his heels.

Pissed, Seth returned the hit, putting his weight into it.

Kenn did the same.

The Eagles were impressed when Seth stayed on his feet.

The two men kept swinging, trading blow for fast blow.

Adrian gave a subtle nod.

Kenn delivered a nasty hit to Seth’s forehead that knocked him down in the dirt at the leader’s feet.

When Seth’s hand rose, Adrian bent and retrieved his property. “Pass. Effective immediately, you are a level four Eagle.”

“No.”

There was a shocked silence as Seth climbed to his feet, covered in sand and blood splatter.

“Because?”

“Because…they voted me team leader...earlier. Can’t have…that as a level four.”

Kenn slung an arm around the cop’s tense, gritty shoulders. “If you knew you didn’t want it, why did you go through with the test?”

Seth smirked at his fellow Eagle, but the expression on his bruising face said his words were meant for Adrian. “To prove…that I could.”

**5**

The radio call came in while Adrian was grinding his hard body against a willing ass, breath coming in short rasps. He pressed a quick, apologetic kiss to her neck as he stepped back and zipped up. He left without a word, marching through the blowing grit to the communication truck. He slid into the sandy seat a minute later. As he keyed the mike, Adrian was aware of Kenn waiting nearby to help him. *Good.* The Marine would make it easier. “This is Eagle One. Go ahead with your message.”

“We need help.”

“Tell me what exactly.”

“We need an armed escort. Things are rough here.”

“How rough? Don’t send me in blind, but be careful what you say.”

“Slavers.”

That one word brought mutters from the half a dozen men now standing around the radio truck. Adrian keyed the mike. “Do any of you know Morse Code?”

“No... Wait.”

There was a few seconds of silence.

“We know it.”

Adrian signaled to Kenn.

The Marine opened his notebook and slid into the other chair.

“Get ready for a message.”

“Go ahead, Safe Haven.”

Adrian gave Kenn the mike. “Say the number five.”

Kenn tapped out Adrian’s instructions. They waited.

“Five.”

“Say the state Nevada.”

*Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.*

“Nevada.”

Kenn gave Adrian a nod and got ready to work.

“We will come get you, protect you, and feed you. In return, you’ll be expected to follow the rules and work.”

There was a lot of tapping and silence. Adrian waited impatiently for this part to be over so he could get to the information he needed.

“Agreed, but everyone goes.”

Adrian’s answer was quick. “We don’t leave people behind. I have questions. Ready?”

“Roger, Safe Haven, thank you. You’re the first people we’ve heard who aren’t in the same boat as us.”

Kenn took the mike and started tapping out Adrian’s instructions.

“Tell me double the number of people you have. Include everyone.”

“Seventy.”

“How many fighters? Double it.”

“Ten.”

Both men winced. “Weapons?”

“Limited.”

*Tap tap tap tap tap.*

“A few handguns. No ammo.”

“Have you seen the slavers?”

“Yes. Twice, from a distance.”

“How many are there? Double it and add a hundred.”

“Not exact, four hundred.”

Adrian’s frown was deep. “Where are they now?”

The taps went on for a long time, with Kenn’s hand flying. Then he circled an area on the map and held it up for the boss to see.

Adrian counted quickly.

*Tap tap tap tap tap…*

He looked over Kenn’s shoulder, reading out aloud: “Heard them this morning. They spend a few days each time they take a town. Most people here are from the places they invaded.”

Kenn counted. “Based on his calculations, they are four towns away from Cheyenne. Two and a half weeks.”

Adrian nodded, plan falling into place. He didn’t like it, but it was the only thing he could do. “Be ready from the twenty-first on. Radio silence until then, unless they see or hear of the slavers reaching Wellington. Switch to channel eighteen and say double the date I’ve given you.”

*Tap tap tap tap tap…*

“Forty-two.”

Adrian took the mike, hoping the slavers weren’t listening. There were hundreds of channels and both calls had lasted less than seven minutes total. Maybe they would get lucky. “Hang in there, Overloaded. Liberty and justice will prevail.”

“Roger, Safe Haven. Cheyenne, out.”

Adrian looked at his right-hand man. “It’s yours, Marine. Hope for the best; plan for the worst.”

Kenn was confident. “We’ll be the eagles–there and gone before the snake knows what happened.”

# Chapter Twenty-Six

**Close Call**

**A close up of a reptile

Description automatically generated**

March 10th

**1**

**S**till alone, and once again in danger, Samantha’s heart pounded as she stood in the dank basement of a farmhouse on the outskirts of Boulder, Colorado.

She watched the drunken passage of a large group of armed men rolling down the street as if they owned it. She listened to shouts, glass breaking, and wild gunfire, praying none of them glanced her way. These stragglers were hurrying to catch up to the main group she had already watched go by. The sky behind them warned of another nasty storm coming. Samantha ignored the throbbing leg confirming that forecast. She spotted billowing, black smoke coming from their backtrail. *Did these people conquer NORAD?*

The small cellar room was cold and stank of mildew. The floor was covered in standing, stagnant water, but she only had eyes for the dangerous group moving through the devastated neighborhood bordering the dark city. Samantha didn’t know who the men were, but it was clear they were trouble.

Not that she would have made contact even if they had appeared civilized. Samantha had been moving cautiously since surviving the battle with the wolves. She hoped to be left alone until she got to Cheyenne. It never crossed her mind this group might be going there too.

Samantha had found more bodies around this town than in other places. The dead had sores that gave her horrible flashes of the bunker where she had killed Pat. There had been a few live people too–brief, distant glimpses of her fellow survivors that made her drop out of sight as fast as she could.

Samantha was now armed, but shame and paranoia were still her constant companions. The pair had settled onto her shoulders, making her prefer lonely solitude to the conversations she would be forced to have. What would she say?

*Hi. I’m Samantha. I had a pass to the government bunker, but my chopper crashed. Now, I’m stuck out in this hell with you common folk.*

Not a wise idea.

She did want to be around other people again. She longed for some of her old life back, but she could only be with others like herself or she wouldn’t be safe. She understood that now.

Samantha scanned the last of the vehicles driving through the dirty slush, lingering on the distant shadow of purple mountains with dull, white peaks. They would be full of lavender columbine by now, with gigantic ash trees and evergreens providing homes for the rabbits, cranes, and larks she hadn’t seen down here. Up there, it was an entirely different world.

Her leg had healed slowly and painfully, forcing her to spend a week at a farmhouse south of the hunting lodge. She was glad the morphine had only held out for the first six days. Any more than that might have turned her into a junkie. *Almost did anyway*, she thought, still wanting a buzz even though normal Tylenol was controlling the pain. Traveling was hard, though. She had only been able to keep going because of the cart she’d found in a shed behind a vandalized golf course. She still wasn’t sure if it had been hunger driving the wolves or something else. The way they’d tracked her, surrounded her, and waited for the storm cover, implied organization.

“Almost as if they planned it.” Samantha pulled her trench coat shut as the last of the muddy jeeps fell out of a view distorted by rain on dirty glass and a tier of Hanukkah candles that would stay dark forever. “They were the hunted before. Now, they are the hunters.”

Her words, spoken quietly, disturbed the occupants of the dank basement she hadn’t noticed when she’d quickly limped down the steep wooden stairs. She had been seeking refuge from the large group of dangerous men, but Sam suddenly realized her safe shelter wasn’t. She froze.

Movement came from the corner.

A soft slither echoed around a cobweb covered ceiling beam.

Another ripple of movement came along the floor–a dark, weaving shadow under the inches of water... Sam’s paralysis broke. She swung her sharpened walking stick in front of her as she limped to the stairs, able to feel snakes coming toward her from above. There was no hissing, no noises except hers. It was menacing.

Samantha took the steep stairs two at a time, seeing another, larger snake coming from behind the wooden steps. She lunged up the last three.

Unable to stifle a cry as she rolled, Sam lost her cane, bad leg taking the brunt of her weight.

The air shifted near her arm.

Sam rolled again, hitting the wall. On her feet a second later, she limped to the door, unable to see anything following but sure the angry reptiles were there.

The feeling was gone as soon as she made it through the heavily decorated front door, but she didn’t slow as rain pelted her. The ghost town around her was silent, smoking in places. Sam wondered if the fallout that was changing nature’s routines and habits was also affecting the people mentally. She had seen things since the war that made old horror stories feel tame, and it was everywhere. There were dead corpses full of bullet holes, female bodies still lying with their mouths open in midscream, a family dog impaled on a broken porch rail, blood smears in the shape of a small hand on the stone walk. Her attention landed on these things and flew away each time, but she knew she’d see them in perfect detail even after old age gave her memory loss.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

**Hard Days, Warm Nights**

**A close up of a sign

Description automatically generated**

Somewhere in Missouri

**March 18th**

**1**

**T**hey were lost. The storm battered their vehicles, lashing out at them. The rain came in sporadic bursts; orange clouds rolled through the sky.

Marc and Angela had been making good time until they reached Kirksville, Missouri, but getting by the tangled piles of wreckage was impossible. Damage stretched as far as they could see. It was clear a massive flood had destroyed this town.

Boats were on front porches; heavy river barges were piled against a Don Pablo’s restaurant like firewood. Homes and businesses were collapsed and scattered, ambulances and fire trucks crushed together. For the first time, Marc wished for a navigation system, forgetting for an instant that it wouldn’t work without access to satellites. They’d doubled back, but the new route was closer to the North Fork Salt River. When the storm broke over them, the water rose, blocking their way. Marc had relocated them to higher ground, jumping from one unknown street to another to escape the water. Now, they were lost.

Marc surveyed the small town. He didn’t want to stop now, despite all the debris flying through the storm. He hated how low this area was.

“Let’s try that parking garage.”

“It’s kinda low.”

“But sturdy.” Angela let go of the mike and pulled around him to take the lead, trying not to react to the Santa hat that blew by her windshield as she searched for a name. The paint on the signs was too faded to read.

The four-story garage sloped upward in circles; they were surprised to discover only half a dozen cars in the place as they did a drive through check. The abandoned vehicles were dusty, with notes taped to the inside of the windows. A lot of garbage cluttered the lanes, including broken neon bulbs and a shredded exit sign on the first level. Otherwise, it was empty.

“Up here should be okay for tonight, right?” Angela backed in, worried when he didn’t answer. “Marc?”

Silence.

She saw him gesturing at his mike and then the ceiling. They had no radio in here.

Angela put her vehicle in park, but she didn’t switch it off as Marc backed in next to her. She’d put them in a far corner, like he would have, but the rain was dusting the hood and front windows, and the wind was rocking both Blazers. She waited to see if he approved.

Marc exited and disappeared, going to secure the perimeter with Dog.

Angela surveyed the darkness, gun in her tense hand. She knew the accessible area wasn’t to Marc’s liking as he came toward her. If he overrode her decision, she would go along with his choice. He’d been surviving out in the world a lot longer than she had.

*Whammmm!*

They both ducked as something heavy slammed against an outside wall. When he opened her door, he was nodding. “This is probably the best place we can be, as long as nothing collapses. We can go up two more floors if we have to.”

Angela nodded, reaching in for her duffle bag.

The wind gusted against her door; Marc’s quick reflexes kept it from hitting her leg. “Damn. We need to get out of this wind. We’ll make camp by the elevators, in that hallway.” Marc grabbed each item as she took it from the Blazer.

When she shut the door, emptyhanded, he gestured toward the dark hallway he had already checked. “Light and gun. Let’s go.”

Angela started to tell him this wasn’t an appropriate time for a lesson, then stopped, realizing this was perfect. “Okay.”

Dog heeling at her side, Angela tried to concentrate like Marc had shown her, tuning out the distractions. She slipped through the loud darkness.

Marc watched their rear. And hers.

**2**

Angela unpacked what they needed, preparing to hunker down and wait out the storm while Marc went back for his gear. She wasn’t as nervous as she had been nine days ago. Killing had changed her. She was suddenly a much harder person than she’d ever been before.

Angela set the heater against the wall, then made one large sleeping area between it and the cooler, creating a wall to block the wind. She started getting settled as Marc returned with his arms full and Dog at his heels.

“Great idea.”

Angela took off her sweater, listening to the wind howl as he added items to the barricade.

“Hungry?”

She set up the stove. “Not really. You?”

Marc dropped his trench coat on top of a box and pretended not to notice how her gaze went to his chest, lingering there. “No, but we should eat.”

She agreed, but only put on water for tea and coffee.

“I’m going to mark the water levels. Be right back.”

Angela pushed off her shoes and sat against her pillows–journal, pen, and cup on one side, gun and ashtray on the other. She was calm. She had already foreseen them safe and sound in this spot as dawn broke. They had seemed to be in a bit of a hurry to leave, but she hadn’t sensed real danger. Trusting the witch inside was easier since Versailles.

Marc wasn’t as confident. He used waterproof chalk to mark where the water was, then marked every ten feet, all the way to their Blazers. A quick glance would tell him how fast it was rising.

Angela was lighting a joint when he returned.

Marc saw his own side of the big bed had been set up identical to hers. Even Dog’s quilt was lined with a bowl of food and water. Neat, organized. *I like that.* *I like her.*

Marc put his gun next to the ashtray on his side of the makeshift bed. When she held the joint out, not looking up from her writing, their fingers brushed, sparked.

Angela dropped her hand without looking up, but Marc saw her nostrils flare. That didn’t feel like fear to him, and if she wasn’t scared anymore, then it was proof he had made progress by holding in all the things he still longed to say.

They were traveling well together. They started their days with a light meal and then a training session. First was hand-to-hand, and then weapons, which put them on the road around ten each morning. They traveled until it was too dark to keep going, then he picked a place if she told him the area was okay. Her power had been avoided before the attack, but her gifts were now being used whenever they made camp. He wasn’t taking any more chances with her life.

“So, tell me about him.”

Angela flinched before she realized who he meant. “Oh. Charlie’s a great kid, warm, funny.” Sadness came into her face. “Probably looks different now, older.” She sighed, heart hurting. “He’s smart. So much that it makes me ashamed I’m so dumb, and I’m a doctor. He’s loyal, hardworking, and he cares about things, like saving the whales. It’s agony for me to be away from him. Sometimes a boy needs his mom, and a mom needs her boy.” Not wanting to let emotions get the best of her, Angela dug through her bag and tossed a yellow packet onto the blanket by Marc’s leg. “Those are from his first birthday. I love the clown outfit.”

“He was born on Halloween?”

“Yes, on 10/31, at 10:31 in the morning.”

Her voice was rough, sexy. Marc let his gaze roam her while she wrote in her journal. “Is he special too?”

She tensed before giving a quick nod. She could trust Marc. “Yes. He’ll be stronger than me.”

“Is it because of being born on Halloween?”

“I assume because he’s male. Fate controls that, not the moon and stars.” She inhaled again, closing her eyes against a sharp curl of smoke.

Marc thought about how erotic it would be to give her a shotgun. “You still believe in destiny and the great plan?”

Angela hesitated, not wanting to stir up old arguments. “Yes, and no. It’s not a set plan. People miss their purpose in life and have to spend eternity repeating it, searching for that one moment they missed.”

“And do they find it? Does fate give second chances?” The implication was clear.

Angela didn’t want to encourage him, but she couldn’t lie. “Yes, almost always. Fate wants the world to be perfect, and each correct or corrected life is a step on that road.”

“You know that for sure?”

“No, but I examine the world around me and get my answers there. Everything on this planet dies, and usually violently. If not war, maybe it would have been the plague again or another asteroid. For some reason, it was all fated to die.”

“But why everyone? Why not just the bad people?”

Angela shrugged again, tone resigned. “That is a question I can’t answer.”

Marc held up the pictures as she eased down. “You want these back?”

“No. I’ve got the memories.” She rolled over and covered herself up to her neck. “Goodnight, Marc. See you in the morning.”

“Yes, you will. Sweet dreams, honey.”

*Not likely*, she thought. In her dreams, Kenny tried to kill her. Most nights, he succeeded.

Around 2am, Marc went to check the markers again. He was relieved to find the water going down.

Dog followed, eager to sniff the area again.

Angela snuggled deeper into the thick blankets, trying to ignore the heart crying for her to slide into his spot. She sighed sadly, feeling guilty that hairy legs and maybe bad breath were the only things stopping her from sleeping in Marc’s big arms. Being attacked and surviving, but also killing the person responsible had unlocked the last of her chains. It had freed the young girl who feared nothing. Slowly, Kenny’s timid mouse was disappearing.

How was she ever going to face him? Kenny would use her up in this new world. With Marc, the witch said there was still a chance for the future that had been stolen from them. Angela tried to imagine telling him how she was feeling. *I can’t stop thinking about you, about us and how good we were together, and… I may want another chance with you once I get my son back and find a way to ditch my other man.*

Never in a million years. Even if Kenny were out of the picture–and he wasn’t, not by a long shot–there were other walls between them. Still, it was hard to ignore as sleep refused to come. They were a great match, and she still wanted him. Soon, Marc would figure that out and do something about it. *Then we’ll all be doomed.*

Marc returned to his side of their bed. They were getting closer despite her trying not to let it happen. She was so strong! She not only recovered quickly, she grew more confident from each encounter. She wasn’t afraid to meet his eyes anymore, or to walk close to him. He could feel her thinking about him and the past. She felt the... What? Love? Maybe. Lust?

*You bet that sweet ass*, he thought, slipping his belt buckle loose. He had never lit up around a woman the way he did with Angie. He had no doubts about his feelings; he had four weeks left to convince her that surrender wasn’t her only choice.

**3**

Angela brushed at her arm as she sat up, waking with a feeling of revulsion. Her skin prickled with tiny irritations in the damp morning air; it seemed to be moving on its own.

“What the hell?”

Marc’s curse brought her fully awake. Angela couldn’t stop the yelp of disgust that echoed off the concrete.

“It’s spiders or crickets trying to get out of the water. I’m not sure which. Come over here and let me brush you off.” His tone was soothing.

Angela stood still while Marc rid her of the nickel-sized spiders with legs twice as long as their bodies.

She moaned, horrified. “They’re under my clothes!”

Marc grabbed the edges of her shirt and yanked it off. He shook it out and gave it back, watching Dog avoid the mutations instead of snapping at them as he normally did with insects. “Do under your pants. I’ll get our stuff loaded. The water’s low enough to roll through if we’re careful.”

Angela began removing her pants, scanning their things. All of it was moving. “It’ll have spiders in it.”

Marc listened to the storm rumbling, sure they should stay, but the water was rising again, and they couldn’t share their shelter. He needed to get her out of here. “Yeah. When you put those on, tuck the cuffs into your socks and gather what you want. We’ll leave the rest.”

As he stepped by her with the heater and their duffle bags, it occurred to Marc that she hadn’t jumped when he’d reached for her shirt.

His heart stirred.

**4**

Angela listened to the voices as the wind pushed them through Matenea, Missouri. “I think we should take cover.” Little black balls of hail were pinged off their roofs and hoods.

“What’s...? Oh, shit! Stay on my ass!”

Angela spotted the funnel cloud by following his line of sight; for a second, she couldn’t move. The twister wasn’t wide, but it was closing in fast, as if it had sensed the presence of humans and dropped out of the sky just for them.

“Come on!”

Marc’s shout startled her; Dog’s piercing bark through the radio broke her daze. Angela hit the gas. *That’s a real tornado!*

“I thought this only happened in the movies.” She was scared as she caught up to Marc’s bumper, but the raw fury of something they had no chance of controlling was beautiful too. Angela knew she would never forget it if they got away.

Marc turned them into a large, mostly empty parking lot, speeding up. When he sent his Blazer crashing through the front glass windows of the theater, plastic and glass flying, she followed.

Behind them, the tornado churned across the small city, smashing through anything in its way as it zeroed in on the enemy.

“Get as far in as you can!”

Angela swerved in next to him, lobby props tumbling. They both ducked as the tornado hit the theater.

The building shuddered. Both Blazers lunged forward in the wind, bashing into the high wall of the concession stand. Glass sprayed as the display shelves caved in. Large chunks of debris banged off them as the roar grew louder.

A blast of straight-line winds swept through the cinema, grabbing and spinning Angela’s Blazer in dizzying circles before shoving it into a line of heavy arcade machines. Marc watched as the big games were sent flying into the air and each other from the hard impact. Glass and coins erupted like tiny, silver volcanoes. Her muddy Blazer slid the length of the lobby before coming to a tire-squealing halt just inches from his front bumper. A second later, it was over except for the rain.

Marc scrambled over wet debris to open her door and help her out. “Are you hurt? Are you all right?”

She shivered in Marc’s arms. “I don’t remember asking for the quick tour.”

He chuckled. “Me either. You’re okay?”

Angela trembled, a bit shook up. She rested against his hard, comforting body and held on. “Yes.”

Marc rubbed her arms to warm her. The shock of being woken so abruptly and then being forced to deal with the fury of their environment before she’d even had a cup of coffee had shaken her, made her vulnerable. He refused to take advantage of her. “Dog, up. Shhh... It’s okay, honey.”

Angela kept her arms locked around his waist as the wolf leapt to the hood, then the roof. Marc held her, watching the drumming rain continue as his body tried hard to ignore hers. It was still a perfect fit.

“Are we safe here?”

Marc recognized the moment. *If she can ask me that and be prepared to believe it, things have changed.* “I think so. I just need to do a quick check.”

Angela shivered when he stepped back, cold as he disappeared into the dim shadows. The wind blew her hair around. This storm was traveling northwest, toward her son. She had to warn Kenny again. She gathered herself quickly, doing it before fear could make her change her mind.

Marc felt energy humming through the cinema as he returned. Without knowing he was going to try, Marc slid in front of her, concentrating. He was blocked by a wall of mental bricks. *Let me in.*

The wall crumbled.

Angela’s lashes fluttered, but she didn’t protest having Marc fully in her mind for the first time in fifteen years.

*Where are you?!*

The man’s voice was loud, intimidating, familiar somehow. Marc stored it to work on later.

*You have to take cover. Bad storms are coming your way.*

*One more time, bitch! Where are you?*

It was a struggle for Marc to remain silent.

At his side, Dog’s fur began to bush up as he caught the vibes.

*A lot closer. How’s Charlie?*

*Happy with me. How close?*

The barely controlled anger was clear. Angela forced herself to stand, emboldened by Marc’s presence*. I’m coming for him as fast as I can.*

*You’ll never get him unless you do what I say!*

Searing rage filled Marc, but it was nothing compared to the fury radiating off Angela. It came in clouds of heat he could actually feel.

*You won’t keep me from my boy, Kenny! That was the old world. Things have changed, and you’re the one who should be careful!*

She sucked in a breath as he screamed obscenities, then overpowered him with her anger. The words blasted out in a furious snarl. *If anything happens to my son, there won’t be a place on this fucking planet where you can hide!* She slammed the door before he could respond in kind.

She flashed a weak smile at Marc. “He’s in a good mood.”

Marc was pissed. He now had the proof she wasn’t lying, though he’d been sure for weeks. “I’ll protect you both. My word on it.”

Angela turned away. That was the first time in over a decade that she had stood up to Kenny. There would be a payment for it. “You can’t promise that. You think you know what you’re up against, but you don’t. He’s a violent, trained killer, and in the end, blood will spill.”

Marc’s tone deepened. “His, not yours.”

Angela hated it that he was thinking of murder. “Please don’t. It’s on my hands if you kill him. It would destroy me as sure as losing Charlie would. My freedom is not worth a life. I need you to swear you won’t.”

Marc shook his head. “I can’t. You don’t deserve to be treated that way. I won’t sit by and watch it.”

“I’ll figure something out.” She looked around. “For now, do you think we can stay here until the storm is over?”

Marc sighed at her obvious distraction technique, running a hand over his neck length hair in frustration. *Am I getting to her at all?*

“Sometimes, too much.”

Marc flinched.

“Well?”

“I don’t know. Let’s have a look around, and we’ll decide.” Marc let it go, not saying he could make it appear like an accident and not feel any guilt. He was also a violent, trained killer.

“Dog, in.” Marc shut the Blazer door behind the big animal, not wanting him to get distracted by things blowing in the heavy wind. “Guns and light. Move out.” If he decided to handle her man, Angie would never know. He’d lock it up so tight that even he wouldn’t be able to access the memory. *I’ve done dirty work before.*

5

“Wanna watch a movie while we wait for the storm to pass?”

Angela smiled sadly. She hadn’t been to a movie since Charlie was a baby. She kept herself from saying it only by looking at the poster for *A Miracle on 34th Street*, trading one pain for another. “You know how?”

“Yes.” They were on the upper balcony of the theater. The ghostly smell of popcorn and butter that still haunted the stale air was almost covered by the fishy rot blowing in with the rain through the broken doors. Marc listened harder, fighting the urge to find a room with a window. “Just have to find the generators and add some gas.”

Angela read the fading posters, ignoring her unease. After the morning they’d had, that was to be expected.

“Okay. How about *The Shadows of Fate*? I loved *The Chronicles of Riddick*.”

Marc grinned, feeling unworthy of her with his long hair and unshaven face. “You just like Vin Diesel.”

Angela laughed at his joking accusation, admiring his sexy goatee. It added to his image of an old west gunfighter. *My own John Wayne*. “It was a good story.”

“It was crap with a lot of eye candy.”

She snickered.

Marc stilled suddenly, scanning the destroyed lobby and dark, shadowy hallways where he thought bodies should be but weren’t. This would have made a good place to hole up, but until they’d hit it, literally, there hadn’t been anyone here. “Did you hear that?”

Angela listened for a moment, hearing only the storm and things moving with the wind. “No. What?”

“I’m not sure. It sounded like someone clearing snow with a metal shovel.”

The image made her grimace. Angela pushed at the door in her mind as her stomach dropped. They had made over a hundred miles in the last week and she was tired. The door hadn’t opened on its own. Something was happening. “Up, I think. We should go up.”

*BOHICA*, Marc thought*. Bend over. Here it comes again.* “But Dog and the Blaz–”

“No time.”

The noise came again. It was a headache-causing sound of metal and stone meeting, but instead of a distant echo, it was loud and close. Vibrations rattled the walls and pounded through the floor under them.

Angela ran for the employee door to the right of the upstairs concession area. “We have to–”

The grinding noise was suddenly deafening; Marc grabbed her arm. He shoved them both into the dark stairwell as the building around them shifted, knocked forward on its foundation.

A twenty-foot wall of mud and debris slammed into the rear of the movie theater like a bomb, blowing out walls and windows. The sound of it was like a tanker truck jackknifing. The space immediately began filling with sliding ooze. The entire back wall of the cinema crumbled under the onslaught, filling the rows of seats with thick, dark mud. The side walls held. The mud was slowed and then finally stopped by something bigger–the strip mall around the theater that was more than a mile wide.

Sludge continued to invade open spaces, flooding the theater and parking lot around it with feet of thick, lumpy glop. It gushed over counters and ticket booths, shoving the two vehicles against the glassless front doors and then out them.

Angela and Marc flipped on their penlights to view the dim stairwell and bowed-in door.

“Is that mud?”

Marc shined his light on the bottom of the door, where thick, blackish silt was pushing underneath.

“Yeah. A slide.” He motioned her upward. “That door’s not gonna ho–”

*Craack! Swwwooosh!*

The door gave way, buckling under the weight of the sopping mud flowing into the hall.

Marc nudged her further up the steep, twisted stairs. “Keep going. It’ll take a full day to dig out that way.”

She turned reluctantly. They climbed to the roof’s exit door, both listening for Dog.

Marc pulled her back before she could go out. “Wait. Always check it out first.”

“Teach me how to do this.”

He nodded. She really would have made a good Marine, a strong fighter. “Stay no more than two feet away and put your feet where I do mine. If I fall, you should come back here and dig your way out with boards or whatever you can find.”

Angela kept her head down at the thought of losing him; her mind flew to her gifts. She’d do what she had to, no matter how forbidden it was.

“The whole hillside’s gone!”

They stood just outside the doorway. Most of the roof had cracked, crumbled, was missing in places. The Show Me state gave them an awful view of missing homes, businesses, and roads that had been between the hill and the theater. Even the reeking turkey farm and rye field beside them were now a ten-foot high piles of uneven, treacherous mud and debris for miles to the east. Small puffs of smoke and dust rose eerily in the early morning chill.

“Look.” Angela pointed to a black corner, where thick, sloppy mud was still spilling around the front of the theater. “Is that your Blazer?”

Marc was relieved. “Mud must have pushed them out. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Angela smiled. “Think we already did. I hear Dog.”

“Come on. Let’s get down from here before the whole mall collapses.”

“We need rope.”

“It’s in the Blazer with my kit.”

Marc scolded himself for leaving his kit.

Angela gestured to dead telephone wires. “Can we use those?”

Marc considered. “Maybe. The poles and wires are sprayed with a flame retardant chemical that makes them slippery. We’ll have to braid a rope together.” He began fishing in his pockets. “We’ll hope the pole wasn’t loosened by the slide.”

He cut the phone, cable, and electric wires and quickly wove them together.

“Will this work?”

“We’re gonna find out. If it breaks, try to go limp.”

“Okay...”

Marc wrapped the braided cord around his fist and then his waist.

Angela scowled fearfully. “This is the best we–?”

“Hang on!”

A second later, she was tight against his body, feet in the air, and they were dropping off the side of the building.

“Semper Fi!”

His shout gave her the courage to wrap her legs around him and keep her head up as the ground flew closer.

Marc had swung them toward the pole, hoping to slow their descent. He put his feet straight out; his boots slammed into the wood with a jerk that made their grips on each other tighten painfully.

Legs now holding them to the slippery pole, Marc picked out a shallow-looking patch of mud and swung them for it... The braided cord snapped under their weight.

They dropped to the ground with a hard, wet thud.

They landed with her on top, legs pinned around his waist. Angela winced as the layer of mud shifted beneath them, putting pressure on her knee. “You okay?”

His eyes were shut. She leaned in, muddy hands feeling for his pulse. “Marc?”

Dazed but aware that she was getting upset, Marc opened his eyes and said the first thing that came to mind. “Never have I seen anything so beautiful.”

Angela blushed, fighting the urge to lean down and kiss his pouty lips in relief. “If you say so. How about getting off my leg?”

They were on their feet a second later. Marc reached for her. “Let me see.”

Angela flinched away, slinging mud from her hands. “I’m fine. Let’s check on Dog.”

Marc followed her, frowning. Another side effect of her man or the life she’d led?

*Neither*, his heart whispered. *She feels the attraction too. She’s not scared. She’s interested and feeling guilty about it.*

That made sense. Angie and loyalty went hand in hand.

When Marc let the anxious wolf out, Dog eagerly rushed to check them both over. *Did you see that shit?! It was a wall of shit!*

Angela took that minute to scan what was left of the town for survivors. She still hoped they might be able to help if someone was stuck, or maybe leave food, but there was only silence. Kirksville was a ghost town. It made her think of the History Channel. Would archeologists discover all the bodies that must be buried under that mile-long stretch of thick mud hundreds of years from now and try to figure out what had happened?

“We got lucky.”

Angela didn’t say anything, sure it was more than luck. Fate had allowed both of them to survive repeatedly. Was it because it wanted something from them, something bigger than just their tiny lives?

The two Blazers were mud-splattered, the glass on Marc’s side window cracked, but other than dents in the fender and bumper, both vehicles had held up despite being shoved through the windows by a wall of mud. They climbed into their seats with squelches, grimaces, and shared shrugs. They were alive. It had been a good day.

As they drove, Angela stewed on her reaction to Marc reaching for her. She had wanted to melt into his embrace! She was no longer able to ignore the intimacy that was growing.

“You okay back there?”

She flashed her light in response. She’d been a fool not to call him all those years ago.

“Ready to go till dark?”

She picked up the mike. “And then some. You lead, I’ll follow.”

“Copy that.”

They had been traveling together for a month now; they’d come through five hundred miles of heartbreaking, gut wrenching, unbelievable horror. Missouri was no different from Indiana, Virginia, or Ohio except, the ground here felt and smelled worse. They had seen their first mutation yesterday. The single black ant had watched them alertly as they went by. It had drawn attention because it was too big and the shape was too odd. When Angela had stopped, Marc had waited while she squashed the freak under her tires. It had been a powerful moment for him, seeing Angie so appalled by something that she’d decided it didn’t have the right to exist anymore. He had never felt closer to her than at that moment. It was how he had spent most of his adult life.

“Three o’clock, down low.”

Angela scanned, then immediately hit the brakes, searching for a clear path to her target.

“Use your gun this time.”

Angela didn’t fight the urge to destroy.

“Slow down. Don’t scare them off.”

The small colony of mutated ants didn’t stray from their slow, disorderly course through the dying switch grass. They didn’t seem afraid of the tires that rolled closer, but the witch said they were aware. She could feel the scent of alarm coming from them.

Angela slid her window down.

“That’s far enough.”

The witch protested the distance, but Angela agreed. She could hit them from here if she tried and Marc knew it. He wanted her to use this as a lesson too.

*My how we’ve changed*, the witch commented as anger and revulsion took over Angela’s trigger finger. *Not a killer, huh?*

Angela ignored the hurtful jab. These mutations couldn’t be left free to turn America into a cheap horror film. Angela opened fire.

The ants tried to flee, panic-stricken. Angela took a savage, guilty pleasure in their destruction, getting the last one with her tire as it darted for cover under the Blazer.

Marc was impressed and aroused. He struggled to keep it from his voice as he keyed the mike. “Very good. Ready?”

“Yes. Let’s roll.”

They traveled until it was almost dark; the land around them was wet, deceitful-looking. By the time they hit higher, dryer ground, the mud had molded to them like a second skin.

Marc chose to make camp on a flat, almost deserted stretch of highway where the only cover was two moss-dotted dogwood trees, both without a single bloom.

Angela laughed as she got out. “You look like an abused dog.”

Marc snickered and stomped to the rear of his Blazer, trying to dislodge some of the dried mud. “Feel like one.”

“Let’s make a shower.”

He thought about it for a minute, then began to gather a mental list. “Got an empty gallon jug?”

“In the back, under the sleeping bag. I’ll get us something to eat. You make us a shower?”

Marc snapped off a salute. “You got it.”

**6**

“Where should we set it up at for the showers?” The wolf was out roaming the breezy darkness around them, and they had tested his crude invention on the dinner dishes. Now, he wanted to be clean.

Angela had already considered that. She tossed a blanket onto the roof of his Blazer and moved one of the jugs they had warmed to the hood. When she turned, his face was red. “What’s wrong?”

“Who’s gonna hold your towel?”

Angela hid her nervousness. “I’ll pull my Blazer alongside. Once we open the doors and hang a couple of sheets, it’ll be fine.”

“Cool.” Marc got busy, hoping this wasn’t hard on her. The sheets weren’t for him. He had showered with ten other naked men in the room nearly every day for years. His flush had come from the image of her naked and soapy that flooded his mind.

Angela parked her Blazer in the right place, then climbed onto the roof and held the sheets while Marc adjusted them around the doors.

“You first.” Angela began opening the supplies she’d already placed on the hood.

Marc took off his Colts and entered the cozy four-by-four area. As he began undressing, Angela lit a smoke, trying not to imagine his every action but failing as she kept watch on the dark, Missouri landscape. Her sharp gaze picked out shadowy forms of mountains to the east that she assumed were the Ozarks. Everything appeared normal here, but she wasn’t fooled.

*Rap-rap-rap-rap!*

Angela fumbled for her gun. She felt Marc’s displeasure even though she couldn’t see it.

“It’s just a woodpecker.”

“This time of night?”

“Yep. Everything’s screwed up now for them, too.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Don’t be, just remember it. Once you familiarize yourself with the sounds of your surroundings, you’ll only react to what’s not normal for that environment. Your mind will sort it out for you.”

Angela smiled, grateful for him and all she was learning. Marc was the perfect teacher. He never made her feel stupid or acted like he was better.

Angela heard his dog tag clink. Her mouth went dry at the thought of his naked chest. His belt buckle was next, then a zipper and a rustle of jeans that made her heart pound.

“Hit me, woman.”

Angela slowly began pouring warm water into the shower. *I didn’t hear underwear...*

She sucked in a surprised breath when her body responded to that image.

“Soap, please.”

That brought a new set of images; she was careful not to touch his wet fingers as she handed him the blue cake.

“Washrag?”

She got it quickly.

When he finally called for a rinse, she was relieved. Too many feelings and memories were coming back to her, but it had to stop. A spark hadn’t been enough back then. It wouldn’t be now.

“I’m done. You can stop drooling.”

Angela flushed, stuttering in embarrassed denial.

Marc laughed, drying off. “Well, I thought it was funny.” He quickly pulled on his clean jeans and shirt, and stepped out in his bare feet. “Come on down. Your turn.”

He sat on the bumper to tug on his socks.

Angela moved slowly, fear growing at the thought of being defenseless with a man above her.

Marc felt it. Their eyes locked, spoke.

*I’m scared.*

*You can trust me.*

*...prove it?*

“Hang on.” He pulled on his boots and then dug out another blanket that he tossed over the top of the makeshift shower. He left a small opening for pouring water. “If it gets lighter, you’ll know I’m peeking.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Angie. You know that.”

Marc kept up a steady stream of chatter about their travel plans as she washed, not letting the vibes become sexual for even an instant. She’d asked for proof. He gave it to her.

Angela hurried, body tingling from her hands and thoughts. By the time she finished, she had relaxed more than either of them had thought she would.

Marc moved to the fire as she dressed, making a half pot of hot chocolate with their last pack of mix.

Angela joined him on the blanket he’d put out, taking a mug with a smile. Chocolate was always welcome. She sipped it as she dug her brush from her kit.

Marc got his kit out and started working on both his guns. Marc watched her while he cleaned the weapons, unwilling to look away from the flames dancing over her black curls and pale skin. “I can do that without ripping all your hair out. The birds could make a nest with what you’ve thrown into the fire every night.”

Angela’s first thought was *no*. “Deal. You battle the tangles, I’ll roll.”

His surprised, happy look kept her from withdrawing the offer. She surrendered the brush reluctantly when he held out a hand.

Marc shifted behind her and knelt down. He started with the damp ends, aware of how tense her posture was.

It was an uncertain moment for Angela. She listened with a thumping heart, hearing leaves rustling in the soft breeze, the gravel crunching under Dog’s paws as he returned, panting... She waited for footsteps and gunfire. Kenny could be here by now.

Dog sniffed their feet, their beds, and then curled up near the fire.

Angela told herself to relax. The wolf would hear anyone sneaking around, even a Marine. Besides, she wasn’t doing anything wrong. She got her journal out to prove that.

By the time he had gotten a third of the way up her small waist, Angela had relaxed. Marc eased down, legs on either side of her. She tensed again as his big body surrounded hers, but when he only continued to work on her damp curls; she continued writing in her journal.

Marc wondered if she would note today’s escape in her journal. She’d had him telling stories every night for the first few weeks, but she hadn’t asked for one lately. He suddenly wondered why. Had his tale of betrayal and self-preservation during Katrina bothered her that much?

“Not so much your part. You followed orders.” She closed her journal and dug a joint from her case. “It just makes me sad all those people were hurt.”

Marc agreed. “I almost left the Marines over it. I mean, we could hear them screaming for help. How’s a guy supposed to live with that?”

Angela wanted to comfort him, but she was afraid to say the wrong thing and break the peacefulness. She did the best she could. “They wouldn’t let you help. You were knocked out when you tried to anyway. Nothing you could do.”

*Pop!*

Angela jumped into his arms as the log in the fire exploded into a shower of sparks.

Marc was pleased when she laughed and didn’t move away. He kept his hands working, almost holding her now.

When he finished, he put the brush down and rested his chin on her shoulder. “You got that lit yet?”

Angela’s stomach tightened at the feel of his warm breath on her cheek, but she didn’t pull away. “It’ll burn, but it won’t be pretty. Stale doesn’t describe this shit.”

He chuckled, fishing in his pockets for a lighter. When he leaned in to share the flame, their bodies made gentle contact for the first time in fifteen long years.

Angela’s heart immediately settled into a rhythm of a peace that she hadn’t felt in a long time.

“Look, honey. The moon.”

She leaned back against Marc’s hard chest to peer up. “It’s a good sign.” She still didn’t move away. “We need more of those.”

They smoked in silence; Angela let the warmth and comfort of Marc’s body carry her away. She was safe, if only for this moment.

Her lashes fluttered when he slid an arm around her to pass the joint. Caught up in the good moment, Marc couldn’t resist putting a soft kiss on her smooth cheek. “Never did I see such beauty, such courage, such passion, and such fear in her eyes. The lonely heart demands and the mind refuses, but the body, the core, pulses with need.” He inhaled and passed, continuing to speak his poetry as they relaxed in clean jeans and matching Marine sweatshirts. “Never did I see such hair, dark as the night, and lips of love, red as a rose. A body that tempts me, begs me, and blue eyes that follow me into my dreams and beyond. Forgive me these careless slips of shameless flattery. I cannot explain, with mere words, what you mean to me. Hold to the truth, to your heart, to love… To us.”

Angela rested her cheek against his chin, pushing away the voice now screaming of Kenn’s anger. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s the way you make me feel, what you make me see. My life was so empty without you.”

Hers, too. Other than her son, she’d had no one she could love or trust. When Marc wrapped his arms around her, she relaxed against him. The long day had worn her down.

*Don’t lie to yourself*, her heart scolded.

Angela faced it this time. She was too aware of the man behind her to keep denying it. Marc was the only one who had ever understood her and what she needed. When he kissed her jaw again, she said nothing to make him stop.

“You smell good.” He rubbed his cheek against hers, sweet vanilla assaulting his senses. The feel of his lips on her skin sent an unexpected shiver of pleasure into her stomach.

“Are you cold?” He tightened his arms around her.

Angela flushed, nodding so he would pull the blanket around them and make their innocent embrace more private.

Aware that things were going too fast, Marc wrapped the quilt around them anyway and pulled another cover over their legs. As he wrapped himself around her, she slipped her hand into his.

Marc sucked in a breath, heart skipping.

They sat together in silence, both very aware of the other, yet content to just be so close.

The day caught up to Angela quickly. When she was asleep in his arms, Marc gently laid them down and pulled the covers up. He cradled her, loving every second. As he buried his face in her hair, he placed a long, slow kiss to her neck that gave him chills and jerked her eyes open.

Marc forced himself to stop despite how hard it was. “Night, honey. See you in the morning.”

“Yes, you will,” she mumbled groggily, already falling back to sleep.

Marc joined her, the wolf at their feet.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

**The Devil and his Minions**

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March 19th

**1**

**D**illan and Dean made it to the filthy slaver camp at dawn, pulling three middle-aged women and a strikingly beautiful teenager on rawhide ropes. The females had all come from Kimball, Nebraska, where the brothers had waited out a dust storm.

Surrounded by a wall of mountains, the slaver camp was a sprawling, unorganized mess of mud-spattered, bullet-ridden vehicles and torn, dusty tents that stretched across highway 287. They were out of sight and sound of the next town, with trees, charred frames of cars, and ranch homes as a border. One house had been reduced to a blackened frame with antireligious phrases sprayed on its sheds and outbuildings. It had been targeted due to being covered in Christmas decorations. The hundreds of statues and displays were riddled with bullet holes and melted by Molotov cocktails, but there was too much to destroy all of it. Now, it stood as a warning that the old world was gone.

Smoke swirled sharply from dying fires. Hordes of flies buzzed and landed, swarmed, and resettled over the garbage dump behind the camp. Corpses of all ages lay there.

The three females on ropes didn’t react to these horrors as they stumbled by. They just concentrated on moving their feet so they could draw another breath. The rawhide was shrinking, rubbing away the skin on their necks until they were slowly choking all the time.

Dean and Dillan came into the camp openly, not expecting to see guards; they didn’t. Word had spread. Many of the places ahead of the Mexicans had already emptied before they arrived. That would work in the twins’ favor. Empty towns meant no women and that might cost Cesar leadership if it continued long enough. The twins had an offer that would be to the man’s advantage. Or so he would think if they did this right.

They had made over four hundred miles in two weeks. Alternating driving, they had stayed on the move until they stopped near the Nebraska-Colorado state line to pass the storm and ferret out a few females for Cesar. Despite owing Cesar their lives, Dean and Dillan felt no loyalty toward the mean little man. They did respect him for his quick, brutal methods of control, but if not for their failure with the witch, they would have never returned. It was one more thing they hated her for. They had been gone a long time. Cesar was unstable, making it hard to know how they would be received. He might order them killed before they had a chance to make the offer.

Few of the passed out and sleeping slavers noticed their arrival. Those who did acknowledged them while ignoring the bandages. They scanned the women, then averted their gazes. Word had also spread about the brothers. Despite their long absence, now was clearly a bad time to draw their attention. Even the camp mutts, starving, mean mixes of indecipherable origins, shied from them.

Dean and Dillan went to the rear of the dirty area, to the reeking, rusted semis. They shoved the cringing captives into an empty one, locking them in. These were holding pens for slaves. There were no guards here either. The already broken women had no courage left to run, but those who were fresh wouldn’t make it far before every man in camp was on them. A loose slave was fair game.

With their noses full of holding cell decay and the harsh odor of gasoline, the twins went to the center of the muddy, stinking site, certain they would find the leader there. His tent would be surrounded by his men so if they were attacked, he wouldn’t be hit first. Cesar was smart, ruthless–exactly what they needed.

The grungy green tent was indeed in the middle. It was one of only a few dozen vinyl shelters. Most of the men preferred to see open sky above them after years of not seeing it at all from prison and detention centers. It was also a lot easier to just wrap up in a blanket and roll under a truck.

The twins could see the Loveland, Colorado skyline lit up in flames and lined in thick, black smoke. Their eyes were drawn to the charred frame of a jetliner resting in a thicket of piñon trees to the right of the burning town. Surrounded by a muddy, devastated landscape, and covered in red dust, the crushed plane was more unbelievable than the destroyed city behind it.

Loud snores echoed under dogs yelping, women crying and, the pop of neglected fires, but there was instant silence as the twins slid inside the center lean-to…and then a gun cocked.

“Who is there?”

The smells of sex, blood, and violence mixed badly with the cigar smoke in the dark tent. The cautious brothers stayed in the shadows, so there wasn’t a clear shot.

“Dean, and my brother, Dillan.”

Their gazes lingered on the naked teenager chained to the center pole of Cesar’s filthy tent like a dangerous dog. She was curled into a ball, showing a body they immediately wanted.

Jennifer felt it, tensing. Other than that, she didn’t move. She knew better.

“We have an offer for you.”

“And, an untouched gift.”

Cesar grunted in recognition, putting his weapon under his pillow.

The twins grimaced as Cesar yawned and added bad breath to the other strong odors.

“So, you have returned. I did not think you would.”

A candle flared to life, giving them a better view of the Mexican and the bloody girl at his feet. Her swollen face and crusted thighs said she’d passed a rough night.

“What happened?” The slaver pulled up his cruddy jeans. The material was tacky with dried blood–the girl’s. “Who attacked you?”

“A witch,” the bald brothers answered together.

The bearded slaver puffed on a cigar. Cesar had never been sure about these two; he studied them while pulling on muddy boots. If not for the good work they had done for him in the past, he would kill them here now. “A bruja?”

They nodded at the same time, tones full of hatred.

“Yes, magic.”

“Spells. A witch.”

Cesar tried to figure out what they could hope to gain from such a lie. When he found nothing, he let himself consider what it could do for him. He was no stranger to the occult and its mysteries. If the twins were telling the truth, if they had found what the old world hadn’t, his plans to seed America with his bastards and control it through them would be unstoppable. “You have seen this?”

The twins told him everything that had happened. They offered no excuses for their failure, and they didn’t talk up their actions. It convinced the Mexican. The mercenaries believed what they were saying. *Is it possible? A real witch?*

All three men looked over as the flap opened to reveal a stocky Mexican in crisscrossed gun belts. An ugly scar stretched across his cheek and ran up his nose, then over his brow. It cut his face in half and gave him the appearance of someone who liked to cause pain. “Everything is okay?”

Cesar waved him in with his deformed hand.

The twins ran scornful leers over the new man’s broken, yellow teeth, baggy shirt, and torn, muddy pants, but they both recognized José for what he was–a possible threat to their plans. “No, but it cannot be helped. Get the men up and ready for tomorrow. Then give Richard the signal. Trace light red ‘e uno green.” Cesar hated the sound of the broken English coming from his mouth. He hated anything American, but many of those here didn’t know their native language. He had little choice if he wanted to be understood.

José swept the hermanos with clear dislike. He had been against Cesar letting these two live, though he had voted to spare Rick.

The mercenaries smirked back at him.

“We have esclavos in truck six.”

“See to them.”

José bared broken teeth at them before ducking back out into the heavy wind and mud. Men who were about to come toward him with questions changed their mind when they saw the fury on his face.

José was a cousin and not as deadly as Cesar, but he had earned a vicious reputation with his temper. He was left alone when he stomped to the trucks, worrying about the twins. They were hardasses. If they decided they wanted control of Cesar’s camp, there was a good chance they would get it. In Mexico, they had been the ones to call when no one else could get the job done.

Wind beat against the tent. In the thick silence after José ducked out, all three men could hear the girl’s nervous breathing.

Jennifer had been with him since the week of the war. Fear for her life was something that never left, even when she was alone.

Cesar stared at the brothers with a hard, calculating expression. “There is no way to explain these things?”

“No.”

“We followed her for almost a month. She was alone until she sent out the wave of power.”

“She conjured a protector.”

They appeared desperate to Cesar, certainly not the same men who had left him after they’d conquered NORAD together. “You know where she goes?”

“She’s traveling northwest, never deviates.”

Cesar scowled. “There is a group near Yellowstone that calls for survivors.”

“You hear them this far away?”

Cesar frowned deeper, pulling a beaten sombrero from the debris littered floor. He slapped it on over his tightly kinked black hair. “Sí. Your bruja is going to them?”

“Maybe. We think she’s hunting for family.”

Cesar’s displeasure grew, scanning the grimy bandana around Dillan’s bandaged wrist. The white of the gauze under it had long since turned brown. “We must get to her before she reaches them. This group is big, organized. A witch would make them a threat to me.” Cesar’s mind raced. “You can take her?”

Dean shook his head, while Dillan shrugged.

Cesar felt a tremor of worry. He had never seen a time when the twins disagreed on anything. *The woman’s protector must truly be strong.*

Cesar saw Dillan grimace when he flapped his hand to deflect a determined fly. The injury to his arm was obviously bad. *It is her man they want, her soldier.* Surely he was the one responsible. Then why say a woman? That was worse. Either way, it came down to revenge. “So, this is why you’ve come back.” It wasn’t a question; he glared at them, thinking it wouldn’t hurt to agree for now. “Mine during the day, yours at night?”

They both nodded eagerly.

Cesar grinned, gold front tooth flashing. “It will be good. We will set a trap, kill her soldier, and have her.”

“That’s not enough!”

“She knows things!”

Cesar fingered the handle of his hoja, hating it that they were always so disrespectful.

The injured brothers waited for him to pull the knife and hand over his camp. Either way, they were determined to pit his men against the witch.

“You have a plan?” Anyone else, Cesar would have already challenged, but he wasn’t sure he could win against the two vicious assassins with just the gun under his pillow and a hangover.

Dean’s leer lingered on the chained girl, but he was aware that the Mexican was now an enemy instead of an ally. He would need to be handled as such. “We’ll follow her; figure out where she’s going. If it’s a good place, we can take shelter there for the winter.”

“You are estupido to let her reach familia. Then you face dos brujas, yes?”

The twins were pissed at the insult. They had killed for less.

Cesar kept his hand on the knife. *I will at least take one of them with me to hell.*

“It’s better to control them both, than to have the missing one ambush us.” Dean didn’t want to kill Cesar and lose half the men outside in the fight for leadership that would ensue. “We can’t find the other one until she leads us to them.”

“How will you get to them once she reaches the safety of this Haven?”

“You’ll surround the group and demand they hand over both witches. We’ll pick off a few easy targets, use your inside traitor to cause chaos, and then make it clear we followed her. The other people there will hand her over to save themselves.”

The other brother picked up the explanation. “Once they do, we’ll make her use her power against any defenses the group has. You’ll be in control of a safe area, new supplies, a witch, and fresh slaves–all without having to lose men.”

Cesar needed proof to go through so much. Their word wasn’t enough. *This has to be a trick.* “The men will not believe.”

“They will later, but for now, it doesn’t matter. They don’t even have to know. Just keep going north and give them whores and whiskey.”

Dillan gestured. “Didn’t you tell us you wanted to take Cheyenne and Casper by May?”

Cesar’s face lit up greedily. “Sí, and my men know it.”

“Good. That will put us on an intercept course. Dean and I will track her; we’ll also find some bait to send in with Rick.”

Cesar considered it. He had used the traitor repeatedly. No one ever suspected him until it was too late because he was white. The Americanos should have remembered their own history. Whites were not more trustworthy than the Russians or even himself, for that matter. They were only a bit more careful to cover their asses.

“Less than a month from now, you’ll own Wyoming, and probably have a good start on Nebraska. We’ll be a day or two from the tank hidden near there. Best of all, you’ll rule the entire western half of this country, from the Nevada wastelands to the Midwest corn belt.”

Dean finished it off. “Plus, this group will know you’re coming and lose courage.”

“America is dead. I will show them!” Cesar clenched his fist, the missing fingers making it a grotesque motion. He didn’t see the looks the twins were giving his young slave. She was his private property; he didn’t share. He wanted to be sure the bastards he left were his and every man in his camp knew he would kill the girl and the man to be sure of it. “It shall be as you say. Drink, smoke, rest. Tomorrow, we take Windsor. Then you shall have the revenge you deserve.”

**2**

Cesar invaded the untouched town of Windsor under the cover of darkness and a violent thunderstorm; his men blocked escape routes at all four entrances to the city.

They split up, and began moving in at 4am. They gave no mercy to anyone, like they hadn’t in any of the other towns they’d taken along Interstate 25. Moving inward, the gang conquered Windsor over the next six hours, burning as they went through. The few who managed to escape would have nothing to return to.

Doors were kicked in and terrified females were dragged away, floors and bedclothes soaking up the blood of their husbands and fathers. Those found running the radio broadcasting American values were tortured, beheaded, and dismembered, then left with Mexican flags draped over their faces. The rest of the males were killed where they were found, babies were left to die alone, and female after female was raped, beaten, broken.

During the first hours of this hell, the twins were back in Cesar’s tent, taking what was his. They snuck back to join the slaughter after they filled Jennifer with seed.

Cesar never knew they hadn’t been with him the entire time. A few of his sharper men could have told him, but that might mean a confrontation between them. Cesar’s men weren’t sure he would come out on top. The twins were hard, but none of Cesar’s crew wanted them in control. The stocky Mexican was still followed without hesitation when they got to Fort Collins and found it abandoned. Word had spread that the slavers were close.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

**Success and Failure**

**A close up of a logo

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March 21st

**1**

***T****his has to be close enough*. Adrian waited for Kenn to finish updating the Eagle who was about to take over his 8am-2pm shift. Jeremy was on Neil’s team, level three. He’d only earned the right to have point last night.

Adrian sighed, tired and worried as he waited for his people to get ready for another day of traveling. They were on the edge of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands, off 387, and while he was glad to be east of 25, pictures had verified Casper and Buffalo were ghost towns.

It made his stomach burn. One was buried, the other submerged. His warning hadn’t been heard, hadn’t mattered. They hadn’t picked up a single survivor since the dust storm, which made these people in Cheyenne all the more important.

Adrian swept the mountains surrounding them. Would the evergreens up there have mold like the fir and pine trees here did? Would it smell like smoke and unburied dead? Were there bodies of deer, moose, people? He was almost sure they would see for themselves at some point.

Adrian changed as Kenn came to his side, sharp tone of a drill instructor replacing the calm voice the camp usually heard. The slaver rampage had traveled up Interstate 25 faster than they had estimated. Cheyenne had called again. “You’re *the Man* on this one, Marine. You ready?”

“Locked and loaded, sir. Kyle’s team is stowing the beans, bags, and bullets.”

“They’re good to go, eager to prove themselves. What about you? How do you feel?”

Kenn’s expression didn’t change as he took in Adrian’s dusty jeans and wrinkled camouflage shirt. The boss had been up all night again. “Good, ready.”

“In and out, Marine, just like with the old lady. But if not, if something goes wrong and you have to fight?”

“Then we’ll kill as many as we can.”

It may have been wrong in the old world, but it was all that was left to them now. Adrian only ordered it whenever he thought the crime warranted it. This definitely did. The slavers were a growing threat he felt dutybound to eliminate. But he couldn’t yet, not against one hundred fifty armed men who had become good at conquering survivors. The stories from refugees who had escaped said he needed to tread carefully.

Kenn seemed to feel it too, repeating himself to make sure his boss knew. “If any opportunity comes up to do damage, we’ll take it. *I’ll* take it.”

Adrian clapped him on the arm, satisfied Kenn meant it. They had been falling behind and would arrive later than expected. That made the mission more dangerous, putting the Eagles and the slavers near Cheyenne at roughly the same time. “Watch your six. We need you.”

“Semper Fi.”

“Oorah!”

A deep frown planted itself across Adrian’s face as Kenn and the Eagle support team left. He hated it that their first encounter with the dangerous men would happen without him there to judge the threat.

Adrian hit the button on the tape player in his pocket, listening intently. *Am I missing anything?*

*“SOS, Safe Haven! This is Cheyenne! SOS!”*

*“Go ahead, Overloaded.”*

*“They’ve hit Wellington! We can see the smoke. People are coming here, but I can’t care for them! We need help!”*

Adrian hit stop. The desperation made him consider changing places with Kenn, but he couldn’t. The Marine wasn’t ready for leadership of an entire camp yet. For this mission though, he was perfect. Kyle and his team were making steady progress every day, and though only ten men were getting into the armored vehicles, they would be lethal.

Fighting a migraine, Adrian went on his rounds. Another forty souls would bring their number up to one hundred seventy-seven. They were a week from Cheyenne, but there was no way the whole camp could go and get back out without being seen. Kenn and Kyle would do it in two or three days. Adrian knew he would worry the whole time.

The growing camp seemed almost empty once Kenn and the Eagles faded from view. Adrian didn’t like the feeling of being incomplete, but never doubted that they were. He hated to have people out of Safe Haven. He only relaxed when the entire flock was under his watchful care. They’d been lucky so far that everyone who’d gone out had returned. He had increased their chance of success with the addition of armed escorts.

Adrian looked forward to a time when he could settle them down and show people how to provide for their needs, instead of scouring this broken land like scavengers. Now camped in the heart of the Thunder Basin National Grassland, they were fifteen miles from the South Dakota state line. The tall pines, blue grass, and forget-me-nots were comforting sights after all the horror along 387. If not for the heavy fog, they would already be back on the road now, tired faces gawking through the windows at a muddy landscape that included a crashed government chopper.

Adrian tensed, feeling the uneasy mix of power, of magic coming. The landscape wavered, changed. He saw a survivor of the crash, her outline tall, thin, tough.

He looked away from the vision. It had been so long since he’d had one that he’d forgotten how it made his heart clench.

Hoping she was one of his, Adrian got moving again, feeling a little bitter with fate. He had been promised magic, but so far, he’d only gotten a gifted teenager who was too young to really help yet.

Adrian lit a smoke. *It doesn’t matter*. When Charlie was needed, at least he would be here, already under the discreet eyes of the Eagles. They had been told to watch him right after the restless teenager had gotten his own tent–the result of a noisy fight where Charlie had almost hurt one of the boys he was bunking with. Kenn’s cadet was a bit unstable.

*Unhappy*, Adrian corrected himself. Even the job with the veterinarian wouldn’t be enough to hold him here. Something had Charlie’s mind, pulling at him. When Kenn returned, Adrian hoped to ferret out whatever it was.

Today held a full shift of activities. The biggest was a towing contest. Their clearing times had improved because he’d made it into a race to see who could do it fastest without breaking any safety rules. Tonight, the first crew leader would be picked by whoever won. With Kenn gone, more people would be willing to try. There was little his right-hand man wasn’t good at. It even sounded different without him here. The people were subdued somehow without his energetic, boisterous XO.

Once he got them a couple hundred miles further from 25 and the slavers, Adrian planned to travel southeast for a while, toward Georgia and the miles of caves waiting there. He hadn’t thought of a better place yet. He dreaded having to confirm that going into the ground was the only way they would survive. His other option was too far away to consider without more help.

Comforted by the steady crunch of boots guarding their perimeter, Adrian moved by Kenn’s improved mess–where coffee and food lines were open on both sides–and came to the traveling emergency class. Tents flapped in his ear; he paused to listen to part of a lesson, assaulted by the odors of cologne, sweat, and cigar smoke. He loved it. It was the smell of life. It beat the hell out of the other shit they were usually inhaling.

A small group was gathered around the rear of a big van, watching Peggy Ann Kelly, the single, 40-something mother of little Becky, change a flat tire. This class had solved the need for one crew to do all the labor, all the time. This way, the entire camp did it.

The cute, reddish-blond woman was sweating and greasy. Most of the men watching would have done it for her to get her attention, but Adrian had made it clear women needed to be able to fend for themselves too. The males watching offered advice but no actual help.

Peggy struggled to break the last lug nut.

Adrian denied the bald professor who stepped forward to help. The portly man carried his profession proudly, from his thick glasses to his plaid patterned suit. Adrian didn’t look away from the brooding glare the teacher sent his way. He also didn’t keep his voice down. “She has to learn. What if she gets separated?”

The gusting wind carried his words further than the class.

The bald man frowned, aware of the thick, disapproving silence from the men surrounding him. “You sure it isn’t because I’m black and she’s white?”

Adrian stiffened. Joseph had been here long enough to know how things worked. *Is he holding onto that shit?* They didn’t have many other races represented here yet, but that wasn’t because Adrian didn’t want them. The war had split more than families. The old segregation lines had slammed down, making most races search out their own kind. It was something he needed people like this bitter teacher to help him conquer. “You’re from Salt Lake City. You were almost dead when we found you. A group of men had beaten you so bad we didn’t think you’d live at first. There were only twenty of us then, and no one knew what to do with you.”

“Because I’m a nigger.”

The men around them muttered uneasily. No one used that word here, not even in joking. Adrian would throw them out.

Adrian’s tone was sharp. “We had our basic laws, but race was something we hadn’t even talked about. We saw you bleeding and we had to make a choice. Do we let you die or let you in and find a way to deal with all the problems mixing races inevitably brings?”

Adrian had the attention of everyone close enough to hear. He used it to bring them together and issue a warning. “We made the choice in about fifteen seconds, Joseph. You’re not black or white in this camp. You’re a survivor and that’s the only one that matters here. Leave the race war in the past, where it belongs, and things will continue to improve for *everyone*. Dredge it back up, and you’ll need to find somewhere else to get food and shelter.”

Joseph quickly nodded.

Adrian kept walking, but he knew Joseph would need a lot of work before he would accept that his race wouldn’t hold him back here–only that nasty attitude would. The same was true of anyone who came through his gates. *It’s my lane or find another highway.*

**2**

“All those jeeps worry me.” Kyle lowered the binoculars.

“We’ll have to draw them out.” Kenn kept watching the armed men patrol the top and four sides of the large school where the refugees had been hiding. Two on top, one each on the sides and rear, two more were on the front doors. Maybe four more were inside, but judging from all the jeeps parked along the exits, probably more like six or ten.

*We’re outnumbered, but not by much*. Kenn frowned as thick clouds rolled through the sky and colored lightning flashed in the distance. He scanned the area again, seeing old holiday decorations that had been used for target practice, but underneath, he was evaluating how to kill them all.

Kyle was impatient. “You and I covering the top?”

Kenn didn’t answer, still finishing the plan. They hadn’t found ammo for the M16s, so that meant getting into range for handguns. When it started, a few of the targets would come out, but most of them would take up positions around the hostages, forcing a standoff. For a while. Then reinforcements would come. This was only a scouting party that had already checked in and reported their victory. It bothered Kenn that neither he nor Adrian had expected this level of organization. *We’ll have to do it quietly. No telling how far out their main group is.*

It had taken Adrian’s Eagles thirty hours to get here, driving straight through in five-hour shifts. The men who hadn’t driven stood guard duty when they arrived to let the others get a short rest. They had snuck in as dusk faded.

The ten men on duty hated it here. It reeked of decay; even the constant gusts of salty, smoky wind couldn’t knock it down. The awful odor came from all the bodies. Thousands of them, fresh and old, littered the city, along with burnt houses, cars, businesses. There were thick drag marks in the dust left by the storm, garbage, mud-covered streets, and little pillars of smoke that signaled the path the Mexicans had taken to get here. They were in a war zone.

“What do you want to do?”

Kenn had been waiting for that edge of frustration in Kyle’s voice. He stood, always feeling the need to prove who was in charge when they were on missions together. To the listening men, he said the right thing. Only Kyle would sting afterward when he remembered almost losing his cool with only silence used against him. “We kill them all.”

Kenn knelt, pulling his K-BAR to draw in the damp dirt behind the big storage sheds they were using for cover. He hadn’t created this plan, but these men wouldn’t know that. “We go with suppressors. Take out this side, and corner. As they come out, we pick them off. If the leader comes out too, it’ll all be over.”

“And if we don’t spot the leader?” Kyle kept the bitterness out of his tone, but not his gestures. He hated the smug Marine leading his team today. He was hoping for someone to join Safe Haven that he could support against Kenn.

Kenn slid his knife back into his muddy boot. “We’ll have taken out at least half the men, and that’ll leave a lot of exits without coverage. We’ll look in from those trees along the windows first, then slip in and nail ‘em as we find ‘em. Once inside, we go for the gym, because that’s where they’ll be with a group of captives that size. From there, we’ll do what we do best.”

“They might negotiate, surrender.”

Kenn frowned at Kyle’s comment, checking his gear and gun. “Adrian wouldn’t give them mercy. We won’t either.

The other Eagles followed his lead. They had been on a few missions where hostages were involved, but there had only been one shootout. The small gang of Aryan brothers hadn’t wanted to give up their captives. They had given their lives instead, but the newness of doing battle hadn’t worn off yet for the Eagles.

Kenn tapped his good luck charm, a Zippo lighter he kept in his pocket. “Top four shooters with me, the rest to the sides and meet up. I’m man in the middle. On my mark... Go!”

Kenn and Kyle fired as they ran.

The two Mexican lookouts jerked at the same time, and fell together. The other man on the roof darted toward his comrades, shouting. He arched, stopped, fell as the second rush of Eagles hit the building. They came to the wall in fast waves.

Kenn and Kyle stepped into view as the front doors opened and two men walked out.

Kyle whistled, then waved a middle finger at the shocked faces.

The two men drew their guns.

The Eagles ducked out of sight as the enemy gave chase.

“One...two...three. Now!”

Moving together, their guns took out both men before they could return fire.

The two Eagles dragged the heavy bodies around the corner as Chris pointed to the other row of trees. Chris was on Kyle’s team, second in command. “The banners center there. That’s probably the gym.”

Eight men eased up the trees a minute later, using the thick branches for cover from the ground and windows.

“Bulletproof glass.” Kenn’s voice was barely audible.

Kyle snickered, but the amusement didn’t reach his voice. “Not today. All the Eagles are packing armor piercing rounds. Your mags too.”

Kenn’s mind raced as he peered through the dirty glass, seeing five armed men around fifty civilians on the gymnasium floor. Which one was the leader?

A door opened on their side of the building. A tall, thin man emerged, face hidden by his bandana. He noticed the bodies right away.

“Dedro! Ahhh!”

Kenn’s shot connected, but the guerrilla’s yell ruined their element of surprise. Guards came to the windows; boots ran toward them.

Kenn aimed for the jeep in front of the glass doors, trying to time it as the next rush of men came out. An earlier shot to the gas tank was already allowing a long stream of the pungent liquid to escape.

Kyle and the Eagles stayed still, waiting for the distraction Kenn was about to provide.

*Woosshhh!*

His tossed flare sparked the puddle of gas. They watched bright, orange flames flash over the concrete and scorch their way up the fuel coming from the gas tank.

*KKkaaaablammm!*

The explosion shattered half of the windows along the front of the building, throwing the jeep through the doors as they opened. The slavers rushing out were consumed in a cloud of twisted metal and hot flames.

“Fire!”

“Get out!”

“Sit down!”

The refugees were in chaos, pushing for the doors. The slaver’s orders were ignored in the panic, causing the guerrillas to raise their guns and take aim at retreating figures.

“Now, Eagles! Open fire!”

Their targets were moving, mixed into the small sea of terrified civilians; slugs found chests and backs amid total chaos. Despite all the people trying to get out of the chained doors, only slavers were hit.

“Damn!” Chris examined his arm as blood dripped down the thick tree trunk. “I’m trimmed–that’s it.”

Kenn and Kyle were both relieved. Neither man ever wanted to tell Adrian they’d gotten one of his army killed.

Seeing no more enemy movement, Kenn leaned inside the shattered window. He spotted shaggy, unkempt hair, cold sores. The smell of body odor made him grimace. *No threats to my place in this group.* “US Eagle Force! Safe Haven!”

The shout echoed in the concrete room, getting attention. They looked up warily, quieting.

“Someone here named Overloaded?” Kenn grinned. “Your taxi’s waiting.”

Kyle and his men lowered each other into the room, hurrying to grab fire extinguishers as the refugees cheered.

A tall, thin man with a long cane and a dirty bandage over his head tapped toward Kenn’s window position. “What’s the word?”

“Freedom.” Kenn scanned the bodies on the floor, then the door, where Kyle and Chris were getting the small fire under control. The other men were taking up guard posts by the exits. He keyed the mike on his belt. “Mission accomplished.”

It took a little under an hour to evacuate the filthy school. It would have been one hour exactly if Kenn had swept every room, but he didn’t bother with the basement, where the dead had been stored.

As the team pulled away, no one noticed a hysterical blonde woman running up the nearby road, arms waving frantically.

They never glanced back.

**3**

Kenn brought home forty-one survivors.

Adrian met them eagerly, Seth at his side, but both men were once again disappointed. They now had a hairdresser, yet another bank teller (it wasn’t surprising to Adrian how many of them had survived. They were used to having their lives threatened), and a lot of other careers they didn’t need yet, but none of them, not even Greg, the blind radio man, had what he was searching for. There was no fire burning in these people, just bright fear and desperation.

Adrian didn’t sleep that night, sure he had passed one of his own somewhere. He chose to linger in the area for a few days. It was dangerous, considering how close they were to the slavers, but he needed the help as much as the refugees needed rescue.

*I refuse to believe I’m the last free descendant in America. I’ll keep calling until someone answers.*

# Chapter Thirty

**Broken Bridges**

**A picture containing candelabrum

Description automatically generated**

Western Missouri

**90 Days AW**

**1**

**“T**his is Safe Haven… Red Cross convoy… survivors. Coming through…”

Angela froze at the staticky transmission.

Marc came to the open passenger door. “Everything okay?”

“That’s them. That’s who we’re searching for.”

Marc knew the group had to be within a few hundred miles for them to hear the transmission. He fished in his pockets for a smoke. That only gave him another three weeks alone with her.

Angela got out and shut the door, ignoring the gray and black wolf on the roof edging over for her attention. “I’ll help.”

Marc understood her need to hurry, but he wanted to linger over the radio for a location. In this big empty, it would be easy to miss them.

“We won’t. *I* won’t.”

Marc lit a smoke, watching her take care of their lunch mess. She wiped her hands down her jeans as she finished. It was something she wouldn’t have felt relaxed enough to do during their first weeks together. She was growing, learning, changing, and on some things, she was as good as he was.

“They’re near Gillette, Wyoming. We’ll catch up in South Dakota, I think, around Interstate 90.”

Marc recalculated, not doubting her. They would be facing her man...by the end of next week. *Ten days.* His heart twisted.

“Come on. I’ll back it up; you can do the chains.”

Marc swallowed his unhappiness and cracked an imaginary whip, making her snicker. They’d chosen to tow one of the Blazers to save fuel since they were low again. “You drive. I’ll check the maps for what’s between us and them.”

Angela nodded, glad he’d interrupted her thoughts. Instead of relief that she was about to be with her son, all she could feel was fear. Time to pay was close now, and she wasn’t sure if she was strong enough to do it.

The mood was somber as they left Corning, Missouri. This was tornado country, part of the alley. It was eerie to discover one block normal–if you could call looted, burned businesses normal–and the next street had only piles of debris standing. It was also farm country, crops of tobacco and river oats were everywhere, surrounded by Indian grass and milkweed. There was no traffic in sight; there hadn’t been for the last day. Angela knew why. Few people had made it out of or through the last town.

Pattonsburg, fully decorated, had bodies in every Christmas scene. Each corpse had been painstakingly put in the place of the person they most resembled. Mary, Santa, Wise Men, and even the baby Jesus were represented. She and Marc had gone around; the feeling of evil was too strong to ignore. They had detoured an extra day, sure each of the *actors* had been survivors of the war, not victims. They were too fresh. Pattonsburg had become, or maybe always had been, home to a serial killer.

She had marked it in her journal, then tried to forget about it, but she’d kept stewing. Marc had offered to go back and challenge the mad man to ease her mind. She’d denied him, but when the witch had asked the same question, she’d said yes with a heavy heart. After her own encounter with evil, Angela now understood some people had earned death. The nut job in Pattonsburg was one of those; she had sent the witch out to hunt while she slept. The fact that it hadn’t been by her direct hand helped, but death was something she couldn’t handle. If she ever had to kill again, she might–

“Angie.”

She glanced up to find Marc staring at her.

“Try to let it go.”

Angela breathed deeply. Knowing she had saved future travelers mattered. “I will. What did you say?”

“We’ll have to cross the Missouri to get into Nebraska, unless you want to parallel it until we get below Kansas City. Flatter land might mean a better chance of finding a shallow place to cross.”

She was already shaking her head, lifting her sunglasses. “That’s another week. Let’s try to find a dam or a bridge around here that’s okay.”

Marc stared, stomach uneasy.

Angela gave him a quick look that revealed a desperate need. “I feel it too, but I can’t waste another week. I can’t.”

“I won’t ask you to unless we can’t find a shallow place or a dam, like we did when we came over the Mississippi.”

Angela studied the empty lanes of Interstate 29. The cracked pavement was full of potholes and mud. She wasn’t sure what was wrong, but she knew something was. “What do you–”

The ground under them began to shake. Angela slammed on the brakes, jerking them to a stop. She started to get out as the vibrations increased.

Marc put a gentle hand on her wrist. “Wait. If it gets worse, we’ll get out. Watch the ground for cracks.”

His touch was soothing, exciting.

He let go slowly, responding to her interest.

The ground under them rumbled and swayed, shifting debris piles. The distinctive sound of buildings collapsing echoed in the distance.

The shaking eased gradually, quieting over a minute before going still. Angela looked over at Marc, who had gone back to studying the map as if nothing had happened. “Should we go on?”

“Yeah, just stop if it starts again. Always stay clear of anything that can fall on you, and watch for cracks. They open up fast.”

*Don’t I know it.* Angela eased on the pedal, surprised to discover there was a fault line under St. Louis, and it was active. They had felt other tremors, but not while driving and not this strong. In the Midwest, the big one hadn’t come yet, but it felt like things were warming up.

They listened to Pink Floyd as Angela drove over weedy, debris littered streets, rolling around abandoned cars with indecipherable notes mildewed to dashboards. The conversation was about anything other than the destruction around them. Nature was the cause here.

Marc was aching. Time looked short for them, and though he could say they were almost friends, he wasn’t sure if there was more. She’d been keeping space between them. Marc stole another look at her profile as she drove. She was so far out of reach that he didn’t think he would ever have a real chance with her again, but it didn’t stop the desire.

Angela felt his hot looks, but she was blocking so she didn’t catch the exact thoughts unless he sent them. She tried not to fidget. She loved having him so close, but she also hated it. Her body was too aware of him. She was reminded of a time when the mere thought of sex didn’t make her cringe. She had loved to touch him, to kiss him, to run her fingers through his feathered black hair. They had stolen dark, shadowy moments of heaven. The voices whispered he could conquer her fear and make her feel that way again.

“You have to trust me.”

Angela threw him a startled look. “What?”

“You have to turn by that tree.”

Her eyes darted away, cheeks reddening as she realized she’d misheard.

Marc wondered if she’d been thinking about their sparks, but he didn’t push. *I know better. She taught me that lesson years ago.*

**2**

They made it to the Nebraska Missouri state line before dusk and stopped to inspect the area. Marc wasn’t encouraged. The bridge they’d hoped to cross was almost submerged. The river was well over its banks, covering the roads leading to the blue structure, but the water was dammed up on one side. The south end was so low they couldn’t see it from where they were. As a result, the ground between them and the bridge was covered in nasty, stagnant, reeking liquid; the edges of it were pushing up onto the road they were sitting on.

After a long study, Marc handed her the binoculars. “No way we could cross, even if we found a way in.”

Angela knew he was right as soon as she looked. “Damn. I’m surprised the bridge hasn’t fallen yet. Is that a bulldozer jammed up against the railroad trestle?”

“What’s left of one. The water backing up behind the bridge might mean there’s a shallow spot a bit downstream. Go slow.”

The Blazers rolled as Marc searched, picking out places that appeared solid so he could guide her around the quicksand mud that would suck them down.

Half a mile from the doomed bridge, Marc had her stop so he could get out for a better view.

Angela waited, stomach full of spiders. She grimaced at that thought and hid it as he came back to her window.

“It’s steep, but maybe we can make it. Tracks say someone else did recently. If I had to guess, I’d say they did it in a small, light car. Look at it while I unhook my Blazer and then we’ll try. You’ll go first.”

Angela did as he said, hating the way the damp ground gave under her weight and tried to steal the boots from her feet. She felt a little better when she saw it wasn’t a straight drop into the riverbed, but it still looked rough. She could see the tire ruts that someone else had left further down, just above the shallow water rushing by with bits of bobbing debris.

Not feeling the sun anymore, Angela tightened her seatbelt and drove toward the muddy bank, heart thumping. This wasn’t going to go well.

*Better tell him*, the witch warned.

Angela shook her head. It was too late to go back now. *Nothing will keep me from my son!*

The radio crackled. “Nice and slow until you hit the flatter part before the water, then pick up speed.”

Angela rode the brakes as she started down; the vehicle bounced over the big rocks, jarring her.

“A little faster, honey.”

She eased off the brake, letting it coast as the water rushed by. It was deeper than she’d first thought, and moving fast. Angela eased on the gas too late; sprays of water flew up from her submerged tires, creating small rapids that surged outward.

Her tires slipped near the middle of the wide riverbed, going sideways in the water, and then she was back in control and shooting across, heart pounding.

Marc came down the incline behind her.

Angela felt the tires slip again as she hit the muddy embankment on the other side. Pedal going to the floor, her tires dug into the wet ground. The Blazer came to a stop and snapped her seatbelt against her chest.

Angie let off the gas and hit reverse, but the tires sank further into the thick slop. She got no response from the four-wheel mode either. Angela was overwhelmed by the feeling of danger. The Blazer fishtailed as the ground began to shake again.

*Out! We have to get out!* Angela mashed the pedal, spinning the tires. White smoke billowed up.

Marc didn’t warn her as the rumbling increased. He hit the gas and slammed into the rear of her smoking, sliding Blazer, knocking it up and out of the thick mud with little visible damage.

The sound of the bridge’s final collapse was loud. Angela didn’t notice as she was hit hard and moving again. She cleared the edge and she picked up her mike, stopping to look back. “Damn that was... Marc! Get out!”

Marc knew the wall of water was surging toward him. *I’ve been here before.* When his tires bogged down where hers had, Marc shoved himself out the window and climbed onto the hood, glad Dog was with Angie this time, out of reach.

“The tree! Grab the tree!” Angela’s scream was frantic.

Marc darted across the protesting hood, jumping just as the water slammed into the Blazer. It was snatched by the current and rolled. The thick swells carried it under.

“Marc!” Angela jumped out with the rope from her kit in hand; she ran to the embankment and leaned over the edge. “Marc!”

“Here!”

She spotted him in the center of the churning, rising water. She threw the long cord as hard as she could.

It landed on his outstretched fingers. She saw him double it around his wrist.

She tied the other end to the hitch of her Blazer and ran for the driver seat, not thinking, just doing what instinct told her to.

Marc held the rope and then his breath as the water closed over his face.

The rope tightened, jerking his shoulder brutally, and then he was out like a fish caught by a boater, gasping for air. He coughed violently, feet and hands digging into the mud, clawing for purchase as she hauled him up.

The water roared in protest.

Angela saw him collapse in her mirror. She had her medical bag in hand as she rushed to him. “Marc! Are you hurt?”

Marc pushed onto his knees as he coughed out mouthfuls of diseased river water. He hadn’t been able to hold his breath long enough this time.

She ignored his protests, running her hands over him to check for injuries.

“...finger, or should I give you something?”

Marc was confused, trying to get his air back. “What?”

She gestured at the rising water. “Some of that’s inside you now. We have to get it out before it can settle in and do damage. I have something that’ll bring it up.” She set a small vial on the ground by his feet. “I’ll get camp set.”

Marc blew out a sigh, pushing up onto shaky legs. “Fucking quake. Some great joke.”

“...swallow it all and then take a deep smell of the bottle. Are we okay here?”

Marc blurrily scanned the muddy ground. There was a park about two hundred yards away. It appeared normal. “Over...there. This should be part of the Brownville...State Rec area. Leave my duffle bag, couple of jugs of water. No fire. Stove’s okay.”

Angela left him alone, glad the sound of the water crushing anything and everything would mute his misery and provide privacy.

Angela scanned for problems, pushing her gift out a full mile to be sure no one else was around. She was relieved to find it empty. Angela turned to check on Marc and saw his torn shirt hit the ground, exposing a wide chest she was drawn to over the distance. When his hand dropped to his belt buckle, she spun around, clumsy fingers getting the Coleman stove lit. *I almost lost him.* Her impatience had almost killed them both.

Angela found Marc’s naked body across the distance again; she couldn’t look away. He poured the clean water over himself. She felt a stronger chill of desire. He was a beautiful man, and they would be sharing a bed tonight to stay warm. She should have been afraid of getting that intimate, but things had changed for her. She wasn’t afraid of him as a man anymore. It was a welcome change from the paralyzing fear she had lived with for so long. Their bond of trust was one of those blind comforts that might mask the truths she wasn’t ready to face. It would be too easy to fall into a submissive role under Marc and forget her own needs just to make him happy. However, knowing she could feel a normal attraction again gave her hope that Kenn hadn’t damaged her beyond repair when it came to things like love…and sex.

Marc could feel her staring. His body swelled to thickness in seconds. He took his time rinsing, drying, dressing, brushing his teeth. He was alive. *So, let her stare all she wants.* *Maybe she’ll see something she likes and take it*.

Angela snickered, picking up the thought. The wall between them had crumbled when the water reached out for him like alien hands.

Marc walked slowly, shirt open, duffle bag over his uninjured shoulder. Their eyes locked over the distance, speaking louder than the water rushing by.

Angela scowled at all the scrapes, cuts, and bruises on his arms, chest, neck, face. *I almost got you killed.*

Marc shook his head, full of fierce gratitude that he would never be able to express. *You saved my life!*

*I’m sorry.*

“Don’t be.” Marc pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. “No way to know the smartass upstairs was going to pick those ninety seconds to shake the ground again. Your quick actions saved me. You deserve a promotion.”

Angela waved a hand at the tailgate. “Have a seat. I’ll patch you up while you tell me about this raise.”

He took the Irish coffee she pushed into his clammy hands.

The wolf sat on the ground at his feet.

“All right. In the Corps, you’d start out a Private, but you would have been a Private First Class after Versailles.” Marc watched for signs it was bothering her, but he spotted nothing as she lifted a brow.

“And now?” Angela opened packages from her bag as the sun sank, leaving a pale orange and purple sky. Angela felt him fishing, but that bait had already been stripped by her own guilt.

“Now, I’d say...a Lance Corporal.”

She laughed, hiding her wince. Kenny was a Lance Corporal, though he also would have been ranked higher if he could have followed orders. “Better get a good raise with that. What about you?”

Marc shrugged, concentrating on the red of her lips instead of the stinging from the alcohol pad. “I’m happy where I am.”

Angela heard it all in his voice: the need, the respect, the fierce joy to be alive. She slid his dog tag aside to smear gel over his scrapes. It was heaven and hell to touch him. She barely kept the old Angela from doing something they might regret…like letting her hands wander over his hot skin.

Angela’s pulse was pounding when she stepped back. “Ready for–”

The ground under them lit up again, rattling the Blazer and everything inside it.

“Just a tremor. We’re all right.”

“Okay.” The ground shifted under their feet. Angela stumbled.

Marc caught her.

Angela sucked in a breath, tight against his bare chest. Instead of pulling away when the ground stilled under them, she enjoyed his embrace. His heart was pounding as hard as hers was. She saw his nostrils flare, as if he was scenting her. She blushed. *I want him. What a wonderful feeling!*

Marc let her have the lead, patiently waiting, hoping desire would have its way, but he was dying to kiss her. He craved it. *I have to have at least one kiss to take back out into the wilderness with me.*

A wave of sadness fell over him. When she pulled away, he let her go, trying to keep it from his face. Who was he kidding? He would never take it, and she would never offer.

Angela pushed a bowl of hot soup into his hands. “Any other cuts?”

“No.” He stirred the noodles absently. “I didn’t even tear my jeans. Lot of bruises, though.”

She handed him pills and a cup of water. “Painkillers.”

Marc smiled. His body was sore all over, but his shoulder hurt the worst. Throbbing sharply, it was continuing to swell. He was surprised it hadn’t been dislocated, but he didn’t complain or even mention it. There had been little time for anything else.

“We’ll stay here tonight.”

Marc agreed, watching her set up a lawn chair next to the stove. She waved a hand.

He went where she wanted him.

Angela dropped a blanket over his legs and held up another. “Lean forward a little bit.” When he sat back, she pulled it around his wide shoulders, not flinching when their fingers brushed.

Marc couldn’t stop a small moan of pain when her hands settled onto his shoulder. Then she began rubbing, soothing, pushing, manipulating it back into position. Her fingers were fire one minute and ice the next as she healed him.

Drained, Angela stepped back. “I’m going to put the discs out. Twenty feet?”

He nodded, smothering a yawn as he handed her the wristband controller. “Two rows. One at twenty and one at thirty.”

She did it as he had shown her.

Marc watched for a minute, before rising to his feet. “You want a cup?”

The wind gusted as he scanned the distant but clearer shapes of the mountains to their south, bringing the stench of rotting fish. He kept from gagging by sheer will. His body felt foreign, clammy.

“I’ll get it. Sit down, will ya? That was enough dope to knock you out.”

When he only put a hand on the hatch for support, she came over and slipped an arm around his lean hips. “Come on, Grunt. Time to hit the rack.”

“Been waitin’ weeks to hear that.”

She surprised him by laughing. “Well, wait a while longer, Romeo. Come on now, slide in.”

Marc eased onto the stiff bed.

She tossed the two top blankets over him. When he looked at her, his face was full of fear instead of the male pride she had been expecting.

“I’ll get sick now, right?”

She didn’t lie to him as she brushed dust from her jeans, then leaned inside to pull his blankets up further. “Maybe.”

“Will I die?”

“God, no!” She slid in next to him. “At the worst, you’ll be tired, have diarrhea, and throw up, but it’ll only last a couple weeks because you’re in great shape.”

“So, I’ll feel like I died.”

She grinned, running her hand over his brow to smooth his hair back. She loved the feel of it against her fingers. “That’s the worst. We handled it quickly. You might just be a little queasy for a couple days, but probably not even that. You’ll be fine.”

Marc sighed, relieved. He stared at her until he wasn’t able to stay awake any longer.

The chill in the wind made Angela shiver as she stepped outside to repack everything. She loaded it quickly so Marc wouldn’t get a draft. All the propane cylinders for the heater were gone, and they couldn’t waste the quarter tank of gas they had left to run the engine while they slept. Body heat would do.

Finished, Angela ignored her racing pulse as she shut herself inside the tepid Blazer with Marc and laid down, leaving Dog outside. She slid against his back, covering up as the horror of the day washed over her.

That constant voice of fear whispered she would pay for breaking Kenny’s rules, that it wasn’t just her life in danger. She wasn’t allowed to talk to another man, let alone crawl into bed with one. The past rose up to assault her weary mind; thoughts of being separated from her children crept in. She let herself cry a little against his warm comfort. *What am I going to do?* She was chained to one man, but she loved another.

Marc had woken the second she left the Blazer. Her pain was something he couldn’t ignore. He rolled over and wrapped his arms around her. “It’ll be okay.”

Angela didn’t respond. She could only hope he was right.

“I am.”

She stared at him.

Marc brushed away her tears. “We’re connected. Always were. No one can stop that.” He kissed her cheek, felt her shiver. “We belong together, Angie, and right or wrong, I still love you. I always have.”

“I love you too.” Her tears fell harder. “There’s no future for us. He’ll never let me go.”

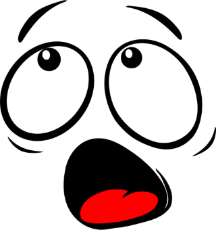
Marc’s heart thumped. *She loves me!* “We’ll find a way.”

“And if we can’t?”

Marc didn’t hesitate. “We’ll grab Charlie and run, together this time.”

# Chapter Thirty-One

**Time to Go**

****

South Dakota state line

**March 26th**

**1**

***D****anger to the herd!*

Adrian woke to the ground beneath his tent grumbling and groaning. He grabbed for his boots as the tremor strengthened. Things fell, broke; people ran, engines started, radios crackled. The silent roar of the quake distorted the sounds, making their ears vibrate.

Adrian pulled his jacket over his bare chest and ducked outside as he zipped it up, scanning the nervous guards. They’d survived tremors, but not as strong. He keyed his mike. “Hold your posts, Eagles.”

Adrian motioned Neil and Kenn over. The two men were roughly the same height.

They came to him quickly, dodging members in robes and slippers who were fleeing–most toward the parking area. He hit his radio again. “Empty a mag, Doug. Turn ‘em around!”

The towering, red vested giant didn’t question. He fired into the air above the small mob of thirty.

The gunfire got immediate attention. The panicked people pulled up short and stopped, faces wild with fear.

Doug’s bearded face was full of disapproval as he waved a beefy hand to where Adrian stood.

The crowd turned, distracted at the sight of Kenn and Neil hunkered down to let Adrian stand on their shoulders. The earthquake had stopped, and it was such an unexpected thing that it captured the twitching crowd. Doug assumed Adrian had a plan.

Seth, a quiet shadow ready to protect the boss, had the same thought. He shared an admiring glance with the Eagles.

Everyone was watching Adrian now; the crowd grew as more people came out of their tents.

Adrian tapped the hats below him. “Up.”

The Eagles moved slowly, but with little teamwork. Adrian swayed dangerously, amusingly. His wild arm gestures drew titters from the calming group. Most of those who’d broken quarantine were new refugees from Cheyenne.

Adrian waved as they finally got him up all the way.

The watching people gave a small, uneasy cheer in return.

“We had a tremor. This is how it feels.” Adrian lowered his voice. “Walk, guys, and do it together or I’ll break my friggin’ neck!” He lifted his voice again. “We survived it.” Adrian swayed, almost falling. The tall men grabbed at his legs, pulling more laughter from the people.

“Damn it!” Adrian hauled himself up by sheer will, and struggled to stay there. Hearing calm in the crowd reactions, he gave up the fight, wobbling.

“He’s going to fall!”

“Grab him!”

“Down, guys!” Adrian rolled forward as Neil and Kenn bent, ended up on his feet in front of the crowd that let out a cheer and clapped.

As Adrian waded into the people, they quieted, most realizing they had overreacted and were due a scolding.

Adrian’s men watched, thinking they were lucky Adrian had known how to handle the crisis. Nothing broke panic like laughter.

Nose full of sulfur and smoke, Adrian felt the air shift. He knew by their guilty demeanors they understood. He said nothing, letting the silence stretch out.

When many of them were about to offer apologies, Adrian stopped it with a curt gesture. “During a quake, you get away from anything that can fall on you, then stop. Wait for cracks to open.” He pointed to the jagged, gaping hole in front of Doug that a lot of them would have fallen into. “Like that one. Panic makes us do stupid things. I understand, but sometimes, it also costs your life. I can’t give that back.”

Neil watched in approval with the other Eagles, hands on his narrow hips. Adrian was giving them what Kyle liked to call the lay or how things stood.

“All of you have broken quarantine. You’ll have extra time in it, along with all the members I’m looking at.” Adrian paused to mark them with this sharp gaze. “It’s over now. I want this camp back the way it was, and everyone accounted for.” Adrian let them understand how displeased he actually was by jerking his hand. “Now.”

The commanding tone had them all rushing off.

He gestured to Kenn and Neil as they went by. “Sitrep in five. Check in of the guards first. Gather your team, Neil, and go round up our strays. Kenn, get Mitch on the radio. Have Zack and his guys oversee the cleanup. I heard engines. Try to call them on the radio. Have Doug handle the count, then tell the cook to start chow. It’s almost dawn anyway. Kyle keeps Point. I’ll be around.”

Neil saw Seth’s shadow follow Adrian and was pleased. He and Seth had hit it off. He knew the redhead would cover Adrian’s overloaded back.

Adrian joined people in the mess. The camp was a flurry of activity in the foggy morning. They’d had no serious damage, no injuries.

Adrian finished his cold coffee with a grimace as the stench of rot wafted through the crowded, loud mess. A large herd of bison had died about three miles southwest of their location. John was testing the bodies since there wasn’t an obvious cause of death. The big ants Adrian sometimes thought might be following them were also here, along with a burgeoning population of field mice. This area was all nature as far as they could see, with no signs that humanity had ever been here. Adrian dreaded dropping south into the Badlands, but he would if John said fallout had killed the bison. That strange, eerie landscape would be better than sickness, but it didn’t have anything they needed. They wouldn’t stay long–only a week instead of the three they usually spent in each state. There wouldn’t be tours of Mount Rushmore or the Wild West sites that had featured Annie Oakley and Wild Bill Hickok shows. That world was gone.

**2**

“Is everyone accounted for?”

Neil opened his book as he joined Adrian. “Almost. We had five cars leave. All but one is on the way back. We contacted the supply team. Chris said he hasn’t been able to reach the fifth car yet.”

“They were together?”

Neil nodded, continued his report. “One of the guards swears there were two people in her convertible. They’ll probably show up at dawn.”

Adrian glanced to his XO.

Kenn waved a hand for Kyle to join them from his post on the mess. He’d been expecting it. “Get your team and do a recon for Tonya and the reporter. Half hour check ins.”

Kyle swallowed his dislike. The orders actually came from Adrian. Kenn didn’t like Cynthia. Few of them did, and though he was screwing Tonya, Kyle didn’t think he cared for her either. *Women are just possessions to Kenn*, Kyle thought, calling in his relief early. He pitied the female who had shared Kenn’s bed before the war, when there had been no Adrian to keep him in line.

Kenn waited until Kyle was out of earshot, noting the body language indicating the mobster’s displeasure, but even that didn’t ease the thumping of his heart as he spoke to Adrian. “Mitch took a call. I may have missed someone in Cheyenne.”

Adrian had recognized the edge of fear in Kenn’s tone. “Could you have?”

Kenn was miserable. “Yes.”

Adrian knew more was coming. He waited unhappily when Kenn scanned the black hills surrounding their camp instead of maintaining eye contact.

“I need to leave for a while. I’m feeling...smothered.” Kenn shrugged at Adrian’s lifting brow, but didn’t offer more details. “Charlie’s stayin’ here. I’ll recheck Cheyenne first and bring the woman back if she’s there.”

His tone implied he doubted she would be. Adrian hid his grimace as his heart skipped, sending pain into his arm. He couldn’t keep it from his eyes.

Kenn mistook it. “I’ll be back. *Soon*.”

Chest easing, Adrian gave him a hard stare, mind and body already dreading the Marine’s absence. Kenn had been more help than he knew. Fresh out of the quarantine zone, he had only been back from Cheyenne for half a day. “When?”

Kenn still didn’t look at him. “Now.”

Adrian sighed, hoping it really was restless urges and not devious tactics taking the Marine out of camp. “I told you everyone here is free to go any time they please. If you have something to do, somewhere to go, come home when you’re ready. Just don’t forget about us, and watch your six. We need you.”

Kenn nodded, beard covering his guilty flush in the windy darkness. “I hear that.”

Adrian frowned. It had been his experience that when someone said that, the opposite was true.

“I’m comin’ back.” Kenn addressed the uniformed shadow who had given himself away by a quick breath at the news. “Hold my place.”

Adrian forced a chuckle. “You know it.”

Kenn hadn’t been sure how to bring up the subject. He didn’t want to give details, but in his heart, he was sure the lone female had been Angela. Static had kept Mitch from hearing the name clearly. *It’s time to go set her straight.*

**3**

As dawn broke, Tonya and Cynthia rolled in, flanked by Kyle’s team.

Kenn waited nearby, lingering in dawn’s last shadows.

A few minutes later, Tonya’s tent flap opened, revealing a dim, smoky interior. A small red glow winked on and off.

Kenn went to her openly. If she and Adrian had been an item, that was over now. Kenn entered the pungent tent, inhaling from the thick joint she slid between his lips.

The flap shut them in darkness as her hands opened his jeans.

Tonya had figured out something was happening with Adrian’s right-hand man. She’d seen Kenn’s loaded Bronco. She wanted to be sure her place with him was secure before he left. Kenn was her only ticket to power here. Tonya gave him an amazing effort, trying to dig her hooks in deeper.

For a little while, the future was forgotten by them both.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

**Wrong Place, Wrong Time**

**A close up of a logo

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March 29th

**1**

“**Y**ou forget who I am!” José snarled, hand dipping toward his belt. “Never talk to me that way!”

Dean peered up from the muddy ground. A thin layer of grit was blocking most of the sun; without that glare, Dean had a perfect shot. “Whoever did this might still be around. Listen to my brother, *Josey*, and shut up, or maybe your body will join the one by the burnt jeep. It is one of your hombres, yes?”

The school had blackened jeeps, fly-ridden corpses, puddles of drying blood, and the front of the brick building appeared as though a bomb had gone off.

José picked it out through his binoculars, storing the insults. One day, he would be in charge, and these hermanos would be muerto.

Dean sensed the thought. He snorted. “You’d better bring help, *Josey*.” Dean mounted his solid black horse awkwardly; he silently cursed the wound that had healed but left nerve damage and prevented the smooth control he used to have.

At the second intentional slur of his name, José considered pushing things now.

Dean was ready. “Don’t miss.”

The long moment lingered between them.

Dillan distracted his brother. They needed Cesar. Killing his reckless cousin wouldn’t help. He stood up from his perusal of the hard ground. “Fresh tracks. Not ours.”

José pretended to watch mutated ants climb out of a high hill of dirt, but both brothers knew he was a coiled snake, waiting for the right moment to strike. If he could conquer his carelessness, José might gain the deadly air Cesar carried, but for now, they weren’t impressed.

“Our men were overpowered?” José lit a thick cigar with hands that didn’t shake. He wanted to fight; he adored fighting.

Dean realized his brother had been right to stop him. *José might be harder than I estimated.* “They had help. Casings are from 9mms.”

“Safe Haven.”

Dean slid his coat aside to finger the rifle on his pommel. “It has to be them.”

“They’re the only group we know of that are organized enough to do this. Go tell Cesar to make camp here.” Dillan pointed. “Last call said he was three hours out.” The slavers were finishing up in Wellington. A dozen refugees had barricaded themselves in a basement. Rick had been sent in to open the door.

The twins rode off in a cloud of dust purposely kicked up to insult him further.

José spun away to do as ordered, hand holding his sombrero as the wind gusted. *When I’m in charge, those two are dead, and I’ll do it myself!*

**2**

“Who has done this?!”

The dozen men in the gymnasium stared at the filthy, bloody floor and the bodies of their men instead of Cesar’s red face.

They were glad when José hurried in. José was Cesar’s right hand man. The scarred guerrilla had been the only one to speak his mind when choosing time had come, but all the men knew the Kelly twins, when they were here, were really second. Everyone else was behind them.

“It was Safe Haven. The twins are tracking. I will get us ready to attack.”

“I want them dead!” Cesar stomped down a long, dim hall that should be full of bound slaves, but held only cobwebs.

José hurried to catch up, staring at the gold handled pistols in his cousin’s crisscrossed gun belts. *Is this the moment?*

“No.”

“But now, while they don’t–”

“No.” Cesar lowered his voice. “They have a powerful weapon. We will send in el traidor to take care of it.”

“What kind of–”

Cesar scowled, shaking his kinked curls. *Will the young never learn?* “Not here!” He used his deformed hand to open an office door

The two men stopped, coming face to face with a tall, blonde woman wearing a long, unbuttoned trench coat. They saw stunning blue eyes full of hatred, and then she darted between them. Even limping, she was halfway down the hall before they reacted.

The two men gave chase, words a mix of English and Spanish.

“Apurarse! Stop her!”

“Grab that puta!”

Samantha made it out through a side door.

A sea of male faces spun her way at the echo. A loose slave was fair game.

Terror ran through Sam, making her shiver. She dropped to her knees, heart thudding in her chest as they all rushed toward her. She was in deep shit, even worse than when the chopper had gone down, worse than when the wolves attacked. *Help me, please!*

The door opened behind her a second later.

Sam cried out as she was jerked backward by her thick braid, landing on her ass in the dirt.

Cesar gave José a nod.

The evil man swung a knee over each shoulder, pinning her arms as he opened his filthy pants.

Cesar knelt beside them, puffing on a fat cigar to get it red-hot. Then he moved it toward the bare skin now showing from her struggles.

Sam had time to notice the man was missing two fingers on his left hand...then he ground the cigar against her hip.

José thrust into her screaming mouth, gagging her as he pushed in as far as he could. With a hand on Cesar’s stocky knee as his brace, his free paw roamed her body. “Bite me, you die!”

“I have questions.” Cesar stated as José thrust in and out of her mouth, forcing her to breathe through her nose. “You will answer.”

José stiffened, hips bucking forward.

Cesar’s face filled with delight as he slammed his deformed hand over her nose and watched her choke.

José pulled out, feverish at her purple face. *Maybe I’ll do it again and not stop.*

Sam rolled over, gasping, straining for even a thread of air as tears streamed over her cheeks.

“Each of my men waits for a turn; they will get it if you tell a single lie.” Cesar’s eyes narrowed as she continued to cough and gag. “Why were you left behind? You have disease?”

“Not left! I got here...too late. Saw...them leaving.” She stayed on the ground, coughing it up. She cringed when the short, stocky leader jerked her to her feet.

“Tell me!”

“Two...jeeps, three vans? Like SWAT, solid black.”

“How many men?”

Sam shook her head, trembling. “They were leaving when I...came up 210. I only saw them go.”

“She lies!” José exclaimed, advancing toward her with an expression that said her mouth hadn’t been enough.

“They left her because she is diseased! I claim her.”

Cesar hated how fast fire blazed in her eyes

“They did not leave me! They would have loved to have me, but the dumbass driver never looked back!”

Cesar jerked her arm. “Why, puta? What makes you so especial?”

Sam stepped through destiny’s open door. “I’m a storm tracker. Who doesn’t need that now?”

Cesar hid his pleasure. He gave José a nod as he shoved her, tripping her so she hit the dirt. “My tent first. Show her what I expect tonight. Mañana, she does rounds of el los soldados.”

Samantha’s heart clenched with fear like she’d never known, unable to believe he found no value in her. *Escape!*

Sam began to plan, ignoring the hand crawling inside her torn shirt. She had gotten out a call and been answered, but the radio had gone dead before she could ask if they would come get her. She couldn’t count on it. She had to save herself, again. She hadn’t wanted to wait in the middle of a battle scene, but the rest of this neighborhood had looked just as bad or worse. Now, she wished she’d taken shelter anywhere but here.

Samantha looked around, searching for anything that could help. Crooked tents with Mexican flags and slogans were going up; the smoky breeze carried odors of feces, rot, blood, and death. Screams echoed from the other side of the big camp… It only took a moment to understand these men were evil.

A piercing scream echoed, making her jump.

Samantha stopped struggling as the man led her through one side of the unorganized camp. Sam replayed the evil leader’s words: “*Show her what I expect tonight.”*

Fear filled her body from the feet up. Melvin and Henry had been bad. This was going to make her want them back.

Her captor shoved her into a large, lopsided tent. He followed her in, closing the flap.

**3**

The second she was able to move, Samantha forced herself to her feet and began searching for a weapon, ignoring the blood dripping from her mouth, her nose, down her thighs. *There has to be something!*

Her attacker had chained her ankle to the tent pole like a dog; the cold metal was a horrid reminder of her weeks in captivity. Her gut was blazing with determination to get away. *Tonight*. They would be expecting it, but they didn’t know she’d kill to accomplish it. *They don’t know what I’m capable of!*

Samantha edged to the flap and slowly lifted a tiny corner. She swept the men, who appeared unhealthy with cold sores, coughs, and noses being wiped on filthy shirtsleeves. They were an ugly group of hardened killers, with bruised faces and clothes streaked in blood that drew insects in swarms. Sam hated the snapping flies swarming the filthy camp, but it was fitting that the mutations were here, in this place of abominations.

The town outside the camp had been gone before the slavers arrived. Sam cursed herself for being caught off guard. She should have known trouble was coming by the way the rescue party had been leaving so quickly. It had taken days to figure out how to power up the CB system. After finally succeeding, she’d fallen asleep in front of the radio and missed the engines through the wind and her bad dreams.

Samantha shivered as the noise levels increased with more cries, gunfire, barking, shouts. Help wouldn’t come from any of these men. *What about the females here?*

As she started to raise the flap higher, instinct took over. Sam ducked a big boot slamming into the tent where her face had been.

“Closed!”

Samantha scrambled back, afraid the guard would come in and hurt her too. *What am I going to do?*

*Keep trying*.

That, she would do until she was dead. She was a survivor, no matter how many times this new world tried to kill her. At one point, Samantha had laid low in a supermarket full of decaying bodies during a dust storm. The warning had only arrived an hour before the sandstorm, but it had been enough. The waves of energy made her heart clench in longing. It had come from someone who was like her. She had almost chosen to skip Cheyenne and hunt for the person, but she wasn’t sure how to do it. Now, she bitterly wished she had tried.

“You won’t find anything.”

Samantha was on her knees in front of the flap. She looked up to find a tall, thin white man with shifty eyes and a black bandana around his neck. He held a jug of brownish water in one hand. He looked so much like one of the slavers that Samantha forgot her own plan.

“What do you want?!” She backed up on the blood-splattered floor. She wouldn’t get near the cot again unless she was dead or unconscious.

“Cesar wants you to get cleaned up and ready for him.”

Sam ignored the words, escape plans reforming in her mind as she watched his green eyes crawl over her exposed flesh. The steel in her spine hardened. She stood, facing him. Maybe she had gotten lucky. If he wanted her when she was this battered, he was a sexual deviant at the least, and therefore, weak. “Are you one of his men?”

Rick let the flap shut them in smelly dimness. “Slave.”

Sam took in the fresh and old bruises, the dirty, ragged jeans and shirt that hung on him. The voice inside warned her this man could not be trusted. “Can you get a gun?”

Rick shook his head again, ogling the bare skin showing through her torn shirt. He had a thing for broken blondes. It had sent him to prison. “No. Pills, though. You’ll be a zombie while he’s using you.”

Sam forced her lips to curve into an inviting shape. “Do you have a woman or family here?”

“No.” Rick hid his sly nature. Cesar would be pleased with how easy this was going to happen.

Samantha stared.

Rick felt his body respond. The blood and bruises were a turn-on for him. That was another reason he’d stayed. Here, a man was allowed to be just that: a man.

“Do they let you come and go?”

“Sometimes. Usually, I have a guard.” Rick gave a slight wince that he made sure she saw. “I got away once.” His voice lowered to a mutter. “Haven’t tried in a long time.”

Aware of the dim day fading fast, Samantha ran a hand up his arm, letting her shirt fall open. “You like women?”

His expression was full of want, but his mind was full of control. It was all part of the plan. Rick had done it enough to know he’d already succeeded. He was numb to the guilt as he worked her. “Hell, yeah!”

“Wanna touch?”

Rick did want her. Unlike the other females here, who cried too much and cowered, this one had the feel of a fighter. He broke Cesar’s first rule: don’t touch until the deal is done.

Samantha was unprepared for the bolt of lust his gentle hands drew. When she arched into his caress, to her shame, it wasn’t completely faked. “Wanna do more?”

His hands slid to her bony hips.

Sam pulled back, closing her torn top as best she could. “Then get us out of here. I’ll be *your* slave.”

Rick’s hands lowered in mock fear. “He’ll kill us!”

“We’re not Mexican. He’ll do that anyway.”

There was truth in the statement.

She leaned against him, sensing weakness. “It’ll be great. Just the two of us, and you’ll never be alone.”

“It’ll have to be fast, while they’re drinking. Be ready.”

His words surprised her, even though it was what she wanted to hear. “I will.”

“Good. You can trust me.”

**4**

“She went for it already?”

Rick told Cesar everything word for word, like he always did. They were standing just out of sight of the tent where Samantha was stashed. This wasn’t the first time they’d run across a valuable female and used her to get inside a defended town. It would be the first time they’d used a government employee. Rick and Cesar both assumed she had been. They’d spent enough time around detention center females to recognize the type.

“She is smart. Talk to her a little. Sneak out on one of the horses.” Cesar fingered the handle of the knife in his belt as the cool wind blew by them. “You will contact me in two weeks. If you do not…”

Rick gave in without a fight; shame no longer something he felt. “You’ll have what you want, like in Trinidad and Boulder. This plan always works.”

“And what reward do you ask, white man, for betraying your people? Again.”

Rick didn’t flinch. They weren’t his people. They hadn’t been since the war. “The woman, until I’m tired of her.”

“We have no white unions!”

“Not a union. *My* slave.”

“If there is a child, it will be killed.”

Rick snorted. “I want her, not some screaming shit machine. If she comes up pregnant, I’ll make it go away.”

Cesar didn’t doubt him. “Deal. Do not forget. Two weeks, and then you will deliver Safe Haven to me.”

Cesar watched Rick go to the woman, waiting until he was out of earshot. “You follow. Make sure your witch is with them. We’ll be along.”

“We will.”

The twins hovered in the shadows, eager to go. The tracks from the school might have led them to the witch, but the brothers had lost their tracks in a sewer drain and hadn’t been able to find them again despite checking exits for hours. The weeks that had gone by had made the twins doubt themselves. If the woman wasn’t what they had assumed, then they would just keep going.

Cesar had put a lot of time and effort into this now. He’d made strong plans based around the control of such a power; being denied would cost someone’s life. They’d likely be caught and killed in the future if they had to run, but the need for revenge on the woman was undeniable. If she was what they thought, then they would gain something any man would risk his life for–true magic. If she wasn’t, their lives might be over in this country.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

**Fire and Desire**

**A close up of a flag

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Near Chadron, Nebraska

**March 30th**

**1**

“**W**e are an American Red Cross Convoy picking up survivors. We offer food, shelter, medical care, and protection. Does anyone copy?”

“We hear you, Safe Haven! We’re in Hot Springs. We’re out of food. Are you around here?”

“Close enough. How many people?”

The man who answered the woman’s plea for help was different from the one they’d been hearing for the last week. Marc and Angela both stopped cleaning up their late lunch to listen to the conversation. The waves of authority from that voice were impossible to ignore. To Marc’s ears, he sounded military.

“Twelve. Two are sick. We don’t know what it is.”

“We offer help to everyone, sick or not. Do you know Morse or phonetic code?”

“I know both, but go slow, it’s been a while.”

“Are you an ex-sailor by any chance, Hot Water?”

“Nancy, and yes, for seven years. How’d you know?”

“Because of the slight dislike in your tone. Marines and Navy didn’t mix well in the old world.” The Safe Haven man’s tone was laced with a comforting humor.

“No, sir, they didn’t.”

“They do now. We’re all soldiers in the same fight for survival. Take down this message.”

“He tells his men that too.” Angela was listening in many ways.

The taps came slowly enough for Angela, who’d been learning the code from Marc, to understand. “They’re in the Black Hills. That’s one day from us.”

Marc stared over the hood, full of longing. *I want more time.*

*Me too.*

*Can we?*

…*no.* Two days would be All Fools’ Day. Was it an omen?

Marc frowned. “You all right?”

Angela scanned the vast field of corn that ran as far as they could see on both sides of the road. They were five miles from the Nebraska-South Dakota state line. There were barbed fences lined in brown grass struggling to survive. Other than a faded red barn and a tall silo on one side, there was only moldy corn here.

“Angie?” Marc hated the fear in her expression. It hadn’t been there as much in the last weeks. She had worked hard to overcome her weaknesses; he was amazed by how fast she’d done it. “You could call now. Talk to Charlie.”

“I don’t want Kenn to know where we are.” Angela pushed aside the fear as her mother’s heart spewed awful words. “And we need to talk about what happens when we get there.”

Marc straightened up. “After we make camp tonight?”

“Let’s stay here. Meet up with them in the next few days.” Her gaze wandered large circles of charred dirt that reminded her of the empty holes they’d seen in middle Nebraska.

Marc’s unease grew. They had covered three hundred miles in nine days, driving continuously. Last night, he’d had to insist they rest and get ready to face whatever was coming. They had made one long stop to replace his Blazer. Again, they were identical; the one they had found was the exact match to hers. Fate…? Marc wasn’t sure. She had been pushing them hard to get here. Now, she was hanging back. Nerves? “Are you sure? We could be there by dusk tomorrow.”

“It’s already been ninety-eight days. A few more won’t matter.”

Marc took a step toward her. “You can’t put it off, honey. Face it, and we’ll go from there.”

Angela watched Dog patrol the edges of the shoulder high corn. “I’m not avoiding, but I am nervous. I’m cutting ropes, erasing his hold on me, and he’ll hate me for it. You need to have the details you asked for back in Indiana, but I need to strengthen my determination. Will you drill me on the things you’ve taught me, remind me that I’m allowed to fight back?”

Marc’s heart broke for her. “I think that’s a great idea. You’ve gotten a lot stronger. He won’t know how to handle you.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.”

**2**

“Faster. You can handle it.”

Angela pushed the pedal down; the Blazer leapt forward, throwing them back.

“On my mark. Just like before.”

Angela concentrated, hands and feet connected to the thrum of the engine, the vibrations of the tires.

“Now.”

She spun the wheel, jerking up the emergency brake, and then they were spinning in the dusty street, seat belts holding them in place.

“Now.”

Gunning the gas, Angela slammed the brake and straightened the wheel. The Blazer shot forward.

“Again. Seventy this time.”

Angela mashed the gas, emboldened by her successes. She managed to make the emergency rotation without his instructions this time.

She waved at the line of dirty, faded targets they were now facing. “Next?”

“Loser has dishes!”

Angela got out of the car and took off at his challenge, darting for the distant line of dented cans they’d set up.

Distracted by her happiness, Marc gave chase and left their vehicles in the middle of the street for anyone to see.

**3**

Angela was able to match Marc shot for shot until he moved the cans so far back that she could barely see them. After her missing half, and him missing none, she reloaded her gun and put it away. “That’s not a challenge for you, is it?”

Marc shrugged, expression shuttered. “Does it matter?”

Their eyes locked for a brief, intense moment.

“Maybe. Stand by that speed limit sign.”

“If you like.”

It was amazing to watch. When she asked him to go farther, Marc did it with a curious glance she chose not to answer*.*

*Is she imagining a showdown between me and her man?*

*Yes.*

Pride swamped Marc; he fought it down and settled in to give her the proof she needed.

Marc didn’t miss a single shot. Angela knew this wasn’t hard for him. Marc was good. Better than anyone she’d ever seen, maybe even Kenn, who liked to take her to the range but not let her shoot. Designed to rub in how defenseless she was, it was yet another difference declaring the two men worlds apart. Kenn had been her warden, while Marc... *He makes me feel safe.*

Angela smelled him as he stepped by–smoke, sweat, and underneath, musky man. Her nostrils flared; she inhaled deeply before it was gone. She turned away, lost and hurting all over again. *We’ve missed so much!*

“You all right?” He couldn’t stop asking that question.

Angela stared at the thinner layer of sky grit instead of his handsome profile. She could almost feel the sun again, but even the good things couldn’t distract her from the fear, the desire. There was no way this would end well. “Just thinking.”

“Care to share?”

She shook her head.

Marc could feel her unease, her sadness. He tried one last time to get her to take the easy way out. “Let’s grab our son and go. We’ll find other people to settle and rebuild with.”

“I can’t.”

Marc sighed. “Because you owe him.”

Angela chose to give complete honesty, whether he was ready to hear it or not. “Not anymore. When he left me out here to fend for myself, hoping I couldn’t, I wouldn’t, it cancelled our deal more than anything else he’s done.”

“Then why?”

“It’s hard to explain. I’m going for my son, but there’s something else pulling at me too, at the other side of me. I dream a lot. I’m sure you know.”

Marc knew it too well. The nightmares had come less often, but when they did, they seemed worse. Twice last week, she’d woken him up screaming about a metal monster.

“I dream of a refugee camp most nights. It’s full of people–our kind of people, and they need help. I want to belong there. I want us to be a part of that protection.”

Marc grunted. “In the same group as your man? Don’t you think that’s asking a little much?”

She shrugged. “Yes, but our son is all that matters in the end. We’ll handle the rest of it as it comes.”

“Remember the night we made him?” Marc hadn’t meant to say it out loud. He was relieved when Angie blushed.

“No, not so much.”

“Ouch. That hurts.” He feigned being crushed, aware that he really felt it. He’d thought of little else during sex for the last fifteen years.

Her voice softened. “Don’t ask questions unless…”

“You’re prepared to hear the answer.” He laughed with her. When she met his eye and held the contact, Marc tested the water. “We could talk about it. Maybe you’d remember.”

She stiffened. “No need to.”

“So you do?” Marc watched her eyes glow a smoky, midnight blue; he tensed. *Mistake! Shit!*

Angela was unable to keep the bitterness from her voice. “All the time at first. I’d think about you, and I’d wonder what raven-haired, blue-eyed whore you were with. I’d wonder if you were able to sleep afterward, if you stayed until morning and kissed her lips, if you promised to love her forever *as you walked out on her*.”

Marc took a step forward, heart aching. “No, Angie, to all of it. I’ve only said that to one woman, and I still mean it. Forever hasn’t come yet.”

A tear spilled down her cheek. “Don’t. It hurts.”

“I’d take it away if I could.”

“You have, some of it. Knowing you came to my apartment back then means something to me.”

Marc blinked. “I didn’t think you knew.”

“I picked it up a while back.” She shrugged. “Didn’t seem like you wanted to talk about it.”

“I didn’t.”

“You would rather I went on thinking you didn’t come back for me at all?”

“Yes!”

Angela frowned. “I don’t understand. Why would you want me to hate you?”

“Because you should.” Marc faced his mistakes. “I knew you’d forgive me. You’re a good person, but I have to be punished.”

“Because I was hurt?”

“Because you were being hurt right then and my cowardice let it continue for another decade!” Marc’s shoulders slumped. “I’ve never run from anything in my adult life…except you.”

The pain she’d been carrying all these years began to ease a little. *He was scared to face me; he thought I was happy without him.* He’d tried to do the right thing, after doing the wrong thing. It hadn’t worked out for either of them, but that was the one explanation she’d never considered.

Marc smothered under thick shame. “It was unforgivable.”

“No, it was fate.”

Marc was startled from his self-evisceration. “What?”

Angela tried to be comforting. She’d had a long time to think about it. “One of you would have died that day. The other would have gone to prison. Fate didn’t want that; neither do I.”

“You don’t want either of us dead or gone?” Marc was dazed at how fast she’d ripped him open and already begun healing him from the inside.

“No.” She sighed. “We’ve all made mistakes; the past is done, as much as it can be, but only if Kenny gets a pass too. Charlie wouldn’t be waiting for me in that refugee camp if he hadn’t cared for us all these years.”

“That wasn’t care. It was ownership.”

“I know. But it allowed us to survive. Fate has jobs for all of us. I believe that.”

“I don’t.” Marc didn’t want any part of fate.

“I know.” Angela smiled. “But fate brought you back into my life, Marc. Not when either of us wanted it, but when it was needed. You’ll see that in time, I think.”

Marc made a face.

Angela snickered.

The awful tension was broken; sadness took its place.

“I’m sorry I didn’t knock on your door that day.” Marc was relieved, but he wasn’t sure if it was okay to feel it.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call for you. Fate or not, if I could do it over, I’d call you.”

That was enough for Marc to be able to let it go. He put his hand out. “Truce?”

She shook with him. “Didn’t know we were at war.” Angela let her hand linger. She’d missed the feel of skin sliding across hers in warmth and love.

Marc read the moment and pushed his luck.

Angela held still as he leaned in, needing to know if the stray curls of desire she’d been feeling were real. *Can I be whole again in time or will the thought of sex always scare me now?*

Marc saw her nostrils flare as his hands came up to her face; she shut her eyes as his palm slid along her cheek. His thumb rubbed across her bottom lip. “So beautiful.”

Marc pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth. He felt her sudden intake of breath. Not sure if it was fear, he pulled back. “Angie?”

Her hands were curled into tight balls. She wanted his kiss, but she was scared. *Time to face it and see how damaged I really am.* Angela melted into his arms and tilted her mouth up.

Marc didn’t give her time to change her mind. He delivered the welcome he’d been saving since she’d recoiled from him back in Indiana.

Angela stiffened as his hand slid to the back of her neck, but the mouth against hers was sweet. He tugged her closer... She curled her arms around his neck, lost in the first real passion she’d felt in too many years.

Marc deepened the kiss. Their tongues touched, thoughts mixing.

*Missed you!*

*Need you!*

*Taste like a woman.*

*Smell like a man.*

*My woman.*

*My man.*

The last one made Angela gasp against his mouth. She slammed the doors and broke the embrace. *So much feeling in a single kiss!*

Marc glanced away to lie. “I’m sorry.”

“Marc.”

Her voice was rough, sexy. He looked at her, prepared to hear almost anything.

“It wasn’t fear.”

Marc laughed, body hard and heart light. *It’s gonna be a good day, Pa.*

Angela’s thoughts were along the same line. She hoped the feeling stayed with her through the hard reunion that was coming. She had a plan of action based on what little she’d picked up about the people Kenn had joined. Marc would have to watch his back, but there might be a chance for peace. She would know within the first few hours of being in the camp if that stood a chance.

**4**

Angela ducked under Marc’s arm, grunting. She spun and dropped, throwing her leg out to trip him.

Marc jumped.

Angela had counted on that. She immediately spun again, catching his ankle as he landed.

Tripped, he rolled forward. Marc was on his feet in an instant, spinning, but he knew she was already there.

Angela used the palms of both hands to shove him, hard.

For the first time since he’d begun to teach her, Marc landed on his ass in the warmed dirt, grunting at the impact. Marc chuckled. “Very, good. Now, do it again.”

Angela rushed him the second he was upright, looking to his right. When he defended the left, she came straight up the middle, hands going to his big arms. She used the leg sweep on him again as she shoved, and then had to duck the fingers that tried to pull her along as he fell.

“That was great.” He started to get up.

“Don’t move!”

Her tone froze Marc with his hands splayed in the moist dirt. He sensed something moving nearby as she drew her weapon.

“Roll to your right when I yell and come up firing. Targets at… ten, two, three.”

Marc heard the soft pad of paws; he watched her for the moment to react.

“Two more at twelve o’ clock!” Angela watched the three very thin, gray and white wolves, trying to judge their intentions.

A big black and gold animal she hadn’t seen lunged from the shadows. *Shit!* “Now!”

Angela fired, a bit wildly on the first few shots. One of the rounds caught a wolf in midleap, slamming into the chest. It landed on the ground in a hard thud.

Marc rolled and hit his feet; he began to fire. “Watch your six!”

The wolves were pack hunting. Marc put them back-to-back as the brittle stalks around them swayed with barely seen movement. The sky had begun to darken as they worked out, but neither of them had worried over it. They were used to being in the dark, but this time, they’d let themselves be surrounded by dangerous predators. More eyes gleamed at them through the dusk tinted rows.

They fired at the same time, dropping two wolves that jumped from opposite sides.

A dark shadow appeared at her hip; Angela stopped herself from shooting as she recognized Dog. She narrowed in on a stocky white wolf running through the distant, yellow stalks. Before she could take aim, a shadow streaked by her.

“Damn it!” Again, she kept herself from firing by a hair. “Dog went to my right, chasing the white one!”

Marc spun them to face another dual attack meant to separate prey. The thin animals came in low, lunging for legs. Both shots killed, but two more hungry hunters jumped at Angela.

“Duck!” She got the lowest animal in the chest as the other sailed overhead. She heard Marc take care of it as more and more eyes shined in the dimness. Wolves were streaming through the corn like rats.

Marc made sure they stayed tight against each other. He moved them in half circles, firing and kicking at wolves not quite hungry enough to lunge but still bold enough to snap. He could feel Angela doing the same behind him; her grunts and shots mirrored his.

Flames rose up behind them. Marc saw the tall shadow of a man as he turned, shot a leaping wolf in the chest, spun again and killed a snapping wolf going for Angie’s leg.

More fire erupted, along with the pungent smell of gasoline as full darkness fell over the area. A few of the wolves hesitated, but not the hungry frontrunners.

Angela jerked forward, stiff-arming a determined predator in the throat. Her gun was empty; she knew by the silence behind her that Marc’s was too.

The wolves padded forward with their back fur bushed up.

Angela fumbled for the speed loader on her belt.

Marc turned them again, slamming his mag in as two more wolves lunged. He caught one in the neck, blood spraying. He shoved Angie backward in time to let the second animal go sailing by. “Incoming!”

Reloaded, Angela shot the wolf as it hit the hard ground, then fired at one in the air as Marc rotated them again. Shadows lunged, coming through gaps in the wall of fire. She picked them off as they got closer, assuming the silent gun meant Marc was reloading.

Marc stared at the hulking man, fingers working. The circle of flames was discouraging many of the animals, though it wasn’t complete yet. The newcomer was gigantic, over 8’ tall, and yet he was graceful as he poured the last of the gasoline to ignite the gaps.

Before Marc could say anything, Angela spun them, six shots gone. She gasped in surprise at the big man, but like Marc, her fingers didn’t stop reloading. She had to be ready when he turned them again.

“On your right, woman!”

She twisted the knob to load the bullets and flipped the chamber shut as she dropped the loader to the ground. She fired without looking, almost able to hear the slobbering jaws about to clamp onto her ankle.

A heavy body thudded to the ground.

“Dog! Guard her!” Marc fired repeatedly.

Dog appeared at Angela’s side, snarling at more wolves trying to sneak through a thin gap in the wall of fire.

Nearby, an engine echoed but no one noticed.

**5**

Kenn shifted in the plush seat of his truck.

He wasn’t afraid of being alone in the darkness, but he was more than scared of not being able to find a way to keep Adrian from discovering what he’d done, who he’d been.

*Angela’s here.* It had been a relief to get to Cheyenne and find the slavers (he’d watched for an extra day to be sure she wasn’t there), but he knew she was within a day of him, just not in what direction. She was likely southeast, coming in on a straight line, but instead of going that way at the highway sign, Kenn kept the Bronco on the path he had taken after slipping away from the massive slaver camp.

Kenn had his lights off, brake bulbs loosened to eliminate the telling glows; he slowed as loud, rapid gunshots disturbed the darkness. He put his window down and rolled slowly, trying to pinpoint the location. *It’s her.* Kenn was sure.

More gunshots rang out. It sounded like a battle for survival. He stopped. Scope always at hand, Kenn narrowed in on what appeared to be a ring of fire.

*She’s in trouble.* The plan fell into place with a horrible snap. He would arrive in time to finish off whoever had killed his wife.

*What if she survives?*

Kenn grimaced at that possibility. *I can’t go back to Adrian unless I make sure she doesn’t.*

**6**

Angela muttered a curse. Three more wolves slunk into the ring. She heard Marc echo her expletive as he fired, hitting them all. They were in deep trouble. The ammo was almost gone, but the wolves weren’t. It was time to let the witch out and worry over the consequences later. “Fire!”

Bright flames spewed from Angela’s outstretched hands, hitting a gap in the wall right as two wolves tried to dart through. Their fur lit up; the heat of her power blew them back into the dark cornstalks as the gap filled in.

“Over here!” Marc shouted as the stranger took a rifle from the sling on his shoulder.

She obeyed, flames shooting like golden comets from her fingers. It closed the spaces as each infusion traveled the circle of fire, strengthening it until the ring was solid.

All the animals were outside the ring now, whining uneasily, fighting each other. Angela pushed the witch back as she continued to shoot weak balls that only disappeared into the air. *Stop. We can’t win this way.*

There were numerous dead wolves, but dozens of eyes glowered at them from the darkness behind the flames. They would just wait for the fire to burn down and attack again.

“Bad time to be bleedin’.” The big stranger fired a well-aimed shot that took down a pair of wolves trying to breach the wall. One bullet did the job of two.

Marc kept track of the stranger as much as he did the wolves.

“You hit, Marc?!” Angela kept her attention on flickering shadows.

“Duck!”

They did it at the same time, dropping low, firing together. Two more wolves hit the dirt, and slid through the already dying flames.

Dog jumped, meeting a wolf as it came over the fire. His powerful jaws clamped onto an unprotected throat.

Angela fired at the second animal stalking Dog.

Her first shot landed near its paw. Angie was afraid of hitting the wrong dark body, but her second shot went straight between its eyes.

“This is my last mag.”

“Me too.”

The stranger fired a bright red flare into the sky before their words had faded. Seconds later, a tremendous howl split the air.

*Wwwhhoooo!*

It was a piercing whistle of some kind. The notes were melodic, yet offensive at the same time. It seemed to go on forever.

Marc put a calming hand on Dog’s shoulder as the wolves hesitated in their attack. Marc thought it had come from maybe two miles away, but no more.

Angela winced as the wailing increased and the wolves joined in. The volume continued to rise as the wolf call came again, pulling at them.

“That’ll be the Missus. She’ll have the poison bait out. We’ll be able ta go in a bit.”

“Won’t she need help?” Marc was amazed to see the wolves start leaving.

“No. They don’t climb none too well.”

Angela frowned. “How will you get to your family without running into the wolf pack?”

The man leaned in, big form intimidating. “You tell me, *witch*.”

Angela concentrated, aware of Marc tensing behind her. “Underground.”

The man grunted. He pushed back his hood to reveal a disfigured face partially hidden by a thick, shaggy beard.

Angela stiffened as the witch whispered. “What payment do you expect for helping us? Nothing’s free. Not before and certainly not now.”

The man shrugged, gaze darting over her shoulder to Marc. “We got a broken radio, no medicine, no ammo. Got any of that?”

She relaxed, rubbing Dog’s ear. “Possibly. What else? That doesn’t equal the debt of three lives.”

His face was hard as he swept her from head to toe. “Girls could use some clothes. Maybe some books?”

Surprised, Angela gave him a genuine smile.

Marc heard the man’s sudden intake of breath. He recognized the sound, that reaction to Angela. He rotated them. “The woman is *not* for trade.”

The stranger’s face tightened. “Can’t get it up now anyway. Damn diabetes.” He crossed over the dying flames. “Come on. She’ll have supper waitin’.”

Angela and Marc exchanged a long glance of uncertainty, but they chose to follow the big man into the darkness. The corn around them was empty now, but not silent. The breeze blew through the hollow stalks, making an eerie moan that resembled the calling howl they’d heard.

Dog followed, fur still bushed out in warning.

The rows ended, revealing a dark stretch of sick evergreen trees; they exchanged looks that said they would be careful. The wind was cool, smelling of shit. They both spotted the fresh scat littering the dead rows of corn. This was a hunting ground.

“Almost there.” Max moved steadily despite his size. He stopped in front of a large clump of bushes.

Marc stayed by Angela, as did Dog. His fur was flecked in blood. Marc estimated they had come two clicks from the battle scene.

“Grab an end.” The large man bent to clasp a large handful of the damp foliage.

Marc did it while keeping his ears open, content to let the man’s true colors show when they would. The odds on this stranger winning weren’t as high as with the wolves.

“Pull!”

Angela chuckled in surprise at the disguised sewer entrance. Thin, dark green puddles glinted where it met the ground. She was careful not to step in it, wondering if it was the fumes that kept the animals from coming through, or if they had learned to avoid it from seeing their pack mates die.

Marc snapped his fingers, bringing back Dog to his side. For some unknown reason, canines loved to drink antifreeze. He couldn’t be sure Dog wouldn’t try it too despite his intelligence.

“Close the flap. Watch out for rats. The antifreeze don’t tempt ‘em, and they don’t scare easy.”

Marc gestured to the night vision glasses on her belt as they trekked into the damp, stinking air of underground.

Instead of putting them on, Angela tapped the stranger on the arm and held them out.

Max started to take them, then shook his head, stepping by her. “You keep ‘em and watch out. Your blood’ll probably make fire shoot from their piss. Then we’d never be able ta keep ‘em out.”

Angela heard Marc snort in amusement.

She slid the glasses onto her belt. She didn’t sense evil in their huge guide, but him knowing what she was made her uncomfortable. She dropped back, putting more distance between them.

Marc was relaxing. He was almost sure the man had been some sort of military before the war. He lit a smoke as they walked over and around rotting furniture, mildewed piles of clothes, whole and broken cinder blocks. Gray and green moss climbed tall, dank walls that met a cobwebbed, shadowy ceiling above them. Their boots echoed in time to a distant drip of water.

“About there. Be quiet. She’ll have the little ‘uns back ta sleep by now.”

Marc sent Angela a silent warning. *He thinks we’re a couple. Tell him different and I may have to fight for you when it comes time to leave.*

Angela also felt the man’s interest, but there was no sense of him being the one to fear unless he was given orders.

They came to a stop. When Marc gestured, Angela spotted a trap door in a wooden floor over twenty feet up, an impossible jump.

A rock flew through the air. It slammed into the stranger’s cheek.

Max sucked in a surprised breath at the pain as another, bigger stone sailed toward him from the damp darkness. “Damn! It’s me!”

The rocks stopped. An indignant woman snorted. “Shoulda said something!”

Max grunted, rubbing his arm where the second rock had hit. “Jealous, I think. Seen your woman.”

Marc nodded.

“Come on, Lenore! Did I save ‘em from the wolves to feed ‘em to the rats?”

Angela was unable to keep from grinning at the longsuffering sigh the big man let out.

“Definitely jealous.”

“I am not! The rope’s kinked up again. Hang on!”

Round gleaming eyes appeared in the deeper shadows.

“Now, woman! They’re comin’!”

The trap door slid open; a rope ladder dropped onto the man’s head.

“‘Bout damn time. Here!” Max grabbed Angela by her clothes and lifted her onto the ladder in one effortless motion. As she climbed, his big hands settled onto her ass, shoving, caressing.

Angela climbed faster. She jerked herself up and out of his reach. The .357 was pointed at him an instant later. “You touch me again, and your missus will use your balls for bait!”

The man stopped halfway through the opening, glaring.

“Angie.” Marc’s tone was patient, resigned.

“What?!”

“There’s a rat about a foot long trying to have sex with my boot. Let him through.”

Angela’s rage cleared. She holstered her weapon and turned to study the other person in the big, cluttered kitchen.

Dressed in a stained white shirt and an enormous pair of farmer overalls with the pockets ripped off, the large woman smirked back at her. A grand beehive of black and white hair hung in every direction like a bad wig. The long, jagged scars on her face and huge arms said she had defended her life at least once, and she could do it again if needed. Angela felt an immediate kinship. She also knew better than to trust the woman just because of that.

“Lenore Codd.”

Angela held out a hand, faint bell ringing. *Isn’t there a fairy tale based on the life of a giant by that name?* “Angela. I hope we won’t be a bother to you.”

The woman watched them as she shook, huge hand engulfing Angela’s. “Me? No. Him?” She nodded at the man leaning down a hand to help Marc; he didn’t react at all when the wolf riding on Marc’s shoulders nipped at him. “Probably already have. T’was me that sent him after ya. Told him I wudn’t cookin’ till he got ya here.”

Angela covered the woman’s large hand with her own. “Then, it’s you I owe the debt to. Good. Let me start paying on the debt. I’m a doctor.” Her voice lowered. “Diabetes can be controlled. Then some of the effects go away.”

“Might could be. Let’s get them men fed and we’ll talk.” The woman clapped her on the shoulder.

Angela held onto the big arm to keep from falling as the reek of corn filled her nose. “Deal.”

Angela took her sweater off and tied it around her waist, not wanting to sweat and stink. She was barely able to walk through the dusty 10x12 room as she followed their host. Cluttered shelves of bags, canisters, and unpacked boxes lined every wall. “Can I help? Set a table? Do cleanup?”

Lenore stared at her, bushy brows coming together. “You’re polite, eager to help. You remind me of the past.”

Angela didn’t look away, though the stench of corn was making her eyes water. “I’m sorry.”

Lenore shrugged massive shoulders. “Don’t be. Wudn’t all evil.”

“Damn it, woman! Feed me! Them.” Max dropped down at the long, wooden table in one corner of the narrow, lantern lit room.

His wife motioned at a chair, indifferent to the large wolf standing tensely in her kitchen. “Put your man to the right. We’ll stand. Only got two chairs left now. Keepin’ warm’s more important than pass-me-downs.”

Angela shook her head at Marc when he started to offer to take the floor. She brought the heavy chair over with no visible effort. She knew the big woman was pleased when Marc obeyed her and sat in it. The feeling increased when Angela snapped her fingers at Dog to get his attention, then pointed at the trap door. *Please?*

The wolf went to that spot and laid down, tail and ears tense.

Angela stayed by Lenore while she served huge bowls of what looked like stew from a large metal pot on the wood stove.

Marc fell into a conversation with Max about the wolves. He and Angie kept track of each other with almost constant sweeps.

“Everything’s against us now.” The mountain man cracked his knuckles impatiently.

Marc frowned. “But so many? Packs are never more than ten or fifteen.”

“We killed the world.” Max watched Lenore approach the table. “They hate us enough to band together.”

“Still.”

Max grunted, spoon already in a beefy hand as Lenore set his bowl down with a heavy thud.

Angela looked away from the mats of dark hair on his forearms as he scooped up a big bite of the steaming stew.

Lenore stepped back. “It’s not just the wolves. All animals are the enemy.”

Marc made a face, dismayed by that thought.

Lenore saw his reaction. “Must not be that way where you came from.”

Marc felt danger enter the air. “No idea.”

She studied Marc, ignoring Max when he scowled at her for it. “How far have you come?”

Marc decided to try for a humor distraction. “So many miles I can’t feel my ass anymore.”

Lenore leaned in, intelligence blazing. “Is it safe where you came from? When were you there last?”

Marc nodded toward Angela. “Wrong one to ask.”

Lenore produced a tight, grim smile and turned back to Angela. “He’s trained. We can make some deals, trade. I’m Lenore. He’s Maxwell. Welcome to the killin’ fields of Nebraska.”

**7**

“Ohio, huh?” Lenore grunted, handing Angela a thick slab of cornbread a few minutes later.

They both ignored the belches and grunts echoing from the table.

“This is so good!” Angela groaned as she chewed the first bite.

Marc glowered when Max’s sly gaze went to Angie’s face and lingered there.

“Missus makes the best.” Max leered at Angela, hungry eyes dropping to her chest.

Angela held her ground, though she had the urge to put her sweater back on. She let her eyes glow red.

Max paled; he dropped his eyes and went back to his meal.

Marc hid a smirk. “You’ve been here since the war?”

Marc wasn’t surprised when Max glanced at his wife.

“Tell ‘em what ya will.” Lenore ducked through a curtained door.

Marc saw a long, oddly decorated horn on the frame above that door. *I wonder if that’s what made the weird howls.*

When Angela turned to see what Marc was staring at, Max waved a hand. “She’s checkin’ their breathin’. Corn fumes.”

They both frowned, confused.

The man finished his last bite before explaining. “We grow the corn. We have to keep it from the rats. Fumes build up while it sets. Poison, o’ course, so we sleep in shifts. When we puke, we know to get out the guns and open the windows ‘til it airs out.”

Angela was horrified. “Why?”

The big man’s tone was rough, but his demeanor said he hated it. “To eat. Can’t hunt anymore. Damn wolves get ya or there’s no meat around to hunt cause o’ them. Gotta eat. Gotta last ‘em out.”

“You could leave.”

Marc’s suggestion was met with silence.

Angela shook her head when he would have repeated himself. “Not our business. Maybe you should examine their radio now.”

It was enough to fool Max, who immediately responded to the tone and got up. Angela hid a smile at the warning look Marc slid her way. Up to a point, this could be fun.

Marc tried again to get information. “Are you from here?”

Max belched, hefting the radio case to the table. “No. We came from the mountains, near on six months ago now.”

Dog’s head lifted. He put it back down when he recognized the big woman’s steps.

Angela turned to Lenore as she emerged through the curtains. “You vent the corn?”

“Yes, but the generator is out of gas.” Lenore handed her a list. “This is what I need and what we have to trade. I’ll throw in some cornbread if you have the last one.”

Angela scanned the list. When Lenore handed her a pen, Angela understood the male here wasn’t allowed to know how much of what they had. To prevent theft? Control was more probable; the fact that Max had none was likely more responsible for his impotence than the diabetes.

“I can spare this much of each of these. You can find that one here.” Angela pointed with the pen. “That one, I haven’t seen in over a month.”

Lenore creased her brow. “And the last?”

Angela grinned. “Six months’ worth sound good?”

Lenore’s leer said it would go faster. “Deal. I’ll bake while you sleep with your man.”

Unprepared for the probing comment, Angela flushed. She saw the woman’s eyes fill with speculation. She hurried to distract. “You have room for us?”

Lenore nodded absently. “Too much. You’ll stay?”

Angie didn’t like the hungry stare the woman gave Marc as he removed his coat to work on the radio. “Yes, but be clear now. The man is not for trade.”

Marc tensed. *There’s the threat. Damn. I thought Max was the problem.*

Lenore studied Angela, voice cool. “Things not for trade are often taken by force.”

Angela let the witch surge forward, eyes glowing red again. “And often, people die in the trying. Perhaps mankind will be smarter this time.”

Lenore grunted bitterly. “Not the men.”

Angela let more heat come into her words when Lenore didn’t back down. “Maybe not the women either.”

Lenore flushed at the pointed tone. “But if he’s not yours–”

“He is!” Angela prepared to fight.

Marc got ready to help.

They were both relieved when the woman sighed resignedly.

“I’ve mistaken, maybe. Forgive me?”

Angela waved it away, hoping this was the end of it. “My first time in control. I overreacted.”

“First one’s always the best. They still have a hope it will change back.” Lenore grinned, clapping her on the arm again.

This time, adrenaline and anger kept Angela on her feet without an anchor.

**8**

“Coming in.” Marc entered, scanned, then locked the door. He’d just finished with the radio and had been escorted to Angela, who had already called it a night. That had surprised Marc, but he understood she wasn’t threatened by the couple anymore. Marc did, but he hoped she was right about them.

Dog went straight to Angela for a sniff. Then he explored the room. Covered in dust, it sported a rickety bed, one end table, a plush, dusty chair below a window, and a long, cluttered dresser without a mirror.

Marc blinked guiltily when he saw Angela had a row of medical supplies spread across the dresser. “You hurt?”

Angela didn’t look up from the needle she was threading. “Funny. Get over here.”

Marc gave a sheepish grin at the dry tone. He took off his sweat stained shirt, trying not to wince as the cloth peeled away from the wound.

“When did I get you?”

Marc shrugged out of the gun belts and laid them on the end table near the bed as Dog curled up under the front corner. “First few shots. It’s just a trim.”

Angela rolled her eyes at the crusted, three-inch furrow along the underside of his arm. “I’m always hurting you, Marc. I’m sorry.”

He saw she had cleaned herself up and put on the jeans and black shirt from the emergency kit he had helped her assemble. They’d gotten lucky to have them on when the wolves attacked. “Mistakes happen.”

“I could have killed you. Again.”

Marc tensed as she cleaned the wound with alcohol pads.

Angela found herself watching the way his muscles flexed.

“This world is full of chaos. It was your first real fight. I think you did great.”

Angela fought the urge to reach out and run a hand along his bearded jaw.

“You learned well.”

She examined his injury, letting the doctor take over.

Marc twitched at the needle as it sank into his skin.

Angela tried to hurry. It occurred to her that she had stitching in both of his big arms now. How many more times would he be put in the line of fire for her?

The wind outside picked up suddenly, as if responding.

Angela shivered.

“Damn. It got colder. How do they keep warm in these rooms?”

Angela kept her tone light, but she blushed at the pictures running through her mind. “Body heat.”

That explained all the people in one sloppy tangle in that center room. It made Marc think of how Lenore had held his arm as she led him through, fingers caressing. She had whispered of being a good master if he was unhappy with his current one.

Angela’s anger flared. “She made a move on you?!”

Marc said nothing.

Angela went to her side of the bed as she dried her hands and controlled her rage. She had no real claim on him. If he wanted to sleep with the woman, he could.

“I don’t.”

Her eyes flew to him in time to see him grimace as he tried to pull on the clean shirt she’d put out for him. “You sure?”

“Yes.”

Marc sounded amused; it calmed her.

He began trying to button the emergency shirt, but with only one good arm and pain shooting through the other, it was slow going.

Angela waved a hand. “Leave it open or you’re going to rip out those stitches.”

“You could do it for me.”

Angela frowned. *He won’t ask for a painkiller even though he’s out of them, but he’ll take one if I tell him to. What is it with men and their pride?* “There’s Vicodin in my bag, top left side. Take two, leave the shirt as it is, and go to bed.”

Marc lifted a brow at the curtness. “What’s up?”

Angela sighed. “Damn. I’m sorry.”

“Tell me what has you on edge.”

Angela turned toward the window, glad for the bars on it as she spotted shadows padding outside. “Besides the wolves? I’m not sure.”

Marc saw the V on the bottle and dry swallowed two of the tiny blue pills. *She sounds restless.* “You wanna talk it out, play some cards? Both?”

“No.”

Marc sat in the chair and began working on their guns.

Angela started her own nightly rituals, but she was aware of the man pretending not to watch her. This would be their first time in a real bed together since they made a baby. The old Angela harassed her with memories. The mating had been sweet, soft, beautiful. She’d forgotten none of it.

Marc knew she was thinking about him, but he was out of time. If she said her man was near, then he was, and that meant this was their last night alone together. Marc burned to remind her of what it was like to be made love to instead of being taken.

The sparks thickened.

Angie unbraided her long hair and began to brush it.

“Can I do that for you?” Marc let a little of his longing show when she hesitated. “Please?”

Angela couldn’t deny him or herself. The need to get close to him tonight was undeniable. “Okay.”

When he slid behind her, big body warm and already hard, she snapped her eyes shut and held herself in place.

Her curls felt like silk on his calloused hands. Marc took his time, using his fingers to gather it, touching her neck softly.

Angela heard the brush hit the bed behind them; his big hands went to her shoulders, but instead of moving away, she allowed him to rub her. The heat from his touch was incredible. “That feels good.”

“Yes, it does.”

Angela didn’t stop him, even when his fingers brushed the curve of her breast and sent chills into her stomach. She forgot to listen to the voice of fear as his thumb brushed her again. The sensation rushing into her gut like a bullet. “Mmm…”

Marc’s eyes snapped shut at that sound, liquid heat flooding his gut. He moved his hands to her waist, her slender hips.

*We have to stop now.* Angela knew she’d probably hate herself later, but when he tugged gently, she leaned against his hard, bare chest, wishing she had the nerve to give him what he wanted.

Marc didn’t thrust against her ass like he wanted to. When she would have shifted to get closer, he retreated, not willing to destroy the peace.

Angela stifled a protest, cheeks flushed. She hadn’t meant to lead him on, but need was riding her now.

Marc recognized her reaction. The killing had done it for her. It was something no one liked to admit, but he’d had some of the best orgasms, alone, right after a battle where blood had been spilled. “You okay?”

“Yeah. You?”

Marc snorted. “I’m all good, Baby-cakes.”

Angela giggled.

A sharp draft ran through the room, making her shiver.

Marc frowned. “You should get settled, and cover up.”

Angela nodded, pushing off her shoes. She really was cold, sore, and tired. She climbed onto the bed, relieved to find it clean under the thin sheet.

Marc got another blanket from his kit and tossed it onto the pillow next to her. “Put that one around your shoulders.”

Angela drew on her courage. “Share it with me?”

Marc felt the need rise up, strong and hungry. He sat next to her, but shook his head at her offer. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Flames sparked.

Marc felt as if he was sweating, body making it hard for him to sit. He shifted restlessly, waiting for it to go away like it usually did. He had pleased himself from time to time while Angie was asleep, but right now, he felt like he hadn’t cum in years. He struggled to keep it out of his voice. “You ready for tomorrow?”

“As much as I can be.”

“You’ve learned a lot. I think you’ll do fine.”

She smiled at him, in a good mood despite the wrongness here. She tried not to let the thuds and creaks outside the ranch home bother her. She was with Marc. They could handle just about anything together. “I had a good teacher.”

Sparks flew, thicker.

Heat flooded her stomach. When his eyes darkened, she knew he sensed it.

Marc got off the bed and settled into the chair under the window, blowing out the candle closest to him. His body and arm were throbbing together–one a pain, one a sharp, sweet pleasure. *What’s wrong with me?*

Angela was asking herself the same thing. She was pushing him. Marc was a man, one with needs that hadn’t been met for a long time, and here she was letting him kiss her, touch her breast.

Her cheeks flamed at the thought.

She heard him shift in the chair, as if he caught the image. His shirt fell open at the movement, making her stare. *He’s still beautiful.*

“Angie.”

She heard the need. Instead of fear, the woman inside responded. “Yes.”

Marc’s eyes snapped open, but her pale face made him shake his head. “Go to sleep.”

Angie braced herself. She had one last lesson to learn. “Come to bed, Marc.”

Marc groaned, breaking out in a sweat. He shuddered. His blood pounded through tight veins, breathing rough.

Angela frowned. “Are you all right?”

Marc tried to nod, but the tempo of the lust beating inside him grew. He shifted again. *I’ll have to do something about the iron bar in my jeans before climbing into that bed with her.* The picture made the need tighten another notch.

He jumped as her cool hand settled onto his brow. He hadn’t heard her move.

“Damn, you’re hot. Let me see your eyes.”

Marc gritted his teeth as she checked him out. The feel of her hands on him, her loose hair sliding across his skin, was torture.

“I don’t understand. You don’t ha…” Angela broke off, frown growing. *My bag*. “I think I know what’s wrong.”

Marc did too. *I need to get laid more often.*

“You didn’t take Vicodin. It was Viagra.”

Marc was horrified. “What?”

Angela opened her worn medical bag. “It got mixed up during the wolf fight. You didn’t read the label.”

Marc scowled, hands itching to pull her down into his lap. “How long will I be like this? And why the hell do you have that?!”

Angela flushed. “It’s for side effects from diseases. Lenore wants to trade it for the cornbread.”

Marc groaned, on fire. He eyed the white pills she held out. He was used to much stronger pills. He hadn’t paid enough attention. He dry swallowed them before she could get him something to drink. “How long will I be like this?”

“At least a few hours, maybe six or eight.”

Marc’s head snapped back, eyes slamming shut. *I won’t last that long.* “Can’t you give me something to counteract it?”

When she hesitated to speak, he knew there was something, but she didn’t want to tell him what it was. “What?”

“If you...take yourself in…” Cheeks a furious red, Angela indicated the bed. “It will go away once you...”

“Next!”

She shrugged. “Let it wear off.”

Marc stifled a curse, shifting again. “There’s gotta be something else.”

“I’m sorry, there isn’t.”

The tension in the room continued to grow.

After five minutes of watching him squirm, and feeling her own hormones respond, Angela stood up. “I’m going out in the hall for a few minutes.” She waved off his protests. “I’ll take Dog out in the hall. You...handle things.”

Marc sucked in a tight breath. “Stay?”

Angela froze at the blatant need in his rough voice, gaping at him. “While you…?”

Marc heard himself beg. “Please?” He’d never been so hard in his life, not even during their time together all those years ago.

Angela was surprised to find herself considering it. “I couldn’t.”

“I’ll stay right here. I won’t leave this chair. And it will cover your story to our host.”

Angela knew she should leave, but the heat between them was stronger than the fear; she hesitated, torn. He’d made her feel so alive when they were young! Memories, old and powerful, swirled through the drafty room.

*“I can’t.” He groaned as their lips met again. “I’m sorry.”*

*The beautiful girl shifted restlessly under him, body begging for his touch. “But I want you to!”*

*The boy held himself in place by a hair. They’d never gone this far before. The hormones were in control of her mind. She was too young, forbidden…*

*When she slid a hand between them, he sucked in a harsh breath. “I can’t do*–*”*

*“Sshhhh.” Her hand closed over him, stealing his voice. He bucked in her grip as she stroked. Struggling to think, he let her slide his tense hand under her skirt.*

*“Love me, Marc.” She moaned against his lips. “As much as you can.”*

*Tortured will crumbling, he did.*

“That’s one of my favorite memories of us.”

Angie blushed at his words. The time after that, they’d gone as far as they could. There hadn’t been any holding back. “I can’t, Marc, I–”

“Just love me, Angie. As much as you can.”

She shuddered, need rising.

Dog groaned. *I don’t need to see this.* He found a dark corner and settled down to sleep.

She took a tense seat on the edge of the bed.

Angela watched his hands go to the buckle of his jeans.

Marc couldn’t stop himself; lust was raging. He held his breath as he popped the button on his jeans. He expected her to flee.

Angela’s cheeks were red, but there was no denying she wanted to be here. When he lifted his hips to slide his pants down, she tore her eyes away, breathing rapidly.

“Throw me a blanket.”

Angela did it without moving from her perch. She heard the blankets rustle, hands shifting for comfort. She couldn’t stop herself from stealing a peek. It was in time to see his hand go around hard flesh.

Marc saw her eyes go over his body, flashing fire and desire. He tightened his grip. “Mmm…”

His sound woke the woman inside. Angela found herself gawking as he pulled the blanket up and started to stroke… She wasn’t sure she could look away.

Marc watched her through narrowed lids, need tightening as she stared at the movements the blanket now hid.

He pulled down the top of it.

Angela’s breath went out in a rush; the sight of his thick flesh sent another blast of heat into her gut.

Stroking faster, Marc nodded toward the bed. “You too? You used to love this.”

*I still do*. How many hours had they spent that way before lust had driven them to actual touching?

Marc let the man inside push. “There’s another blanket. I’ll stay right here.”

She shifted restlessly.

He shut his eyes…most of the way. “I won’t look.”

Angela was shocked to find herself here, in this moment, but fear wasn’t the strongest emotion–desire was. Physical contact was something she’d been reminded of during this trip and it was one of the things she had hoped to conquer before now. In all the years since they’d been apart, she’d only pleased herself about a dozen times, and not at all in the last year.

“Baby?”

Before she could change her mind, Angela grabbed the second cover and tossed it over herself, but from there…

“Angie, you don’t have to do this.”

The sudden flare of guilt from him made her shake her head. He had nothing to feel guilty about and neither did she.

With that choice made, she put her hand under the cover and watched Marc like she used to when it was just them against the world.

Marc tried to slow himself down, not wanting to be done before she was, but he was on edge already. He saw her arm brush a rigid nipple as she got comfortable. He listened to her small hiss of surprise at the sensation, fire boiling.

She did it again, intentionally this time.

He stroked harder. That was the Angie he knew, the fearless, sexual nymph that he’d eased into womanhood wasn’t scared of pleasure. It was okay to think of that moment now, of how her tight body had wrapped around him in willing surrender.

He groaned at the feel of the memory mixing with reality. Marc jerked himself back from the edge by a hair.

Angela had stopped, watching him, also remembering. She shivered.

“I can’t wait much longer!”

The fear rose, making her tense.

Marc delivered a smoldering smile. “Scared?”

She nodded, voice rough. “A little.”

“You’re free, Angie. No one owns you anymore.”

The happiness that gave! Because it was true. She grinned, cheeks darkening further. “I’ll watch you for a minute.”

Marc wasn’t sure he had a minute after that.

Her hands stirred under the blanket. The urge to storm the bed and have her screaming in climax was a hard one to resist. “Move the blanket. Let me see, too.”

She did it slowly, revealing long, sexy legs and then white panties with a hand pushing the center aside. Her fingers rotated in small circles.

Marc’s heart thumped as the edge flew his way. “Damn, that’s hot. Lie back, pretend you’re alone.”

“Mmm…” The sound of Marc’s sexy voice made her convulse in pleasure; her legs opened further to reveal dark curls and slick skin that pulsed.

“With me!” Angela demanded hoarsely as the first wave of fierce light exploded through her body.

“Uuhhh!” Marc arched, grip freezing as he released wildly. “Yeah!”

Coming down first, Angela rolled over and pulled the blanket up. She’d thought to face fear or even guilt now, but there was only relief as her body continued to jerk and twitch in satisfaction. *I really am free now.*

Very unsure of her mood, Marc cleaned himself up and kept his mouth shut. He blew out the candle, then moved to his side of the bed. He was surprised when she held the blanket up and smiled at him.

“After that, I think it’s okay to ask if you’ll hold me while we sleep.”

Marc chuckled as he eased into the bed with her. That was what he wanted the most, what he longed for at night. “My honor, baby.”

Sated, the witch and old Angela both faded a bit more, pushed back by the new person who was emerging. This new woman belonged to herself. She wasn’t so afraid to take chances that she forgot to live.

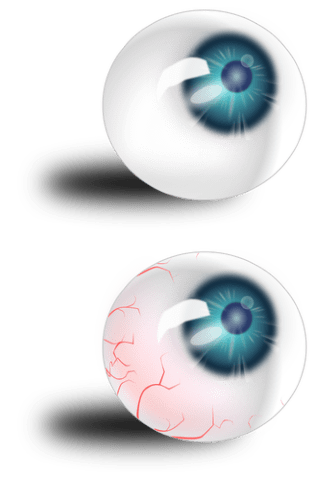
Angela let out a sigh of peace, tight against Marc’s hard chest. She fell asleep listening to his heartbeat for the first time in fifteen years.

Marc didn’t sleep at all. He just held her and remembered.

Eavesdropping from the next room, Lenore was disappointed, but she planned to keep her word and let them go without trouble. She was sure she would forget about the handsome couple the minute they were out of sight. There was trouble on the horizon for all of them. Lenore could feel it coming. *We won’t see them again. At least, not alive*.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

**Tell Me**

****

Chadron, Nebraska

**March 30th**

**1**

**“I** really didn’t think I’d see her again; at least not alive.”

Kenn watched the couple as they slept, ignoring the unpleasant feel of the ash tree between his legs and the angry animals padding below. The beasts sniffed and pissed, trying to find a way into the truck he’d parked up against the thick trunk.

Kenn had found the ranch house just before dawn, hitting shapes in the fog that were either dogs or coyotes as they attacked his tires. He’d taken up a high vantage point as a dim, foggy morning lit up the area, sure she was in there. His starlight scope had penetrated four barred windows, and then he’d found them.

Covers tangled, limbs entwined, it looked like a night of passion had worn them out. The woman wore a sleeping shirt that barely covered her thighs, flashing white panties as she stirred. The man, the wife-stealing, walking dead man, had on a pair of green boxers the intruder recognized even from a distance. They were military issue.

Kenn’s grip tightened on the rifle in his hand, nails digging shallow grooves into the stock as he spotted a dog tag, familiar tattoos, and a quick scan upon waking that every Marine did.

Then he saw who it was.

Dread and cold rage formed a thick knot in Kenn’s gut. Sergeant Marc Brady was Angela’s show of force. He was one of the few people Kenn had ever felt threatened by. He was enraged all over again as he remembered Angela’s mental calls for help. He’d heard the name she called for, but he hadn’t made the connection.

The Marine struggled with himself. The old Kenny wanted to aim and fire; the new Kenn didn’t want to kill without justification.

He chose to wait and see just how close his wife and former team leader really were.

**2**

Curled against Marc’s back, Angela woke all at once; she tensed, sensing danger.

*He is close.*

Her eyes snapped open.

She glanced at the window and tried to focus. *It’s coming from that direction.*

“Are you all right?”

After a minute of nothing happening, Angela told herself it was just nerves. She would be reunited with her son today…and Kenn. *At least it’ll be Easter and not All Fool’s Day.* “We should get moving soon.”

Marc stretched, loving the feel of her pressed tight against him. She hadn’t moved away yet; he wasn’t leaving the bed until she did. “You regret it?”

“No.” Angela lingered. “You?”

“A little. It wasn’t what I had planned.”

Angela’s cheeks turned red. Watching him had been a blast from their stolen past–­one she would replay in her mind for a long time. “As hot as it got in here, I’m surprised it didn’t go all the way.”

Marc rolled over, sliding an arm around her tense waist. “Don’t go back to him, honey. Please. We’re so good together.”

Angela was tempted. The time they’d spent together was seared into her, but her first emotion upon waking had been fear. “I won’t make a promise I might not be able to keep.”

Marc knew that wasn’t good, but he lowered his lips to hers anyway. *I’ll take whatever she lets me have.*

**3**

Kenn couldn’t take this.

Rage exploded in his mind as their mouths touched. When she let out a moan Kenn couldn’t hear but still felt, blood pounded in his brain. How many times had that sound brought him to a thick, instant climax? A hundred? A thousand?

Kenn kept his finger away from the trigger by sheer will. If he killed them now, like this, he could never return to Adrian. Those sharp eyes read the blood on a man’s hands.

He had to do something, though. He couldn’t just sit here and let her betray him, not while he was armed and in range.

**4**

Angela pulled back as another swell of fear interrupted a moment that she didn’t know the ending to.

Even the wolf was tense, fur bristling.

Marc lifted a brow. “Problem?”

She hesitated, aware of him lying mostly on top of her. “Just wolves, I think. We should get up.”

Marc sighed when her arm slid off his bare shoulder. “It didn’t happen, right?”

Angela flushed in the cool morning air. “For now.”

Marc sat up.

Angela rolled out of the bed.

**5**

Kenn lingered. Her creamy flesh was enticing as he studied them from a quarter mile away. The rifle was across his lap now that she was out of the bed. He had yet to find a woman whose body called to him as strongly or promised as much. Weak, Angela was, but she was also hot. Always had been.

Kenn saw a clear moment below and took it, pulling the string to open the hatch of the sunroof. He slid down the slimy tree, rifle over his shoulder. He was inside his truck with the roof latched before the hungry predators reacted. They lunged onto the truck anyway, but it did them no good.

Kenn plowed into the animals, seeing everything through a red haze. He wasn’t going far, just back to the two Blazers he’d found and searched. The pictures of Charlie had told him who they belonged to. He had until the couple returned to figure out how to get rid of Marc so he could give Angela what was coming to her. She had brought a dangerous man he’d hated long before the war. His thoughts raced with fury and fear. Coincidence? *I don’t believe in those. She’s been keeping secrets.*

**6**

“Will we have to fight our way out of here?”

“No. She heard us last night; she knows she was wrong.”

To Angela’s surprise, Marc flushed. “That bothers you?”

He considered. “I might have been quieter.”

Angela laughed, tossing her small notepad onto the bed where he was tying his boots. “That makes two of us. Page seven is what I agreed to trade and what I got for it.”

Marc picked up the small notebook, observing her as she moved around the room, getting ready to deal with what was coming. She left her hair down, braids mixed in. When she tugged her jeans up over a creamy cheek, Marc forgot to breathe.

“Well?”

He mentally snickered. “Looks good to me.”

“Max said to leave it at the barn. The wolves don’t come out until dusk. I also agreed to have you check their venting system while I give the kids a checkup. We’ll probably be here until midafternoon. I wanted to ask you first, but she’s set in stone on this women in charge shit.”

“Works for me. I’m well trained, remember?”

The amusement was forced, the room tense. Marc wasn’t sure how to begin. There were things he needed to know, things he needed to say. “What do you think about Safe Haven? Do they feel okay?”

“They seem organized. Careful.”

“They’re his people. Whatever he’s told them, they’ll believe.”

She shrugged. “Beyond grabbing Charlie and running, which you already know I don’t want to do, we’ll have to hope they’re good people who can recognize the truth.”

“So, you do plan to stay with them.”

“Plan? No, but I’d like to try. What I won’t do is pledge my loyalty to some asshole who thinks he’s God just because his nuts still work. I want to try being with other people, but I’ll be picky. I’ve just gotten my freedom back. I won’t give it up.”

“How do you want to handle it?”

She sighed. “I need to get Kenn alone, if possible.”

Marc frowned. “I meant about me.”

Angela’s eyes softened. “You’re a good friend who helped me, a lot.”

He strapped on his Colts. “Most of the problem is solved if you tell the truth. We’re family.”

“That would mean you can’t claim Charlie.”

“It’s probably for the best anyway, right? At least until you decide what you want.”

Angela shook her head. He’d been too good to her. She wouldn’t allow him to make that sacrifice. “You’re a good friend.”

“Okay. Just tell me beforehand, so our stories match.”

She scowled. “You make it sound like I plan to lie.”

He stared back. “Don’t you?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure yet.”

Marc was always impressed with how she chose to be honest first and lie second. “I understand. Say what you have to. I’ll support it.”

She warmed. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, honey.” Marc’s attention dropped to her shoulder, to the scar showing from under her tank top. How it had got there was the only unanswered question he still had at this point, though he would insist she get it all out. It would be one less thing for her man to use against her. “Did he give you that?”

“…yes.”

“As a punishment?”

“As a reminder.” Her voice dropped to an ugly mutter. “He’s the boss.”

Marc held in his anger to get the full story. “Will you tell me about him?”

“Why?”

Marc grunted. “Because we’re a day out and all I know is he’s a Marine, a bastard, and a dead man if there’s any justice, but that’s not enough. There has to be something I can use. Profile him.”

Angela was quiet for a minute, considering how much honesty she wanted to give. You had to know your own mind when you dealt with Kenny or he would rip you apart. Marc did need the information. “You won’t find anything. At least, I don’t think you will, but I’m only going to go so far. I can’t relive it during the day too.”

Marc thought her nightmares had gotten a lot better since their night around the fire, since the morning she had woken in his arms.

“He’s strict on everyone but himself; he’s obsessed with appearances. He can’t admit it when he’s wrong. He had a bigger shoe collection than any man should. He hates to be dirty, unshaven, or out of style in any way and he demands the same of those around him. He’s manipulative; he really believes what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“Good.” Marc locked eyes with her. “Now, really tell me about him. Get it over with.”

Angela stared at the foggy bedroom window. “I knew he was dangerous when we met; I knew I couldn’t trust him, but I thought I could hide it. I thought if I was careful and did what he wanted, I could have the same connection that…you and I had.” Angela perched on the window ledge. “We dated for a few weeks before he invited me to live with him. When I said no, bad things happened.”

Marc’s face darkened. “Like what?”

Angela couldn’t believe she was about to tell her shame to the one person whose respect meant more than anyone else. “My babysitter’s daughter was hurt in a hit and run accident that required her to be there while her child went through therapy. The sitter’s mother, who was already a heavy drinker, suddenly had an endless supply and stayed too drunk to talk, let alone care for an active one-year-old. I had to call off, miss classes. Stress built up. Kenny found me crying on my smoke break one night. When he offered again, I accepted so I could keep my son.”

She sucked in a calming breath to keep speaking. “I couldn’t apply for welfare because I was underage, and I didn’t know if the family had reported me as a runaway. I always assumed they didn’t care, but I wasn’t taking the chance after having my baby for all those months.” Angela paused, voice sad, heart breaking. “Charlie was my only joy.”

“So you moved in. Did he know then, about what you can do?”

Her tone grew cold. “I don’t know that for sure.”

Marc was certain her man had known exactly what he was getting into. “When did he find out?”

“He kept up the act for almost a year. I was…content. I began to doubt he was the threat I’d first sensed. It made me careless. I would reach for the phone when it rang, stare toward the door before someone knocked. Sometimes…I’d respond to things I picked up from him.” She forced herself to continue. “I met the real Kenny in our bedroom a little after our first anniversary. We were about to make love. I picked up an image of him with one of the teenagers at the recruiting office.”

“And you didn’t hide your anger.”

Angela gave a bitter laugh. “I went nuts. It got bad fast. After I’d slapped him a couple times, the police knocked on our door. I was arrested, and he kept my son!”

Her voice was rough with hurt and anger. “He left me there until the court date. *Five days.* When we got in front of the judge, he told them I had a violent temper and he was considering filing for custody because he loved my boy, but he didn’t want me. I was put on probation. 241-Kids opened a file. When I got out, he let me find my own way home and made me wait outside the door until I’d pissed on myself before he would let me in.”

“Son of a bitch!” Marc’s fury broke through his control. “Why didn’t you kill him?!”

Angela didn’t react, stuck in the past. She continued as if Marc hadn’t interrupted. “When he let me in, Charlie was at his mother’s house. I knew I was in trouble, but it was too late.” She sighed heavily. “I don’t even remember there being any neighbors home.”

Marc sucked in air, forcing himself to finish this ugly moment. “What did he do to you, Angie?”

She turned slowly, pulling up the sleeve of her shirt. “He marked me as his.”

Marc repeated his question. “Why didn’t you use your power on him?”

“I couldn’t. Between the Child Protection people, his mom’s money, and my age, I would have lost my baby. Even if the court ordered Kenn to give him up, he wouldn’t have. Kenny would have sold Charlie off on the black market first. He told me so. He said he wanted control of what I could do, and then things could go back to the way they were before I fucked it all up.”

“Back to him being in charge and you being his slave.”

“Yes, but he didn’t count on the witch inside. She decides who we use these gifts for, not me. When I would have given in, the witch locked it all up. It went away and there was nothing he could do about it.” Her voice shook. “He was so mad…” She closed her eyes against those days of living through hell.

Marc unclenched his fists, angrier than he had ever been.

“He didn’t believe me at first. He tried to make me use it to defend myself. That’s how I got this.” She tilted her arm so he could see it was indeed the letter K. “After he cut me and…raped me, he made me stitch myself up and then I was his.” Her voice lowered. “Every hit he ever gave me after that was because I let the witch deny him what he wanted most–my power. Deep down, he always suspected I could access it again.”

Angela took a deep breath and brought herself back to the present. “I think maybe he did give up after a while. As long as I was defenseless against him, he was content with that as revenge. In time, I learned that I could have some of what I wanted if I was willing to pay the price. His affairs continued. I was the perfect woman. The witch stayed asleep. Until the war, I hadn’t used my gifts in over a decade.” She let the pain bleed into her voice. “I lost who I was to keep him from getting it.”

“You should have called me!” Marc was full of fury and guilt that he didn’t know what to do with. *I should have been there for her!*

“…Kenny was my punishment for our love.”

Awful hurt filled Marc; his rage crumbled. “That’s not true! I was the one who should have been punished!”

Her sadness grew. “Because we were wrong to give in. Our love is a sin.”

Marc gestured. “No. Because I let them keep us apart. Our love wasn’t wrong, honey, it was meant to be. They were wrong for getting in the way.”

Angie was afraid to believe him. “You mean that?”

Marc opened his soul to ease her pain. “Yes, even when we were apart. I stayed away to give you a chance at a better life. I’m sorry you paid for it. I’m sorry I was too weak to recognize the trap. I let them keep us apart! I’m so sorry.”

Angela fought not to cry. She’d longed to hear that from him.

“We should have run together. If I could do it over, I wouldn’t leave you twice.”

“But you will if I…choose to stay with Kenny?”

He shook his head. “Not until you’re happy.”

She stared at him sadly, already sure Kenn couldn’t give that to her.

Marc needed to be done with this conversation. It hurt too much. “What’s the first thing he’s going to do or say when we pull up?”

She gasped. “He’ll demand to know who you are to me!”

“Yes. He’ll force your choice right away. Tell him we’re family and let him cool off.”

“If I do that, when it comes out that you’re Charlie’s dad, people will think he was born in incest.”

Marc shrugged. “We’ll tell the rest of it at that point, but if you just say we’re good friends, they’ll think there’s something going on between us.”

“Isn’t there?”

Marc was caught off guard and then stunned by her next words.

“I don’t want to ruin any chance we might have in the future, Marc.”

Hope and love filled him, but he controlled himself, replaying her words. Had she found a way for them to be together? “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Yeah, I haven’t made a choice yet. I can’t until I get my son back. I’ll handle the rest after that.”

“But you’re thinking about it…about us?”

“Even more after last night.” Angela blushed at her own boldness.

Marc smiled. “I won’t push. You’re in charge.”

“I know better.” She put the last of their things into the two kits. “It’s all spinning faster now. These are our last hours together before the collision.”

Marc bared his soul. “I love you, Angie, so much it hurts. I want us to be together if you can forgive me for all the hell you’ve survived. I don’t blame you if you can’t, but you *can* count on me now.” Marc leered, trying to lighten his somber words. “I’d also agree to be your man toy, but I can’t wear leather. It gives me hives.”

His joke surprised a laugh out of her. “Thanks. That’s another beautiful picture in my head.”

The tension thickened as they stared at each other. When he advanced, she stayed still, wanting his kiss but no, she was afraid of what it might lead to.

He nuzzled her jaw. “Just this.” Marc pressed his mouth to the corner of her lips.

Angela sent her arms around his neck with a sigh of pleasure that he responded to. Angela felt him tense when *she* deepened the kiss, tongue touching his, breath mingling.

Angela pulled away, eyes wide with fresh desire.

Marc let her go. “It’s going to work out somehow. You have to believe that.”

“It may take a while.” She locked down on the loneliness already trying to overwhelm her heart.

“I understand. We’ll handle things as best we can, and maybe there will be time for us later, when things are...safer.”

*There will be,* Angela vowed. *I won’t give you up twice.*

Part Three:

**Safe Haven**

April

# Chapter Thirty-Five

**Reunited**

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**1**

***H****e’s here!*

Footsteps crunched behind her. Angela’s hand dropped to her gun as her eyes found Marc in the moldy doorway of the barn.

Marc snapped his mouth shut on the warning that would have been too late, realizing he knew the man marching down the middle of the street, and not just from their time together in the Marines. The cold glower of ownership he threw at Marc said this was her man. The piper was here. It was time to pay.

Kenn stopped a few feet away, hoping Angela pulled the gun so he could kill them both and claim self-defense to Adrian.

“Kenny?” *He looks different... Charlie!*

Kenn knew the joy spreading across her face wasn’t for him. It faded fast.

“You’re alone.”

Kenn glared. “I’ve come to get you.”

“Little late for that now.” Angela pointed out, able to feel him trying to control himself. Would he end it all right here? Marc was telling her to duck when it started, that he would do the rest.

Angela didn’t retreat from Kenn’s thunderous visage, waiting for fate to determine who would live and who would die.

Kenn already hated this Angela. She didn’t blink, didn’t take her hand from the gun on her hip. “You don’t look happy to see me.”

“Of course, I am. I’m glad you survived.”

The breeze blew her hair around.

Kenn saw her wary glance as he stared at it. She wasn’t allowed to have her hair down in public. It was another transgression she would account for. “Show me.”

Angela stepped into his opening arms with a heavy heart. *Can I endure a little (six years!) longer, so no one else will get hurt? Can I just give in?*

Hand resting on his holster, Marc watched from the lonely doorway, unable to believe he hadn’t been able to use her clues and come up with loudmouth, obnoxious, snotty Lance Corporal Kenn Harrison.

Marc’s stomach was full of hot anger. He began mentally preparing for the battle of his life even while the pain of her being in someone else’s arms flooded his heart. Angie had her man back...and he wasn’t at all surprised. Had Kenn been spying?

Their moment in the bedroom, right after they’d woken, came to mind. Marc’s gut tightened. *What all did Kenn see?*

Them in bed together, the kiss… *Too much*. It implied a lot.

Their eyes locked over Angie’s tense shoulder.

Kenn sent a greeting. *She’s mine. Go away or I’ll kill you!*

Dog’s thick fur bristled.

Marc put a hand on the animal’s shoulder. “Me too, boy. Me too.”

Angela regretted the hug the second Kenny crushed her close. She tried to pull away when his mouth lowered to hers, but he tangled a hand in her thick curls and held her still as his tongue invaded, conquered, revolted.

Kenn ground his mouth against her as that distinctive, addictive scent of vanilla filled his nose. He wondered how much more Marc would allow before stepping in to get himself killed.

*Ah!* *Not much at all*. Kenn shifted them to be in the right position as he shoved his tongue deeper. Her tag-along was already moving from his place in the doorway.

Angela picked up the thought and understood Kenny was trying to provoke Marc. She slammed her boot against his ankle, leaning her weight into it as she elbowed his flat stomach.

Not expecting her to fight back, Kenn grunted, letting go.

Angela stayed between the two men.

“What was that for?!” Kenn closed the distance between them.

“You wouldn’t let go.” The witch said to provoke him so they could either kill him or be killed but be done. Angela couldn’t help but consider it.

Kenn leaned in, itching to break her crooked nose again. “I never will!” He scanned the Marine who had paused by her bumper, then the big black-and-gray dog bristling at his side. “You have one minute to tell me what you’re doing with him! Who is Marc to you?”

Angela tilted her head. “How do you know Marc?”

Kenn clenched his hand. “Answer me!”

Angela shoved him with both hands, moving him out of her personal space as she’d learned. “Stop yelling!”

Kenn gaped. *What did she say?*

Angela kept going while she had him off guard. “We can have a normal conversation, or we can spill blood right now. It’s your funeral!” It was dangerous to push, but the old Angela, the one who’d battled him early in their relationship, was guiding her through this minefield.

Kenn’s eyes flicked to Marc, then Dog.

Angela let herself breathe. Getting Kenny to think before he acted was key to surviving the encounter.

Kenn hated it that he might be outnumbered by the tense Marine edging closer, the bristling animal that appeared to be a wolf…but also by Angela herself, who had obviously done a lot of reverting during her trip. “Fine. We’ll talk.”

“We’ll start the entire conversation over.” Angela gave him a cool smile as the sun came through the clouds of grit. “Hello, Kenn. Good to see you. How have you been?”

Kenn recognized her tactics. He should. He’d used them daily on her. “Never better. Enjoy your trip?”

Kenn felt his rage go up another notch when she nodded, glancing back at her escort.

“Some of it, yes.”

“Hope it was worth it.” Kenn’s expression promised payment.

“It was.” Angela continued to defy the rules even though his beefy hands were clenching into fists again. “Where’s my boy?”

Kenn said nothing, waiting, wanting to hear her beg.

“I don’t need you to find him! How do you think I got here?”

Kenn was too pissed to be worried, though he understood he might be in danger. *She did more than revert. She’s using the power. She unlocked it!*

He’d always known she could. The old, thwarted bitterness settled back into his stomach. *Is there a way I can get control of her power now?* His mind flashed a picture of her son. *Yes.* “You do need me to get near him. He’s with *my* men. They won’t want to kill you, but they will*.*”

“Be careful, *Grunt*.”

Her tone was deadly. Kenn growled at her.

She didn’t back down.

He hated the new knowledge of life and death he read in her eyes. She thought she could kill him. *How much practice did she get? What did she do, survive, to get here?*

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Angela kept defying his rules.

Kenn stared at her, shocked that she would get into his thoughts so openly, so arrogantly. Didn’t she remember what he’d threatened to do if she used it on him?

“Everything has changed, Kenn. You broke our deal when you abandoned me for that group of strangers you’ve been lying to!”

On the edge of control at her veiled threat to reveal his secrets, Kenn was surprised to discover her disobedience was attractive. He hadn’t thought her hold on him was that strong anymore. “You have six years left! You belong to me!”

Angela forced the truth out “Not anymore. I want out.”

“No.”

“You don’t own me!”

“Yes, I do.” Kenn switched to the topic eating at him. “How long have you two been sleeping together?”

Angela tensed. *Here we go.* “We aren’t.”

“Lyin’ bitch!”

“You go to hell!”

Kenn’s hand moved.

Angela felt herself being brushed aside.

Marc slid between them. “It’s been a while, Harrison.”

Kenn also stood his ground. “Not long enough, *Brady*.”

Marc didn’t respond to the accusation.

Kenn waited for one of them to get nervous and babble; they remained silent. “You’re…traveling together?”

Marc took the lead, big shoulders prepared to take what came. “We were both coming this way. I couldn’t let her go it alone. She was hard to convince, though.” Marc lied easily. This was indeed a thin line and he wasn’t the one walking it. She hadn’t been exaggerating even a little. Kenn was deadly with the M16 over his shoulder.

Kenn’s sneer spread. “Well, thanks, *buddy*, but I’ve got it from here. You can hit the redline.”

Marc’s responding grin widened into sharp white teeth. “Welcome, *pal*, but a funny thing happened on the way here. I discovered I want to be with…people. I might stick close for a while.” Marc took a step forward to bring them within inches of each other. “*Real close*.”

Angela knew blood was about to spill. She stayed out of it. She wasn’t as eager as Marc, but if it had to happen, the best time was now, while Kenn was alone.

Kenn’s hairy knuckles inched toward the 9mm on his hip. “She has a man, you fucking Jody!”

Marc snorted. “If you want to call yourself that.”

“What the hell does that mean?!”

Marc bumped Kenn’s chest without hesitation. “It means she’s not your punching bag anymore! You want to hit someone, you hit me!”

Kenn took the suggestion. The hit rocked Marc’s head backward. “Like that?” Kenn followed the upper cut with a powerful roundhouse.

Marc ducked the blow and landed a nasty knuckle to Kenn’s temple that made the Marine stagger. “Yeah! More!”

Kenn rushed him, slamming into his gut.

Marc drove his elbow into Kenn’s shoulder.

Kenn jerked, grunting as he was rocked off balance. They hit the dirt together in a hard thud, swinging, wrestling, trying to get the advantage.

Angela waved at Dog to stay back as Marc shoved Kenn off and then rolled onto his feet.

Kenn rushed.

Marc ducked again, foot flashing out at the last minute to trip him.

The blow glanced off Marc’s wounded arm. He kicked Kenn in the ribs as he went down, wound stinging from the ripped stitches.

Kenn was on his feet in a blur, hand flying to his hip.

Both of Marc’s guns were out before the furious Marine could pull his own.

“Do it!” Marc’s finger tightened, longing to squeeze. “Make it count. *I* will.”

Kenn thought about it. He was fast, better than anyone in Adrian’s employ, but Marc had always beaten him before the war. Always. Kenn’s hand moved away from the holster he’d already gotten open.

“Wise choice.” Marc felt blood seeping through the dusty white gauze on his arm.

“I’ll kill you for this.” Kenn tried to think through the rage, but it was hard.

Marc nodded. “Then let’s end it now.”

Kenn had no doubt Marc would pull the trigger.

“Someone’s coming!” Angela’s odd voice got their attention.

Both men responded to the tremor of fear.

“Good or bad?” Marc lowered his guns, but he didn’t holster.

She looked at them with hazy eyes that made Kenn’s heart slide into his gut. *Adrian won’t miss that.*

“Both?”

Marc glared at Kenn with the hatred of a lifelong enemy. “This isn’t over.”

“You can bet on that!” Kenn spit blood at Marc’s boots.

Marc slid his guns into the holsters. “Where?”

Angela pointed west, watching Kenn even though Marc had turned his back with no obvious worry. Kenny lost. That made him more lethal than if he’d won.

The faint echo of hoofbeats came to them.

Dog growled low in his throat.

Marc gestured for Kenn to protect her, then did the same himself, putting her between them.

Angela was shocked when Kenn obeyed. She made the connection an instant later. *That’s how he knows Marc! They served together. ...did Marc know all along?*

*No,* she realized. He couldn’t have kept that from her. He was too open to be holding such a huge secret. “There.”

A muddy black horse thundered around the corner as she spoke, carrying a thin male with a black bandana covering most of his face. Behind him, a blonde woman in a long trench coat waved frantically. Dust flew from the animal’s hooves.

“How did they know we were here?”

Kenn smoothed his short dark spikes. “They found you the same way I did.” He threw a cold sneer at Marc, then one to the growling animal that had returned to its master’s side. “They passed over that ridge and saw two muddy Blazers in the middle of the street!”

Before Marc could respond, the foaming black horse was upon them, barely stopping before the woman leapt off. She staggered toward them, sharp lines of her skeleton poking through sagging skin. She collapsed against Angela, pulling them both to the dusty ground. “People! Oh, God, people!”

The man also dismounted, lowering the bandana from his scruffy face, but he stayed by the exhausted horse. He studied Marc and Kenn with shifty green eyes.

They both noticed he paid no attention to the raving woman now trying to get a rush of words out through her tears.

“Slavers! Escaped. Have to get further…gun? Have a gun?”

The woman cried gut-wrenching sobs as Angela helped her take off the stinking trench coat so she could check her out.

“Escaped from who?” Kenn marched toward the man.

Rick cringed. “Big group of Mexicans! We got away while they were drinking.”

“Where?”

“On 25, near Cheyenne.” Rick wondered who this hard, beaten man was. The outline of a dog tag under a blood-splattered shirt caught Rick’s attention. His lips tightened. *The enemy.*

“How many?” Kenn swept his dirty jeans, cruddy fingernails, greasy brown hair. *Adrian won’t like this guy.*

“Sixty or seventy, maybe.” Rick was glad Samantha hadn’t seen all of Cesar’s camp. He had three times that number.

“Armed?”

“Isn’t everyone now?” Rick gave a pointed stare as he thrust restless hands deep into jean pockets to keep his nervousness from showing.

“How long were you with them?”

“A long time. They took me back in Trinidad.”

Kenn scowled, frustrated. He hadn’t gotten rid of Marc fast enough. The couple would have to be taken to Adrian. They had information about the slavers. That meant no time to ditch Marc or hole up with Angela for a few days. *Damn it!* “Who are you?”

“I’m Rick. She’s Samantha.”

“Load up.” Kenn joined Angela before the man could respond, one resentful eye swelling.

Dog gave a menacing growl.

Kenn hesitated, then snarled his own warning.

Both Marc and Angela were surprised when Dog retreated a single pace. Even the wolf knew Kenn was a violent, trained killer.

Kenn glared at Angela. “How is she?”

Except for the infected burn on her hip, most of the woman’s injuries appeared to be minor. Her mental state might be a different story. Angela assembled a quick list. “Dehydrated, malnourished, shock–”

“Can she travel?”

Marc wanted to protest the interruption, but he stayed quiet. Angela wanted to try again to handle it peacefully now that they had witnesses.

Kenn pointed. “Get her in your Blazer. We can make it to camp by dawn.”

“Camp?” Angela gestured sharply. “As in Safe Haven, the place you had yet to mention?”

Kenn didn’t deny the accusation, but he worried over how much she already knew. Would any of his bluffs succeed?

In the tension, the now sedated blonde saw Rick’s brief smirk of success at the name of the camp.

Kenn and Marc moved the muttering woman to the passenger seat of Angela’s Blazer.

Kenn picked out details that enraged him, like the edge of a lacy white bra under a purple gift bag, and a pair of green boxers showing from the corner of a black duffle bag. He saw the vehicle for what it was–living quarters. *They were playing house!*

When the two men moved back to let Angela through, their eyes locked.

“You’ve disgraced the Corps. Once we get to camp, I’ll do my best to have you banished for it!” Kenn stormed away before his rage could take control again.

Angela handed Marc the hat she’d retrieved from the middle of the street. “You all right?”

His bruised face was troubled. “Yeah. You?”

“Better now. It’s good you were able to back him down. Thank you.”

Marc fingered his swelling jaw. “It isn’t over, honey. This was the beginning.”

Kenn pulled up to them a minute later in an ugly green Bronco. He got out, waving at Rick. Marc, he ignored. “You drive your woman. Leave the horse.” Kenn looked at Angela. “You ride with me.”

Marc would have protested, but Angela waved it off. “I’ll be fine, just keep up. He’s hell behind the wheel.”

Angela let Kenn push her into his truck. As he got into the driver’s seat, she turned to him, determined to throw him off balance from the start. “What were you doing out here, away from camp?”

She didn’t wince as he slammed the door, though he’d expected her to. She was no longer scared of him just because he was a man. She was afraid of the dangerous person she knew lurked inside, though she thought she had done a good job so far of pretending that she wasn’t.

Kenn stared at her for a long moment, saying nothing. When she didn’t speak either, just waited for an answer, he shifted into drive and hit the gas.

He didn’t make sure the others were ready, but Angela knew Marc was on their bumper. “Well?”

Kenn lit a smoke. “We got a call from the woman. Adrian sent me to get her and some medicine we need.”

His voice was laced with pride. Angela frowned. “Who is Adrian, and who are you to him that you’re trusted with something like that?”

Kenn was surprised again. The Angela he knew wouldn’t have realized the mission was important. “I’m whatever he needs.”

Kenn didn’t want to tell her how high in the chain of command he was, or how permanent a place he’d carved out in Safe Haven.

“Well, what does he usually need you to be?”

Her sarcasm shocked him. Marc had done all this in a few weeks? It had taken him years to train her. *I should have used the knife.* With a K-Bar, he and Marc were equals. “I drive, I make out schedules. I teach, I count, I defend, I lead. Wherever we’re short someone, I do it.”

“How long have you been with them, Kenn? Long enough to build a new life?”

“That’s above your pay grade! How long have you been having an affair? Before the war?”

“It’s not like that. We’re–”

“Friends?” He swerved around a wreck. “You’ve been screwing him all along!”

Angela sucked in a calming breath, heart racing, “You would think of me that way, but it didn’t have to be. I was prepared to love you, to be your mate.”

“I wanted your obedience. The rest of it is shit!”

“That’s what I mean. I had hoped the war might allow you to–”

“To what? Be okay with you bringing your lover along? Wake up! We have a deal!”

“It’s an unfair agreement! You lied, manipulated, *hurt me*.”

Kenn didn’t deny her accusations. “A deal is a deal.”

“Why, Kenn? You didn’t come back for me; you don’t want me here. Why keep me? I’ll take Charlie and go. You can tell people whatever you want.”

“You have six years left.” He slapped the wheel. “You’re going to pay for every rule you’ve broken!”

Angela stiffened. “There won’t be any more punishments. Those days are over.”

Kenn couldn’t help but hear the danger. It didn’t matter. “You have to be sleeping with him to talk to me like that. Wait until I get you alone!”

“We are not! He’s a good friend who helped me.”

“Yeah, helped himself to what’s mine! Unfaithful bitch! It started before the war, didn’t it? Answer me!”

“No! We’re just friends!”

“You’re not allowed to have friends! You belong to me!”

“Never! I’ve always been Marc’s!”

Kenn’s hand flew out. *Slap!* He swerved as he leaned over to hit her again.

Angela took the hit as she pulled her gun. She shoved it against his neck, finger tightening on the trigger. “Do it again! Please.”

Things had just changed between them forever.

Kenn eased off the gas and took a fast glance at her. Lip bleeding, her face was perfectly calm otherwise. Death glinted back at him from her eyes.

He brought the Bronco to a gentle stop.

The two Blazers pulled alongside. Only Marc understood what was happening; he didn’t interfere, hoping Angela would solve the problem on her own.

A drop of blood dripped from Angela’s lip. Her knuckles were white from her grip on the gun as she struggled not to pull the trigger. *I hate him so much!* “Next time, keep going until I’m dead, or you will be.”

Kenn recognized the tone and knew he was as close to death here as he ever had been on the battlefield, but he couldn’t back down. “They used to stone whores!”

Angela drew in a shallow breath. “I’ve been loyal to you, even when I didn’t want to be. You can’t say the same. I want my freedom. I’ll do whatever it takes to get it. Whatever you make me do.” She lowered the gun to her lap.

Kenn noticed she didn’t take her finger off the trigger. *How much did Marc teach her?* Kenn slowly took his smokes from his pocket and lit one.

When he offered it to her, Angela didn’t hesitate to take it, sensing it was his peace offering.

After a moment, Kenn eased on the gas, thinking about what she’d said. He believed they weren’t sleeping together. She was too pissed to lie, but something was going on. The kiss proved that, even if he forgot about all the other signs, the sparks he’d witnessed, her words: *“I’ve always been Marc’s!”* What did that say?

Kenn glanced over to find her staring in her mirror at the Blazer rolling behind and a little to the right–the bodyguard’s place. *Are they talking?*

The rage flared back to life. Kenn hit the gas, swerving so they couldn’t make eye contact. “You better remember who I am. He’s tough, and while he’s definitely unexpected, he’s not invincible. Neither are you! I’m important to these people. Maybe he’ll have an accident.”

Angela’s anger was replaced by a flood of sadness. “Just let me go, Kenny. You don’t love me. You don’t even *like* me. It will cause all of us pain, including you.”

Kenn refused to do the right thing. “You owe me six more years. If I catch you with him or anyone else, I’ll take Charlie out on a supply run and we won’t come back. Ever!”

**2**

Obsessed, malevolent eyes watched the small convoy drive off with Rick. The twins were a mere mile away. They were glad the traitor had been taken in, but the strength of the men he’d joined was a worry. The second Marine was as much a problem as the first. Clearly, both males wanted the woman, which would make it harder for Dillan’s plan to work.

“They’ll fight to keep her.” Dean counted ammo as they trudged back to their hidden jeep.

“Yeah.” Dillan took his place behind the wheel. He picked up the mike. “Package has made contact. Tracking. Report later.”

The twin hung it up, not really caring if Cesar got their messages. They had a good plan. Fear was a powerful weapon, but the way the men were so willing to fight for the witch made the eldest twin nervous. *Maybe we should have a backup plan in case she gets lucky again.*

**3**

Kenn drove hard and fast, fuming. By dusk, he was taking big risks as he released his frustration on his Bronco. When his luck ran out, Angela wasn’t surprised that he blew a tire.

The truck swerved; Kenn handled it expertly. “Damn.”

He didn’t sound mad, despite the curse. *He wanted a delay*. Angela began monitoring his thoughts.

Kenn brought them to a rough stop in the middle of the empty, two-lane road that was surrounded by dying fields of wheat. “Ten-minute break. Stay close.”

Angela waited for Marc to circle the vehicles and give her a motion before getting out.

Kenn felt an iron hand tighten in his gut. *That’s how it really is. She switched owners during my absence.*

Kenn worked on the tire, expecting them to be together the whole time, but after the bathroom break that they all needed, Angela took her doctor’s bag and went to check on the sedated woman.

Marc circled their stopped convoy, Dog at his side.

Kenn glanced up at Marc as he walked by, but the man’s gaze was on the dark South Dakota borderlands they’d crossed into.

Kenn’s anger grew. That level of automatic responsibility was exactly what Adrian was always hoping for in new arrivals. Despite his bluffs, Kenn already knew Adrian would want them to stay and help build the dream. It was an ugly thought for Kenn, envisioning a life in Safe Haven where Angela and Marc were not only a legal couple, but also in the chain of command. The only thing worse would be if Adrian gave Marc his job.

“Will he really want us?”

Kenn swung around in surprise.

Angela stared. “You’ve told some big lies and you don’t want them to find out what kind of person you are. Does that sound like the truth or have you forgotten what that is?” She studied his red face and sullen eyes. “Wanna make a new deal?”

“No!” Kenn scratched the idea off his list of things to try. He stood up and kicked the hubcap back on. “Get in, we’re leaving.” He hated this new Angela. *Where is the timid mouse I curled into the corner with my fist, and what will it take to get her back?*

“You can’t. Ever. I’ll die first.” She slid a hand to her gun as she stepped around him.

Marc came by on a round, holding out a pack of smokes. His nod of encouragement gave her a warm rush of confidence and a frenzy of longing. She was already wishing their time alone hadn’t been wasted. *I denied Marc for nothing. Kenny hasn’t changed at all.*

**4**

As dawn neared, Angela was awake and bitter. She couldn’t wait to hug her son; she was grateful she had made it so far, but she was scared again–the way she had spent so many years. It was depressing that the best she could hope for was Kenny letting his guard down long enough for her to grab her son and run. He thought he had her trapped, but this time she had Marc in her corner. *Will it be enough?*

Kenn scowled when she lit another cigarette without asking for permission, but he only lowered both front windows a bit to clear the smoke. He saw her attention go to her mirror again.

Kenn swerved the truck, throwing her a warning glare that had the old Angela bracing to fight again.

“We’ll be there in about an hour. We need to talk about what you’ll do and say.”

His hard tone and body language sent flashes of blind obedience through her mind. She immediately resisted. “No, Kenn, we don’t. You want to tell me the rules or the way things work? Fine, but save all that other shit. You don’t own me anymore. That life ended with the war I survived alone!”

Kenn was speechless.

Angela sighed. “I won’t embarrass you. I won’t run my mouth. In return, you remember I’m a person, not your property. You don’t own me. You never have.”

Kenn burned at her words, her tone, even hating her using the short version of his name. It made her sound less needy, less weak, and he knew who was responsible. “This is all *his* doing, isn’t it?”

Her response was quick. “Because of Marc, I’m here and alive, two things you didn’t want to happen!”

Kenn enjoyed her pain.

“Can’t you be even a little glad to see me?”

He sneered. “Woulda been easier if you hadn’t brought your lover along.”

“You left me there to die. I did what I had to, and I went through hell to get here.”

Kenn gave her a disbelieving once over. “You look fine.”

“I am…*now*.” Her taunt implied Marc was the reason for it.

Kenn let out a frustrated hiss. “Send him on his way!”

Angela shrugged indifferently, but her hand remained by her holster. “I don’t think I can. We’ve become close.”

Kenn stomped on the gas, throwing her back in the seat. “I’ll kill you both!”

Angela was overwhelmed with what had been caged before–anger. “I owe you a lot, Marine. If you miss, if you underestimate me, it’ll be *your* body they bury.”

Kenn barely controlled himself, almost sure she was trying to get hit this time so she could shoot him. While he was fast, Kenn wasn’t sure he could grab her arm in time if Marc had taught her to fire from that hip holster. The way she was keeping her fingers on the butt hinted the wife stealer had.

*Damn it! I have to get her under control.* Kenn foresaw embarrassing explanations, denials, and a trial he would lose. Assaulting a woman wouldn’t be overlooked.

“My…problems are not going to be made public.”

Kenn scowled, realizing she was trying to stay a step ahead by reading his thoughts. He would stop that later, when he had the concentration to bring up the old wall that had kept her in the dark when they first met. Right now, he had to find a way to save his place in Safe Haven. “The people here will make it their business to find out. Safe Haven has few secrets. Adrian arranged it that way to keep the bad people out.”

“One sure slipped through.”

Kenn flushed in shame instead of the angry denial she expected.

“A truce? A week or two and see how things go before you spread lies and make me do something ugly?”

“A truce? Hmm… Okay.” Angela understood she had just won the first of many rounds. “You have seven days to convince me I should forgive you or forget you. After that, I’m free to do what I want.”

His hand flinched toward her again.

Angela held herself still as he grabbed the mike off the dash holder instead.

“Don’t push me! I’ve done a lot of changing, but you owe me six more years. If I’m banished, I’ll sneak back in to slit your throat! You’re free when I say, not a second sooner!” Kenn keyed the mike. “This is Eagle Two, calling Safe Haven. You out there, Mitch?”

“You got me, Big Daddy.”

Kenn grimaced. “I’m half an hour out. Four new arrivals, two of each, adult. One needs medical care. Have the QZ set up and tell the boss he’ll want to talk to a couple of these people.”

“Roger, Eagle Two. Did you find anyone?”

Kenn grunted in bitterness. “Yeah, my wife.”

Kenn hung up the mike before she could protest the title, wondering if Angela knew from the call he was second in command. *She isn’t that smart, is she?* “These are my men, witch, and they’ll hate him because I do. I can make things ugly.”

Determination to make him understand his timid Angela was gone forever filled her mind in a roar that would eventually have to be heard. “A truce, Kenn. Seven days, then we’ll talk. I’ll walk the line until then, and so will Marc. If you lose it all, it’ll be *your* doing, not ours.”

# Chapter Thirty-Six

**The Line**

**A close up of a flower

Description automatically generated**

Black Hills of South Dakota

**April 1st**

**1**

“**Y**ou are entering an American Military refugee camp. Identify yourself!”

Angela jumped.

Kenn’s beefy hand had been hovering over the radio before the call came. He keyed the handset without picking it up. “From sea to shining sea.”

“Welcome home, Eagle Two. The QZ is in the corner. He’ll meet you there.”

“Copy.”

The valley was covered in fog and huge trees. Among these towering giants lurked a camp of survivors. Dozens of people were in sight through the swirling mist. As they crested the muddy hill, Angela gawked. *It’s a small city!* *I’ll never be able to hide it from so many people!*

It all flashed by too fast for more details as Kenn steered the Bronco to a faint but clear trail etched in the mud.

*What kind of place have we come to? Is my son happy? Healthy? A prisoner?* Angela forced herself to breathe normally, determined to be the strong survivor she had discovered on the hazardous trip here. She counted five small tents inside an area marked by bright yellow caution tape. A larger white canvas sat just outside the quarantine zone, sporting a red cross and a name she wasn’t close enough to read yet.

Kenn drove the truck behind those tents and put it in park.

Angela’s Blazer pulled in on the left.

Marc’s slid in on her right.

Kenn had been searching for an explanation that Adrian would accept. If anyone found out he had hit a woman, he would be banished. He glanced at Angela with desperation flickering. “You’ll keep your mouth shut and behave?”

Angela thought his face was worse than Marc’s, but she wasn’t sure if that meant Marc would win in a fight to the death. This one had been more like two big dogs sizing each other up. “Yes. Leave me be for seven days, then we’ll talk.”

Kenn got out, calling greetings to the armed, black clad sentries on duty here.

Angela could hear him struggling to invent excuses as she opened her door and stood on the Bronco’s wide foot rails. She studied the vague, shifting forms of the foggy refugee camp as the heartbreakingly welcome sound of dogs yapping echoed. *Charlie! I’m here!*

She heard his answering cry of stunned happiness as shimmery forms of people advanced through the high fog. The hair on her arms and neck tingled; blood pounded through her ears as a door in her mind tried to swing open. *Someone here is like me...* Yes, definitely. *He* was coming this way.

Three tall men in jeans emerged through the fog. Angela picked out Kenn’s idol easily. She wasn’t surprised to discover the vibrant sense of power was coming from the great looking blond man in crisscrossed holsters on both hips, like Marc. That was where the similarities ended. This man had sexy, sun-streaked brows, a goatee, and short spikes of yellow hair like rippling wheat. He was average height and weight, but the way he carried himself said he was different. His pace wasn’t a strut, but a confident step implying he could handle what came, he knew what he was doing, and little would stand in his way. The rattling door in Angela’s mind swung open as the witch took over. She pulled hard, with no time to resist as the colors of his energy flooded her.

Stopping in surprise, Adrian stared at the pretty woman with long black curls and a fresh wound on her lower lip. Their eyes met across the distance... The air became crisp, sharp, then faded, taking the camp noises away and replacing them with the soft, lapping waves of a calm ocean.

A second later, the sounds snapped back into place, making Angela flinch.

Adrian faked a yawn and forced his feet to move. “We’re done for now.”

Instead of disappearing as they normally might have, Kyle and Seth stayed, waited. Something had given Adrian pause. The off duty Eagles wanted to know what it was.

*Who all noticed?* Adrian swept the area. The observant males at his side, for sure, and probably Neil as well, but no camp members were in sight. One glance at Kenn’s *bruised?* face told Adrian not only had he witnessed it, he was angry about it. Understanding fell into place. This was Kenn’s wife, why he’d left. Surely she hadn’t beaten Kenn up? The guy with her, then. *Must be a hardass.*

Adrian saw Neil moving subtly toward Kenn’s wife and her escort. Neil had the same questions he did. Content that end was covered, Adrian scanned the other new arrivals.

Unease sank into his gut. A thin woman with dirty blonde curls was slumped against the Blazer on the left. She was staring at the uniformed guards in fear instead of relief. *Abused*. *I can help her.*

The thin man at her side had a black bandana around his neck and shifty eyes that increased Adrian’s unease. He had a natural slump to the shoulders that suggested a lifetime of being shit and no desire to change. *That, I only have one solution for.*

Adrian motioned Billy and Chris toward the couple as he went to Kenn. He scanned Kenn’s wife again, encouraged by her. She stood straight, showed no fear, and she was healthy. *One of my herd or one of my shepherds?*

Ignoring Kenn’s glare, Angela stepped over to Marc. He was standing stiffly by the open door, wolf at his feet. *Please, guys. Walk the line for a bit, give this place a chance. It feels good here.*

Marc nodded, eyes saying all the things his mouth couldn’t as he pulled on his long coat. “We will. You okay?”

“I will be, I think. We’ve called a truce. Just be careful, like you always are.” Angela swept the foggy landscape again, drawn by the murmur of voices when the wind dropped.

Marc handed her two full speed loaders. “I’m here if you need me, Angie.”

She slid them into her pocket, along with a few things from her kit. “I’ll run if he makes me.”

Despite her words, Marc could almost feel her rebuilding the walls between them. “I only need five minutes warning and to know where you guys are.”

She nodded, sad these were the last private words they would share for a while.

Marc caught her thought. “I’ll miss you too.”

Angie was sure she’d never get to sleep tonight without the sound of his breathing, without being able to roll over and stare at him. “I just need some time to read things. It might not be the right place. If not, we’ll go.”

Marc sighed. “Ten minutes and locations.”

Dog shifted menacing golden orbs to a tall man in all black passing by their bumper. His state trooper hat was the only other color on him.

The guard swept them with an open hand on the holster of his Beretta. Marc recognized a gun run. The sentry was seeing who was armed, and assessing the threat. Marc turned back to Angela but kept the guard in his peripheral vision. “You’re here. Bet you can’t wait to hug Charlie.”

She looked anything but happy. Marc’s trained ears heard no fear from the people they couldn’t see yet. *Smart to separate the areas*. “What’s wrong? Isn’t he here?”

Also busy feeling things out; Angela was eased a little by the sense of a normal, safe life she was picking up from the men on duty. “He’s here, on the way to us now.”

Marc’s lips thinned. “You mean to you. I’ll wait right here.”

“No.”

The same guard made a second pass, sharp green eyes on the bristling wolf.

Marc lowered his voice. “Now is *not* a good time.” Marc noted the glints of steel in her eyes and knew she wasn’t going to budge before she spoke.

“It’s the only time. You can’t hide it from him, and you two can’t start out on a lie.” She looked away before the sparks flew. “Besides, he’ll know right off. He picks stuff up as easily as I do.”

“What about Kenn? He’ll go nuts.”

Her face paled, but that glint of steel never wavered. “Maybe.” She slipped into his mind. *Maybe not, if we can keep it quiet.*

Marc was relieved no one else would know yet. He couldn’t protect her from so many armed men.

“Others may suspect, but Kenn will figure it out; he’ll call us on it. Right now, he just thinks it’s me introducing my son to my new man.”

Marc’s spine stiffened at those words. “I’ll handle him if I need to. You’re sure it should be now?”

“Yes.” Angela replied, watching Kenn. He was deep in conversation with his idol, no doubt telling him of the slavers the others had escaped from.

*Such loyalty,* her witch whispered sleepily. *And* *to a stranger. Where’s the devotion he should have for you?*

Angela ignored the question, but it burned. “Come on, Marc. Our boy’s here.”

Marc followed, more nervous than he wanted to admit. He had never allowed himself to consider having a child at all, and now, he had one who was almost grown. “Stay, Dog.”

The wolf sank down, mostly hidden by the tires.

Angela led the way to the corner of the caution tape, experiencing fierce joy as Charlie’s taller form came through the thick fog.

Neil had been watching the new arrivals. He now had a list of questions about how all the bruised faces were connected, but he didn’t doubt they were. He assumed the males had been fighting over the woman, but which one had hit her? …Kenn? Neil stepped forward as they reached the tape. “I’m sorry, but you can’t cross the–”

Invisible heat shot out, burning him. Neil retreated, confused and leery. *Was that a flash of hot wind?*

Neil met Adrian’s questioning eyes as he started to step in front of them again. He was relieved when the boss gestured in denial. Adrian had missed none of it.

The woman moved around him, eyes tinged in red.

Neil took another step back.

When Charlie stopped at the tape, young face full of overwhelming happiness, Neil relaxed a little. The teenager knew them*. Family?* Neil nodded. That made sense considering Charlie was also…*different*.

Angela’s heart was in control of her emotions. Instead of ducking under the caution tape, she snatched her knife from her boot and sliced through it. She sheathed the blade without losing stride.

Everyone, including Kenn, was sure she knew how to use it. They also understood the message. Nothing would separate her from her son.

“Mom!” The teenager threw his arms around her neck.

Angela crushed him close, swinging him around. His face buried in her hair, heart beating furiously against hers. She hugged him tighter, pain warring with her happiness. At least one of her sons had made it through the war. “God, I’ve missed you!”

Charlie kept his arms around her as she let him down, struggling not to cry. “I knew you’d come! *He* said you wouldn’t make it, but I knew!”

Hot rage pulsed through Angela–the same hatred she’d had to pull back in before it hurt the guard who had stepped between them.

She held her son back, looking into eyes that were the same shade of blue as Marc’s. “Our time apart is over. We will never be separated again!”

Angela hugged him once more before letting go, not allowing herself to think. “There’s someone I want you to meet.”

The teenager agreed reluctantly, hands going into the pockets of his dark blue hoodie.

She threw a comforting arm around his thin shoulders as they stepped over to Marc, who had observed their reunion with a sad smile. She was obviously a loving mother. It didn’t come as a surprise, but it did hurt that he’d missed it all.

“Charlie, this is a good friend of mine. He’s the reason I made it here. His name is Marcus Charles Brady.”

They both noticed the fourteen-year-old wasn’t surprised at the exact opposite of his name.

Charlie regarded Marc with his own cool stare. “So, you’re my dad.”

Glad the words had been low enough for only the three of them to hear, Marc held out a calloused hand. “Charlie, right?”

The boy reluctantly shook with him.

Marc felt the subtle tinkering of a child trying to get into his thoughts.

The role of teacher automatically fell back into place for Angela. “Never without permission.”

Charlie glared at the dusty ground. “*Sorry*.”

Marc ignored the sarcastic tone. “Maybe we could talk sometime? Alone.”

The careful request drew a nasty glower. “About what?”

Marc pushed the silent words at him. *About the last fifteen years and why we haven’t spent them together.*

Charlie shrugged. “The past is dead. No one cares.” His voice was full of bitterness that no child should feel.

“I do.” Marc met his eye. “I care a lot.”

Charlie’s face blazed with anger befitting an adult. Marc heard the words clearly, as if Angela had sent them.

*Well, I don’t. You left us in hell. You’re as bad as he is. Maybe worse, ‘cause now he’s pissed at her again!* Charlie spun back to his mom. “When is he leaving?!”

**2**

Rage rolled off Kenn as he and everyone else watched the reunion. *I can’t believe she introduced her lover to Charlie!*

Adrian and many of the guards felt the inevitable coming. A cold wave fell over the battlefield.

Kenn’s fists clenched in an effort to control himself, but he already knew it wasn’t going to be successful. *Marc has to go!* Soon… Maybe even right now.

The two men locked bruised eyes. All the witnesses understood the exchange.

*I’ll kill to keep her!*

*I’ll kill to have her!*

Adrian stayed still, aware that personal drama had just entered his peaceful camp.

Kenn moved forward a second later.

Adrian observed with the rest of his men, wondering whose blood would spill and what it would cost them.

Angela and Charlie turned at the same time.

Their fear drew instant attention from the rest of the guards. Eagles moved closer.

Marc saw Kenn coming, but he focused on the black-and-gray blur streaking toward the Marine. “Dog! No!”

The powerful animal slid to a rough stop, long snout drawn up in a ferocious snarl as he glared at Kenn, who had pulled his weapon.

“Dog! Sit!”

The wolf dropped to its haunches.

Marc joined him, attention now on the real threat.

“You should have that thing on a leash!” Kenn growled, lowering but not holstering the 9mm.

“Maybe you shouldn’t provoke him.” Marc rubbed behind the animal’s tense ears, glad the wolf had obeyed.

“I didn’t even see him!”

“He saw *you*, read your intent. He’s very protective of her.”

Kenn ground his teeth together as he shoved his gun into its holster. He gave the bushy wolf a hateful glare.

Marc gave the animal a loving pat on his stocky chest as Kenn moved toward Angela. They’d just had their first close call and they’d only been here five minutes*. Wonderful.* “Good boy.”

“Praise for the quick response to your commands, or because he would have attacked Kenn without being told?” Adrian had come over during the aftermath.

“Both, more.” Marc was still watching Kenn.

Adrian took it all in, liking the sharp intelligence. *Is this hardass another member of my circle?*

Adrian felt relief. It made perfect sense that they would come together. He would also give the thin blonde woman slumped against her man an interview, in case they had come in threes.

The Eagles understood Kenn’s uncontested power and cool control had taken a hit. The entire camp couldn’t rattle him. Many had tried, but this one man had shaken Kenn, and without doing much. Who was he?

“Everything okay?” A guard in an approaching group scanned for the problem.

More men emerged through the fog, weapons in hand.

Marc was impressed they had come without being called.

“Everything’s 5-by.” Adrian’s voice was tinged in relief.

Marc picked out the earpieces and understood one of those already here had given a signal to alert other guards. Marc tried to determine who. The one Angela had pushed back with her heat wave? Probably. The trooper was hovering near her and Kenn now. Satisfied that she was okay for the moment, Marc did a scan of their dangerous new companions.

The two men flanking the leader were observing him intently. Marc returned the scrutiny. They wore civilian clothes, but he knew they were off duty. *The boss must be either really hard on them or really good to them to have earned such loyalty*. Marc finally gave his full attention to the man at his side, but he didn’t speak first, showing respect.

Adrian noted the dog tag as Marc stood; he heard a click of new pieces being put into place. *Kenn will be livid when he realizes he brought in the very people he has to share power with.*

Adrian considered what he’d already witnessed and corrected himself. Kenn did know, and he was beyond livid. “So, is he dangerous, or does he just look it?”

“He’s a wild animal with a little training.” Marc was aware of the double entendre. “I did him a favor. He chooses to stay.”

“Do you make shit like that a habit?”

Marc felt the man searching him. “Shit like what?”

“Doing favors for those less able. I need that kind of help here.”

Marc indicated the tag around his neck. “Service is my chosen field, but helping animals is easier. You know their nature when you first meet.”

Adrian held out a hand in welcome.

Marc shook it, feeling as if he’d just passed a surprise quiz.

“Mitchel, Adrian.”

Marc automatically squared his shoulders at the authoritative tone. “Brady, Marcus.”

“Where you from, Grunt?”

At full attention now, Marc was surprised to find himself responding as if he were addressing an officer. Like Kenn, it didn’t take him long to figure out that he was.

“West Virginia. Ohio.”

“Marine?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Record?”

“Eight speeding tickets in four years; a couple of bar fights. I paid restitution.”

“What are your plans, Grunt, now the country you were sworn to protect has fallen in flames?”

Marc couldn’t stop his eyes from going to Angela and Charlie as they came toward Adrian, Kenn in the lead. “My country’s not dead. Her people still need to be protected.”

Guards nodded in approval.

Adrian smiled. “Did you rehearse that?”

Marc shook his head, smiling back, but Adrian noticed it didn’t reach his wary eyes. *He’ll add strength to my Eagles!*

“I’m a quick thinker under pressure.” Marc shrugged. “My mother said I’d make a good politician. My CO said I was a wise smartass. I consider myself safely between the two.”

Adrian chuckled. “Brains are welcome here, Marc, as are you. May Safe Haven become your–”

“Check it out, Adrian. This is *my* Angela.” Kenn shouldered between them, not quite daring to drag Angie, but pulling her arm in a way that made Marc grit his teeth.

Adrian noticed it, and her flash of anger at Kenn’s title. *She’s not his. He just lied. Again.*

“Ang, this is Adrian, our Commander in Chief.”

As Marc was forced out of the circle, Adrian saw the slender female actually grimace at the introduction, not caring if anyone disagreed. *There is great strength in her*.

Their eyes locked, kindred souls meeting for the first time…

Lightning flashed suddenly, brilliantly, drawing everyone’s attention away, but Angela and Adrian didn’t react as time stood still. Their life forces melded for a second of completeness, of incredible joy, and then it was gone.

To cover the flames of confusion, Angela let the witch ask a question that demanded honesty. “The last men to hold that position tried to kill us all. Do you plan to follow in their footsteps?”

It drew displeasure from everyone except Marc, who was now studying the small streak of gray in Angie’s hair. It was new.

Adrian saw Kenn’s hand flinch toward her, but dive into a pocket instead. *Because of all the witnesses? Is that where her split lip came from?*

Adrian reestablished the earthshattering connection he and the woman had made. He tried to keep his voice steady, now feeling like the one who was taking a test. “No, I don’t. I don’t consider myself that important.”

Angela was already certain his people would argue if anyone else said that. Their protectiveness was evident. “Good. We have enough controlling jackasses left as it is.”

There were frowns and surprised murmurs.

Adrian forced himself to confirm who she was referring to. The tone of his reply wasn’t quite joking as he noted the bags under her eyes and the hand resting on her gun. “We’ll talk later; you can point them out. I’d be happy to have them slapped and threatened for you.”

He caught Kenn’s reaction. The Marine flushed in guilty anger.

Adrian’s stomach twisted. Kenn had been here for a long time, but there had always been something a little off about him. Adrian now suspected what it was.

“I’m a healer, not a punisher.”

“You’re a doctor.” Adrian’s pleasure hit them in waves.

Kenn’s rage grew. “Yeah, if you need first aid, she might be able to do it. You’ll want to talk to–”

“Later!” Adrian jerked his hand. “Your mission has not ended until the supplies and refugees have been squared away!”

Kenn flushed, pinned by the pissed, cold tone.

Adrian’s gaze went to the lone man studying them all, and then to the thin blonde, who was slumped against the Blazer again, as if she couldn’t stand to take comfort from him. “Separate those two; get her to John. Get on it!” Adrian turned his back to Kenn, something he’d never done before.

His men noticed it.

Angela couldn’t help feeling bad for Kenn. His nature would make this hard for everyone, but she was also relieved to be away from his anger.

Adrian looked at Marc, who subtly shifted to Angela’s right. *The place of protection*, Adrian recognized, also liking the wolf’s neat stance at her side. “If you need something, ask one of the guards. We’ll talk tomorrow at… eleven thirty. Someone will be by to show you around once you’re out of quarantine.”

Marc knew he was supposed to follow Kenn now. He gave Angela a resigned sigh. This was it. The separation had begun. “Catch you later.”

Angela didn’t like it either. “Yes, you will.” She gestured to the wolf sitting at her side. “Go with Marc.”

The wolf didn’t budge until Marc whistled.

Dog rose slowly. Angela patted the wolf she’d come to respect for his devotion to Marc. “He’ll need you more than I will.”

The wolf’s ear flicked; he padded after his master, causing people to move out of his way.

Adrian stored her obvious rapport with the wild animal. “Are you two a couple?”

Angela shook her head. “No.”

They both noted the relief that Charlie was too inexperienced to hide.

It made Angela sad. “Marc’s a good friend. I never would have made it here without him.”

“She’d know if she was sick. Does she have to be in the QZ?” Charlie wanted her to spend the day with him and avoid Kenn. It would also get him out of chores.

Adrian was aware of how intently the boy was listening, and how reluctant his mom was to talk in front of him.

“If you have chores, we’ll meet later.” Angela wanted to hole up in her tent. She was unsure about handling a huge group of strangers, but the witch said if she wanted a life here, she couldn’t spend the first day hiding.

Adrian forced himself to act as if he hadn’t noticed she’d just read her son’s mind. “He has a shift with the vet. You can wait in the quarantine zone, but it may be dinner before he’s finished. Or you can go on rounds with me. It’ll give you a chance to meet your future patients.”

Angela thought he was assuming a lot, but she also understood from the expression on Charlie’s face that she had just been offered something that was sought after here–time with Adrian. “I’d love to spend the day doing…rounds with you, but I haven’t agreed to stay, let alone be your doctor. I came for my son.”

“But you will.” Adrian turned to the teenager. “Put your mom’s gear in a QZ tent, then get to work before Chris marks you late.”

The teenager snapped a salute. “Yes, sir.”

Angela saw a lot of Marc in her son. He was changing, growing into a man; she was suddenly sad for all the years Kenn had kept them chained to his side. It hadn’t been easy on either of them.

“See ya later, Mom.”

“Yes, you will.”

Adrian waited patiently for the boy to be swallowed by the thinning fog. “He’s a great kid. Marc’s?”

Angela froze.

Adrian hated being right. “Kenn doesn’t know?”

She slowly shook her head, hoping the good feeling of this place meant she could trust him. If not, this would get ugly, fast. “No. What gave us away?”

Adrian lit a smoke. When he walked, she followed.

“A number of things I’m surprised Kenn missed–hair the same shade, same stubborn chin…and they both worship the ground you walk on.”

Angela went into panic mode. “It’s not like that! Marc’s an old friend who came when I needed him. Kenny and I had been together since Charlie was a baby.”

Adrian caught the wording. “Had been. Until the war?”

She nodded warily. “Yes, and then I did what I had to. Nothing will keep me from my son.”

Adrian felt respect. *I like this one.* As they walked through the fog in silence, he was also aware of a strong feeling of anticipation. It said something special could happen, something special *would* try to happen if he wanted it to, but he had to choose now. *What is it about her?* Adrian questioned his own gift reluctantly.

*Kindred... Yours.*

Stunned, Adrian stumbled over a mud hole that all of the camp had tripped over.

Angela chuckled as he juggled his body to keep from going face first. The sound echoed into the air and exposed a new surprise.

Adrian watched the colors over the camp ripple in vivid patterns of the sharp, clear hues of health and hope. It faded quickly, something easily imagined. Adrian stared at her, heart twisted*.* *Will you do to her? To everyone here?*

Already damned, Adrian answered the witch’s inquiry with shame and fierce determination. *Yes.*

Angela’s face iced over. She turned toward his camp without another word.

Adrian followed, mind spinning.

Kenn pointed Rick and his woman toward the medical tent, then studied Angela and Adrian until they were out of sight.

Marc stared after them too.

Kenn realized the guards were staring in curiosity and disapproval. He grunted, hefting two heavy boxes from his Bronco. “Grab one of those and stay close. Leave the QZ, you’ll be shot.”

Marc followed with a box on each arm, nodding to the men who moved aside to make room for the wolf, but inside he was dying. *How long will I last here now that Angie has her man back?*

**3**

Now out of Kenn’s line of sight, Adrian pushed. “You two hooked up in Ohio?”

“We met in Indiana. I left Ohio in February.” Angela was distracted. The witch inside was peering through door after door, trying to discover who Adrian was.

“Damn. Hell of a swoop you two made.”

Angela’s eyes grew murky, like the layers of grit above the fog. “What is it you want to know?”

Adrian blinked. The male inside asked before he could prevent it. “Are you sleeping with him? Was he paid with sex for getting you here?”

Instead of the anger he expected, Angela gave him a small, cool smile that made him stop.

“That’s not the question you wanted to ask, was it?”

Adrian chose his words more carefully this time. “No. The query I have requires a certain amount of trust to answer.”

Angela waited, witch listening. “It’s good you have respect for these things. Ask your question.”

Adrian hesitated again, sure it was all moving too fast.

“I guess it takes trust to ask, too.” Angela closed the door to that cage.

She was the real thing–he could feel it. Yet he couldn’t come out and just ask her to prove it. Everything had to be given willingly to accomplish what his dreams hinted at. Still, he longed for it to be true. He was disappointed by his unexpected lack of courage. It was a simple question. *Are you my Seer? The witch I was promised?*

Angela froze. “Are you asking me?”

Adrian forgot to breathe. He forced himself to nod. *The one I need the most is here!*

Angela’s face was cold. “I’m here for my son. I don’t even know you.”

“Fate brought you here.” Adrian hated it that she would have to start out in hiding. “You’re here to help me.”

Angela wanted to believe that, but she’d been protecting herself too long to give in so easily. *They must be okay with magic here. Does that mean there are more like me?* “I don’t know what you need help with, but that’s not what I came for.”

Adrian hid it all as footsteps approached. “That will change in time; you’ll stay. We have great and terrible things to do together.”

Before Angela could deny or question, she wasn’t sure which, the tall guard from the QZ joined them, trooper hat in place.

“Camp’s up and running. Kyle’s on Point.”

“Good.”

As Neil left, he gave Angela a quick, curious glance.

She responded with an apologetic smile.

“He’ll be okay.”

Angela became unreadable again, not liking how easily Adrian was picking out her triggers. “He’s loyal to you. They all are.”

“It’s good here…but it could be better.”

Angela recognized the hard sell and remained silent. *What does he want from me? An immediate oath of loyalty? Recognition of our power?* He was like her, but that needed a lot more thought before she would take any action.

Adrian got them moving, aware of how standoffish she was. He switched them to safer topics. “You’ll get used to the way things work here, but basically, everyone’s required to follow the rules and put in twenty-five hours a week on various chores. You have medical skills, so you’ll be with our doctor, John. Beyond that, your time is your own. For now, you’ll have a few days to settle in before you get a schedule.” Adrian gestured toward the mess. “You hungry?”

She grimaced at the thought of being around so many people so soon. She could hear the noises of a big meal from here. “Not really. Coffee would be great, though.”

He paused to relight his smoke.

Angela took the opportunity to pull off her sweater and tie it around her hips, eager to straighten herself up a little before she met anyone else. She let her dark hair out of the wild ponytail, drawing the notice of every guard in sight.

Men stared in longing as she brushed through the thick curls with her fingers and braided it in seconds with a grace born of practice.

Her pale shoulders gave Adrian a gentle chill of lust he filed away, thinking her dark blue tank top was almost indecent against that pale skin. The edge of a nasty scar was visible for a brief second from under one sleeve. Anger boiled in his stomach, hoping she’d killed whoever had given it to her.

*There’s another topic I’ll need to avoid.* Angela distracted him. “I know, I know. Women: always waiting for them. Some things haven’t changed.”

Adrian chuckled, aware of her tactic. “I’m okay with it. Most people here aren’t sure if it’s all right to joke with me, let alone keep me waiting.”

“You don’t tell them any different?” Angela sensed a great love of humor in him.

He shrugged. “It’s another way to tell the leaders from the followers.”

Angela stopped, impressed as the camp came into view*. Impressed?* All the people were something of a shock. They stood in small groups, talking, drinking coffee, moving in and out of tents and trucks, waiting in small lines, cleaning up Easter garbage and dog piles. Her ears rang with sounds she hadn’t heard in months. Marc had taught her to make very little noise.

Dishes clinked, thuds echoed from things being relocated, dug out, set up; doors slammed, kids ran around playing. She picked out the details faster than her thought processes could sort them. Piles of multi-colored glass were swept against a charred garbage can, indicating a celebration had gotten out of hand.

She swept the people. Mostly white, she was able to spot a few Indians, Mexicans, and blacks. She was comforted by it. The people here were healthy, unafraid, and prepared to deal with what came, yet they were somber instead of arrogant in their survival. Most wore ball caps, jeans, and jackets that didn’t quite cover the guns on their hips, but there were also women in dresses and skirts. There were no bright colors, as if these people were in mourning. Except for one occasional flash of flame, they were all wearing blue, black, or green. Angela liked the feeling of respect it conveyed. These people cared about the dead. They were Americans. “Wow.”

“Little more than you expected?”

She nodded, sweeping again. “How many?”

“One hundred eighty-eight, counting your group.”

“You’ve done well by them.”

“You think so?”

She thought of the dead towns she and Marc had passed along the way. It wasn’t like that here. Safe Haven still held hope. “Yes. So do they.”

“There’s still a lot to be done. I need help.”

Angela instinctively knew he didn’t say that to many people, but she didn’t respond.

Adrian let it go again, though it was hard to keep waiting when it had already been so long. Angela would stay. He would make sure his wishes were clear. His men would convince her.

He had worked a lot of it out before, how to integrate someone like her, but to his pleasure, most of it wouldn’t be necessary. Angela already had a strength he would use, and it would start now. After the day he was about to put her through, the people here would suspect she was being evaluated for a place in the chain of command.

Adrian smiled at her. “Welcome to Safe Haven, Angela. May it quickly become your home.”

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

**Examination**

****

**1**

**T**hey continued down the left side of the rectangle shaped camp; Adrian explained the areas as they walked by them. “The two big tents are separated by gender. They’re for anyone who can’t, or won’t, put up their own canvas and break it down each time we move.”

Angela thought community tents were very considerate. It kept people off the ground and protected them from chemical rain. “How often do you travel?”

“It depends on what’s around us. Usually we’ll be on the road three or four days, from about 9am to 7pm, but in bad areas, we keep going. If it’s good, like here in the Black Hills, or there are a lot of supplies around that we need, we’ll stay an extra day or two.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Southeast, for now. We pick places to search at each meeting.”

Angela didn’t ask what he was hunting for while trekking across the country. She already sensed it was connected to magic and she didn’t want to have that conversation now that people were all around them.

Angela followed him to join a lengthy line of people waiting under a dark green canopy attached to the rear of a flatbed semi. On one wooden wall, an American flag flew over a chalkboard that read *Adrian’s Mess*.

Angela noticed nearly everyone called a greeting to the blond leader, and stared at her. She gave the buffet style meal of pancakes and powdered eggs an approving glance while Adrian talked to the elderly people who had surrounded them. She noticed his refusal of offers to skip to the front, and that he didn’t pull away from the needy, arthritic fingers of the seniors.

Adrian placed a hand on her arm as he introduced them. “This is Angela. She’s an MD.”

Angela jumped at the sweet curl of lust produced by his fingers on her bare skin. His hand tensed on her for a brief second before letting go, telling her he’d felt it too.

The seven men and women turned to her with grotesquely swelled hands, assailing her with questions and complaints. They scared her a little.

Adrian saw her fingers flinch down, then go out to shake the nearest hand instead.

“Are you a real doctor?”

“Will you check my rash?”

“Who’d you come in with?”

The queries came fast. For Angela, who’d been alone for months, it was hard to smile and keep her gift under control. It was crying for hunger that food couldn’t quench. *I’m not ready for this yet.*

“Nice hair. You dye it?”

“Are you staying here with that wolfman?”

“It itches all the time.”

“Because we have laws…”

“Do you play…?”

They jostled each other, trying to get her attention.

Angela’s thumb slipped, letting a bolt of frustration escape. *Enough!*

The mental shout stung them all like the small, sharp bite of an insect.

Adrian’s heart thumped as silence fell among the older people who were usually never quiet. *Will she fail the first test?*

Angela’s eyes lit up in regret, even as a satisfied gleam flickered in her blue depths. She took a gnarled hand. “That was rude.” She connected to the miner. “Please. Forgive me?”

Another second or two of tense silence held, then Ralph bellowed, “Will you come read to us geezers sometime?!”

Adrian relaxed as the older people lost their confused, hurt expressions, adding their support. *Did she know Ralph is the unofficial senior, senior?* Adrian hadn’t seen them take to anyone so fast, not even little Becky.

Angela smiled at the group. “I’d love to.”

Adrian felt the magic again, that spark of flint on flint, and he wasn’t the one. Men across the mess were turning her way.

Angela knew. She slid between the older people so she was mostly out of view. “Tell me about this rash.”

The seniors converged on her again, more gently this time. The rest of the twenty-five or so people in line and already at the tables went back to what they were doing, not sure if they had missed something. Adrian knew how they felt since he’d been studying her the whole time and he knew he’d missed something.

They got their cups and walked up the other side of the neat camp. Adrian stopped. He didn’t speak right away.

Angela could feel her gift wanting to taste him. His energy, willingly given, might be as refreshing as Marc’s. He was like her but different. Together, they could–

“What did you say to them?”

Angela fell back into covering like she’d been doing all her life. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t do that!” Adrian’s voice blazed with emotion. “If we’re going to build something, honesty between us matters!”

The old Angela was saying she could trust him, but she based her choice on that first sharp connection. For too brief a second, she had known she was exactly where fate meant her to be. The feeling was gone now, but she sensed this man could help her find it again. “I told them I’m young, that I don’t have enough control over my emotions. I asked them to be patient, *quiet,* while I learn.”

“Mental conversations.” Adrian cleared his throat. “You can do that whenever you want?”

Angela nodded nervously, missing his happy greed as she reaffirmed the plan. She would be herself here–the newer, stronger woman–or she would take her son and go somewhere else. “Usually.”

Adrian struggled not to ask her for more proof. He got them moving.

Angela was relieved, surprised, and suspicious. *Shouldn’t he call me a liar, or at least ask questions?*

*He knows you for what you are.* The witch’s tone was ominous. *More so than Kenny ever did. Be very careful.*

Safe Haven was awake now; people were everywhere, gawking at the new arrivals. Angela could hear them wondering who she was and when she’d come in, but it was clearest in the expressions of the guards. Most of the security was inside the tape. The black clad men were patrolling set areas. They looked like old SWAT officers. They wore the exact clothes and gear from what she could see, but the difference was in their gazes. They were more aware, more alert, than the cops of the old world had been.

She and Adrian walked by a taped off area, stopping in front of a large grassy field holding three enormous tents set in a half moon. The center shelter was a double-sided circus tent with an eighteen-wheeler backed in on each side. Angela saw a smaller tent in the far corner. She concentrated. “You have a veterinarian?”

Adrian smiled. Despite all the trouble he already foresaw, he was thrilled. His witch had come. “Yes. We’ve gathered him a small herd. The goal is to produce our own food. We try to be careful.” He led her through a maze of chest high, portable, wooden stalls smelling of fresh straw. “We even keep them away from the gun area. Chris says it might make the meat sour if we upset them.”

Adrian gestured at a tall, harried man of about forty, who was kneeling in one of the straw covered pens.

Angela watched his gentle hands push a big pill down a tiny mouth before putting the rabbit into a cage by itself.

“I’ve heard something like that.” Angela kept the safe conversation going. “Farmers used to say their livestock wouldn’t produce as well if they weren’t kept in the right surroundings.”

The vet finally noticed them. He raked Angela in contempt. “Who’s the Barbie?”

The man’s voice put off equal waves of impatience and dislike.

Adrian gave him a warning look. “This is Angela. She treats people. This is Chris. He treats animals.”

Angela automatically held out a hand, forcing the vet to wipe his on his filthy white coat.

The second they touched, she caught flashes of the future. Some of them disturbed her. She quickly let go. “It’s pregnant.”

Before he could respond, Adrian moved forward. “You do this week’s tests yet?”

Angela realized she had overstepped. The leader might think he was ready, but he knew his people weren’t. *Should have known it was too good to be true that someone like me had built a haven for our kind.*

The vet’s gaze lingered on Angela as she wandered the cluttered aisles. “No. Tomorrow. I need…”

Angela swept the area as the men talked, admiring cats, chickens, a goat, and other animals that each had their own neat cage or pen. It impressed her to see extinguishers and fire alarms hanging from tent poles.

Adrian gestured.

Angela took his right, positive that’s where he wanted her. She looked at Chris.

The vet returned her stare with no change in annoyed expression.

Knowing she shouldn’t, Angela slipped into his thoughts. She was surprised to find a thin wall.

*He’s blocking me!* She could be through it in seconds. He was waiting for her to try, but she didn’t. *What would I gain? Proving I can, just to confirm he dislikes me because of it? I stopped playing those games a long time ago.* Angela let out a sigh and caught up with Adrian.

Next to the animal area, a large tow truck with a tarp awning sat off to itself. Adrian talked to the man behind the wheel.

Angela understood this was Safe Haven’s communication center. The man standing just under the cover of the camouflage canopy was a guard, though he wasn’t dressed like one.

Her brow creased. Anyone this organized and careful had to be able to recognize Kenny for what he was. Had Adrian ignored it? He didn’t seem the type, but time would tell. Time that she and Marc would spend apart. She missed him already.

Angela turned her back to Adrian so she could scan the QZ. It held one less tent now.

Marc appeared in the doorway of the vinyl shelter farthest from everything. *You okay?*

Angela was able to feel how upset he was. Had he been in another fight*?* *I’m fine. Good place so far.*

Marc shrugged, eyes going to Adrian as he came up behind her. *We’ll see, won’t we?* Marc let the flap fall over the doorway.

Adrian didn’t want her to be upset. “He’ll be out of there by morning. I skipped it with you because you’re a doctor.”

Angela spun on him at the evasion. “Don’t do that! If we’re trying to build something, honesty matters.”

Adrian reddened a little at having his own words used against him. The people here never did that to him. He was surprised to find his soul needed to be held accountable. Needed it, and wanted it. “I skipped it because I didn’t want to wait while you were quarantined.”

Angela didn’t rise to the bait. The moment with the vet had reminded her that normal people didn’t like magic.

Adrian knew she was right. His camp needed time to adjust, but he hated it that she was so aloof. He’d only spent half an hour with her and he’d already discovered things that shouldn’t be there, even for a war survivor. *Unless she was mistreated before.*

Steady eye contact, mild reactions to gunfire, and curiosity were things most of his refugees had arrived with. These refugees had been fresh out of basements and cellars, or recovering from shock. They were too numb to be scared anymore. Angela carried a deep, wild fear that kept his mind on her arrival. Adrian was almost positive the sore on her lip had come from several backhanded slaps, but it hadn’t been Marc. Their stares were too intense, too familiar. She wasn’t afraid of him. If it had been Rick, Kenn would have left his body by the side of whatever road he’d found them on. That only left one possibility.

Adrian felt something shift in his heart as he stole a glance at the quiet woman walking on his right. *I’ll protect her. No man will ever hit her again in anger, not while she’s under my protection.*

Angela hid a yawn. It already felt as if she’d been traveling the camp for hours, but most people were still eating breakfast. She drew in a steadying breath as more trucks and people came into view.

Around the perimeter, Eagles watched Angela. Inside the camp, refugees did the same.

Angela wondered if Adrian had a woman here who would be jealous of him showing her around. A hollow ache pinged deep in her stomach. She blinked away a red haze of blood.

Adrian stopped before they reached the row of trucks and people. “We have a thief.”

Angela’s brows drew up. “Why share that with me?”

“So you’ll look and tell me who it is.”

Angela hesitated to say yes or no. She wanted to help, and she longed to be free to use her gifts for the greater good, but if she searched those doors for him now, she wouldn’t be able to refuse later. Still, the thought of earning her place here based on what she could do was appealing, as Adrian had known it would be. Who could resist being used for what they were good at?

*Besides,* the witch seduced*, he’s the best ally to have here. Give him what he wants. Build a debt.*

Four of the five men sitting on crates by open semi doors called greetings as they were spotted. Adrian stepped over to the largest of them. “Hey, Doug. How’s the count?”

Angela hung back, observing, fighting with herself over the choice.

Doug frowned, grinding out a cigar in the dry earth at his boots. When he stood, he towered over them all by inches. “Light in every truck. Same as last week.”

The man’s Irish lilt was barely noticeable in his frustration. When he caught her stare and winked at her, Angela couldn’t help smiling back. She was amused and intimidated by all the interest from everyone. Kenn had ignored her unless he was in the mood for sex or she pissed him off. At the hospital, people weren’t aware of their surroundings enough to notice something as unimportant as looks. Until her trip with Marc, she hadn’t felt pretty in a long time.

“They didn’t break in. The locks are fine.” Doug scanned Adrian’s guest again. “They must have a key.”

Adrian stared into the nearly empty truck.

Doug waited for the new solution he knew was coming, but his mind stayed on the woman, recognizing the way she carried herself. *Did she serve?*

“Okay. Post new rules. Fuel and water trucks are now shut from 11pm to 6am. Only Eagles will have access after those hours. Put a red collar dog out.”

Doug nodded. As soon as he finished writing, his eyes went back to Angela.

The other men hadn’t looked away from her yet.

Angela’s cheeks were bright red as Adrian motioned her forward.

“This is Angela. She’s Charlie’s mom, and hopefully, our second doctor. This is Doug, Daryl, Chris, Tony, and Danny. These guys are useful, so you’ll remember their names after a while.” Adrian didn’t say Danny and Tony couldn’t really be included. Those two were mostly useless.

Angela exchanged polite glances, and avoided leers.

Doug limped forward to shake. His massive hand swallowed hers.

Angela’s gift surged forward at the contact, pulling violently.

The sky darkened to charcoal; thunder crashed, shaking the ground they stood on.

A surge of protectiveness flashed across Doug’s face, an involuntary reaction to her kind. Angela slid her hand free. “Nice to meet so many good men.”

Excluding Adrian, no one else had seen or felt anything. They’d only heard her words.

Adrian snickered at Doug’s confusion, eyes ordering the man to let it go even as his mouth distracted the others. “She must want extra shampoo or something.”

The men snickered.

Doug kept staring. “You’re Kenn’s lady.”

Angela scowled. “Not anymore.”

Her quick denial was noticed by all of them.

Doug gave her a friendly grin, finally getting the hint to cover the moment. “I’d be honored to take his place.”

Angela blushed. The others laughed again.

She joined in, embarrassed. “Thanks, but I’m not searching for a replacement.”

Doug wondered how much the new man had to do with that. Their arrival story was racing through the waking people. “Well, you say the word, lass, and I’m all yours. I’ll even take off me vest if ya want.”

Even Angela laughed this time.

*Have you found my thief?* Adrian drew the attention back to himself. “Did anyone report anything in this area?”

Angela realized she had made up her mind. She’d hoped for this a long time ago, a world where she could be accepted because of her gift instead of in spite of it. Safe Haven could give that to her if she could help people accept magic. To do that, she had to let Adrian place her where he wanted. Once things settled down, maybe she and Marc could–

Angela stopped herself, not wanting to search her future again and find only darkness. She knew what that meant now. She would do these things for the right reasons, and never take another life. That was a guilt she didn’t think she was strong enough to survive again.

Angela knelt down to tie her shoe as she slipped into their minds, hard and quick. The dark glow of thievery lit up around one of them. It had been common at the inner city hospital where many of the patients were strung out addicts trying to steal drugs.

When Adrian lifted a brow amid the conversation, she gestured at Danny, the only one pretending to belong, then turned her back to all of them. She was unable to look at the man now that she had condemned him.

Adrian was floored, not sure if he believed her, yet sure he did. Danny was arrogant, lazy, disrespectful to women. Adrian hadn’t cared for the handyman when he’d come to them in Utah; the feeling had grown in the weeks since then. Especially when they had realized there wasn’t anything the man was actually handy at.

“I’ll be around.” Adrian led them away.

Angela exchanged a friendly glance with Doug as they left.

He nodded back, expression telling her he knew something special had happened.

They passed a group of men playing soccer on one side of the camp, then a circle of men and teenage boys learning to handle dirt bikes. It was impressive. Such neat organization amid so much destruction and chaos eased some of her fears. Maybe these people were different. Adrian certainly was.

They hadn’t gone far when Angela noticed a group of five people following them.

Adrian felt her nervousness. Normally, people waited until he was ready, but the leader wanted her to relax. He stopped, waving one of them over. “What’s up, Matt?”

The gawky teenager flushed in pleasure at being chosen first. “Dad said to ask you if I can relieve him for an hour.”

Adrian pretended to be studying the teen in suspicion. “You passed Kenn’s new radio test?”

The pimple-spotted boy stood straighter. “Yes, sir! Yesterday.”

Adrian grinned. “Great. Tell Mitch I said to take two hours.”

Matt’s face lit up. He was gone a second later.

“He seems like a nice kid.”

Adrian nodded at Angela’ comment. “He is*.*” *It may change Matt forever when the moral board votes for his dad’s death.*

Angela frowned at Adrian’s thought, not asking what the father had done to earn that judgement. The fact that he would get a trial was enough for her.

Adrian recognized the moment. *She just gave me trust. The biggest obstacle has been cleared.* A thick shield slid over Adrian’s mind as he turned to the next waiting camp member.

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

**I Stand by It**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**A**drian spent five minutes standing in the light wind, making choices and pleasing his people while getting what he needed from them. When they were gone, he gave Angela a knowing look. “Is that better?”

Angela didn’t like mind games. “You’re set up like a king, and the peasants don’t know.”

Adrian saw purple sparks in her crystal eyes. He would have to dig up information on that. He’d never seen it before. “They know. It’s their doing.”

Angela didn’t consider calling him on the lie, but she knew one when she heard it. There was no way he’d left his approval to chance. That realization sent her back to Kenn’s introduction. It had made her uncomfortable, but she wasn’t sure why. *Someone has to be in charge, right?*

People were staring now, pointing and whispering. Angela assumed Adrian was giving her a long tour, but as more and more camp members watched them, she was forced to consider that he probably wasn’t the one who usually who gave this tour. He was telling them he considered her important. Angela was surprised to feel honored by it.

“They don’t mean to be rude. They’re trying to figure out if you’re one of the good guys, and why you’re with me.”

“That’s why, right?” She lifted a brow. “So you can find out if I’m good or bad?”

Adrian held her stare. “I was sure of you the second our eyes met. I just need time to convince you of it.”

Angela chuckled.

Adrian steered them toward three long, white semis parked in a tight half circle.

She approved of the multi-colored lanterns and Disney character decals. A play mat sat inside this closed space, along with a jungle gym, swings, and slides. Angela also noticed the guard, something she wouldn’t have picked out if not for her time with Marc. The armed sentry was stationary between two of the rolling homes. She could feel him assessing her level of threat. The attention paid to detail here was astounding after fourteen hundred miles of chaos and horror, but the sense of safety, of being protected, pulled at Angela the hardest. Here, she wouldn’t have to kill anyone. *Except maybe Kenn*.

Adrian led the way to the main kid camper. “We try to have two sitters available at all times. It’s important for parents to be able to come and go.”

“Do you have a lot of kids?”

“No.” Disappointment laced his tone. “Only a dozen, but we have so many people who lost children that we had to create a test for them to pass to even be considered as a sitter or live-in. We have to be sure good people are raising our orphans.”

He saw her lifted brow and explained as he tapped twice on the door, then stepped in. “Live-ins do just that. They live here with the kids and help them. Peggy’s the sitter today. She’s a favorite.”

Angela immediately liked the older redhead, thinking it made a lot of sense to do things this way. She tried to ignore the children so her heart wouldn’t start aching.

Adrian noticed it, but he didn’t push, mind trying to figure out that part of her puzzle. Most new females immediately offered to spend time here.

“You’re very organized.” She lit a smoke as they left.

Adrian steered them toward the east side of camp. “These people work hard. You will too, but it’s all worth it.”

*I’ll need a pit stop soon*. Angela wondered why Marc was so pissed. She could feel his anger from here and assumed someone’s words had struck a nerve. She didn’t offer him comfort. Marc always landed on his feet, and while they were falling through hell, he knew how to take care of himself.

They stopped at the rear of the now empty mess, by a large row of trucks with pictures of American cities on them. Adrian hit a button on a small black box attached to his belt.

“Eagle Four to the refer trucks.”

“Copy.”

Angela was surprised. “You grow reefer?”

Adrian chuckled. “*Refrigerated*. We butcher our own meat.”

“A girl can always hope.”

Angela was smiling, but Adrian caught the small note of seriousness in her words and understood it was a question of his leadership. Did he sweat the small stuff?

He opened his cigarette pack and held out a joint. “If I can, you’ll have it. You’ll be happy here.”

He chuckled at her expression. “Freedom with a capital F. Fire it up.”

Adrian turned to greet a man with black hair and full lips under a black mustache. Angela hadn’t seen him coming. Sporting a shiny Glock on his hip, the sentry had an Italian profile, with large, bushy eyebrows and deeply tanned skin.

“Have the perimeter guards checked in?”

Kyle nodded, taking a quick glance at the woman nervously lighting a joint. *Nice .357 on her hip. Too big for her, though. Great body.* *Stunning eyes. Kenn’s woman. Who hit her?* “Yeah. They’re all where they should be for a change.”

Adrian was aware of the mobster’s reaction to Angela. “What about the weapons truck?”

Kyle caught a whiff of vanilla; he was instantly distracted. “Uh, ammo missing again. I just finished talkin’ to everyone who had a shift last night. No one saw squat.”

“Figures.” Adrian glanced at Angela. “Puff-puff give, Bogart.”

She let out a sexy chuckle that made both men aware they were single. She held it out, quickly lowering her hand as Adrian took it.

Adrian inhaled deeply, then passed it back to her.

Kyle delivered a curious smile. “Hello.” Adrian hardly ever smoked with his men, and never in public. *She’s more than just Kenn’s wife.*

“This is Angie, our new doctor. This is Kyle Reece. He’s usually in charge of our highest level of guards. Today, he’s in charge of all of them.”

Adrian observed as Angela held out a slender hand.

Both men saw her calluses, signs of someone not afraid of labor.

Kyle froze as the temperature of the wind dropped to ice; it gave him a deep chill as they shook.

Angela was in deep, reading his automatic acceptance that she was different, like Adrian. The voices in her mind whispered of honor in this man that ran deeper than even the leader here knew of. Angela forced the witch to let go without taking energy. Control would be a challenge with so many good men in one place.

“Ma’am.”

“Angie.”

Her voice was low, sensual. Kyle’s pulse tripled.

Almost instantly, nervousness and fear flooded her expression. She took a step back, color in her cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

Kyle reacted before Adrian could, drawn to her. “Don’t be. I’m Kyle. Reece, if you like. You need anything, *want* anything, I can take care of it.”

Angela’s cheeks flamed at the passion in his tone. “Uh, thanks.” She inhaled hard from the joint.

Kyle tried to act normal. *What happened? Did I just declare loyalty to a complete stranger?* “The kid’s on the air.” Kyle’s voice sounded odd to him. *Yes, I did, and I stand by it.* He didn’t know her, but he knew he wanted her. “He’s a natural, too.”

Adrian glanced at Angela, a question flickering. “Talent runs in the blood.”

Angela only tensed for a split second, but Adrian saw it. That sense of pieces falling into place hit him again. The one he needed most was here; things would spin faster now–he could feel it. Adrian handed her the roach. As their fingers touched, he felt her start to pull away and stop herself, facing her fears.

“Base to Eagle.”

Two radios crackled, full of static.

Angela did jump this time. She hated it that she felt awkward again, but the voices were now saying Kyle would be important to her in the not-so-distant future. That was the last thing she needed.

“Eagle One.”

“Jeremy just rolled in with three trucks. No people.”

The voice was calm, confident, and sounded much older than the teenage kid Angela had met.

Kyle keyed his mike, watching a rare sunbeam light up the long, dark braid swaying in the breeze. She was like a model from a magazine. “Four, on the way.”

“Copy.”

The guard left after a casual nod to Angela.

The preoccupied expression on Adrian’s face kept her quiet as they headed toward a row of port-o-lets.

“These are for everyone. The ones by the QZ and kid area are off-limits. The campers are men’s and women’s, but just showers for now. The time limit is five minutes; we don’t monitor that too closely.”

Angela hurried, not wanting to keep him waiting. When she came out of the smelly camper and didn’t see him, she scanned the area, growing more uncomfortable with all the people observing her every move and expression. *Don’t they have anything better to do?*

She turned her back, reading the laminated sign on the bathroom wall.

**Safe Haven Rules of Conduct and Penalties**

1.) Abuse (Mental, physical, verbal) is forbidden. Punishable by banishment.

2.) Fighting, property damage, violence for any reason except self-defense, is not allowed. Punishable by hard labor or banishment.

3.) Sexual Assault is a capital offense! Punishable by death, or branding and banishment. Jury vote required.

4.) Killing for any reason, other than self-defense, is a capital offense! Punishable by death. Jury vote. Guardian can overrule.

5.) Child abuse is a capital offense! Jury vote. Guardian will almost always overrule any decision but death.

6.) Rape is a death sentence. There is no reason or excuse. It can only be overruled by a unanimous camp vote that includes the victim.

7.) Treason/ Mutiny. When more than half the camp agrees, a new leader will be voted in.

Angela heard Adrian come up behind her. She pointed at one of the detailed maps posted next to the rules. “What’s in the off-limits area?”

“It’s another training site.”

She found the answer a bit evasive compared to the openness he’d been giving her questions so far, but she didn’t push.

“You ready?”

“Yep.” She fell in on his right, able to read people around them without using her gift. They were wondering why a new woman hadn’t been put in the QZ. She didn’t feel any hostility or resentment about it, but word was flying that Adrian had broken his own rules. “What happens if someone refuses the tests you have your doctor run?”

It was an astute question. Adrian was impressed. “What do you think?”

“You send them on their way.”

“Yes.” Adrian hurried to explain his reasoning, something else that was out of the norm for him. “With supplies, and only after trying to change their mind. I hate to refuse anyone, but an epidemic would overwhelm us. There’s no way we could handle it.”

“Has anyone refused?”

“No. The red cross symbol is what draws most people in.”

She believed that. “We heard you all the way back in Nebraska. It’s great, what you’re doing. No one else is.”

“I want to do more. I want to search for survivors and give them a chance to rebuild what was stolen from them.” Adrian’s tone deepened. “You can be a big part of that.”

Angela sighed, wishing she could see the future clearly instead of the foggy, distorted glimpses she sometimes got. She did know one thing. “Kenny wouldn’t like that.” He hadn’t cooled off at all. She dreaded facing him.

Adrian frowned. There would be trouble over her, no doubt about that, but she was one of his–the one he already wished fate had sent him first. “The women here are free, more than they were before the war.”

“Them, not me. He’s very…determined.”

Adrian’s unease grew. “Yes, he is, and we need that from him, but you’ve done fine on your own. If you have problems with him, I want you to tell me.”

“He hates it when I talk to his friends.”

The submissive answer gave Adrian a fresh curl of anger. While Kenn probably wasn’t responsible for all of it–life had a way of beating a woman down and using her up–he was the main reason for it now. Adrian was suddenly furious with the Marine for the first time since he’d come here. “I am not his friend! I am the guardian of this refugee camp and you are now a member. He has to follow the rules.” Adrian looked at her pointedly. “I’ll do what I have to, remove who I’m forced to, if it will mean we survive.”

Angela was aware that Marc would be the one asked to leave. That couldn’t happen. It was a dealbreaker and she let Adrian know that with two simple sentences. “Thank you for giving Marc a chance, despite everything Kenny will say. I probably won’t stay here without him.”

Adrian snorted. Kenn had already lost her, he just didn’t know it yet. “Don’t thank me. Marc will have a tough time of it until people decide whether he’s a gentleman helping a lady or a fox in the hen house.”

“It’s not like that. We’re friends.”

“Yes. How close?”

Angela couldn’t force herself to lie, not to Adrian.

When she glanced away, Adrian frowned. “I’ve been around you for a brief time, and I already know this will cause trouble.”

“Then give me my son and we’ll go!”

Adrian was surprised to feel a small chill at the coldness of her tone. *Damn, she has a strong heart! A fighter’s heart...*

Adrian stifled a gasp as her full place in Safe Haven’s future was revealed. It was bigger than just the magic he’d asked for and already begun to plan around. She was the fighter, the female warrior he’d dreamed of. She had chains, but she was fighting them. He would finish what Marc had obviously started and set her free. Hope breathed life into his deepest plans. Immense and endless, they began to grow. “Go to the medical tent and fill out a paper John has. I’ll get Charlie.”

Adrian was glad to see unhappiness cross her face, but he was unsure if his bluff would work. What if she did leave? Would he go after her and beg?

“Wait.”

When she put a hand on his arm, electricity sparked. He felt her flinch before she let go.

“Please, don’t make us leave.”

Adrian hated it that he’d upset her.

“I’m sorry.”

He was sorry too. “I never said you weren’t worth all the hassle, but you are free to go whenever you want. You need to understand that.”

Angela, now studying the dusty ground, answered in a cool tone. “Thanks for the lesson.”

Aware that he’d hurt her somehow, the sarcastic words made him blow out a breath of frustration, not sure how to handle her.

Angela let the new, stronger female respond. “As a woman first. Always. And then as…someone who hasn’t agreed to stay and play these games with you yet.”

It was the second time she’d called him on that, reminding him that she didn’t intend to grovel for a spot near him like the rest of his people. “This will be a good place for you. I’m sure of it.”

Angela had to smile. He was handsome when he was happy.

Adrian sighed. That one small wave of happiness from her could steal a man’s mind and make him obsessed to create it again and again “Come on. We’re attracting too much attention.”

That made her happiness fade. She followed him to the western corner, relieved when the main camp and all the people were out of sight between truck trailers and the trees. She could still hear the babble of voices though.

Gunshots rang out; her hand flew down, impressing Adrian with how fast she got her holster open. “It’s just target practice.” He used a subtle gesture to deny the guard already moving their way to defend him. “There’s a contest tomorrow, so that will be an all-day sound. Usually there’s a class with more words and less shooting.”

Angela didn’t ask questions, not wanting to draw more attention to her gun than she already had. If there was a class, then they also had a test to carry one. She would have to fight him on giving hers up, even temporarily. Since Versailles, the .357 was never out of reach, even when she was with Marc. It was a lesson she’d learned too well.

The parking area was crammed with a small lake of cars, trucks, jeeps, vans, and bikes, almost all sporting tattered American flags. The hoods were up on many of them. She saw a guard leaning under the front of a long, brown wagon. She recognized him from the QZ. The former state trooper was every cop who had pulled her over, from his suspicious green eyes to the hat line on his head that refused to grow his brown curls any longer. Even the Beretta slung high on his hip was familiar. She gave him a restrained nod.

Adrian frowned. “Where’s your help?”

Neil gave an irritated roll of his shoulders, shooting a surprised glance at Angela. “Sleeping it off would be my guess. Said he had the runs.”

Adrian smirked. “Yeah, I hear you can catch that now from a bottle while at the bonfire until 2am, getting bombed.”

“That’s about what I thought. He said he’d do an extra shift to make up for it.” Neil grinned. “I switched him to refueling all next week.”

Angela understood no one wanted that chore when they both laughed.

Adrian turned back to Angela. “I’m going to give Neil a hand. You can hang here or wait at the mess if you’re ready for a break.”

Angela untied her sweater and tossed it over the handlebars of a nearby Harley. “Marc taught me basic car care. I’ll help too. What’s first?”

“You’ll follow behind Neil and add what’s on the window while I fill them up...” Adrian was unable to keep the doubt from his voice. It was something none of the women here would volunteer for.

Angela felt insulted. “How long does this usually take?”

“Two and a half hours, the last time we had three people.” Neil checked his watch. Neither man pretended they were doing anything but waiting to see if her words could be believed.

Holding back a stray curl against the breeze, Angela read the window.

*1 qt oil. 1/2 gal water. Wash fluid. Gas used? Left rear tire.*

The loaded dolly was nearby. She got what she needed, ignoring the men. She knew this had become a test; she wanted to pass it.

She tilted the oil bottle in, leaving it, then added the water to the radiator while the oil drained in. She replaced both caps, then threw her trash in the bag on the dolly. She filled the washer fluid to the first line, but the tire was someone else’s headache. *I’m not doing that.*

Angela started to go to the next car, then stopped. She closed the hood, then wiped the things she’d done off the glass before pulling the dolly to the next vehicle.

Their approval was obvious.

“Women usually act the way you’ll treat them.” Angela saw agreement instead of the scorn she had expected. Her heart eased. *I can tell this is a good place. I can build a life here. Will Kenny let me?*

**2**

Three hours later, they were on the last vehicle–a red, white, and blue semi with a shotgun under the front seat. At Angela’s request, the two men had shown her where the other fluids went. Now she was standing on a foot rail, with Adrian and Neil on the bumper; they were all leaning inside the big rig–a bit closer than some would have approved of.

Angela was surprised to feel protected instead of smothered with a stranger on each side of her. She opened her mouth to ask another question... Alarm bells sounded. Uncomfortable nervousness flooded back.

“You can dump it in now.”

She didn’t respond.

Adrian gave Neil a shake of his head when he would have asked if she was okay.

Neil snapped his mouth shut, watching her eyes turn a smoky, roiling blue. *Well, that’s...different.*

Angela let them feel her fear. “Kenny’s watching us.”

Both men immediately stepped down to meet him with hard glares.

Angela stayed behind them, washing her hands and listening hard. *How mad is he?*

“John said I’m clear.” Kenn tried to stay blank, but he knew it wasn’t succeeding.

Adrian stared with cool blue eyes. “Kyle is off point at noon; you’re on until 6pm. Jeremy’s back from the supply run. Make sure it all gets squared away. Then I want John’s report on the new people. Ask Chris if we’re doing meat tomorrow. If so, we’ll need that other refer truck ready by morning. Schedules end for the entire camp tomorrow at midnight, so I suggest you get on them today.”

Kenn was now scribbling furiously to get it all.

Angela felt Adrian’s anger as if it were her own. He’d added up the clues and was upset over what he’d come up with. He hadn’t known. *How did Kenn hide it for so long? Did that mean Kenn was a different person here? Did I ruin his second chance by showing up?*

Kenn’s thoughts were along the same lines. He was gone quickly, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

Angela could feel Adrian and Neil forming questions. She smiled brightly, retying her sweater around her hips with a woman’s slow distraction. “Did we beat the time?”

Both men shook their head, jaws tight, expressions unreadable.

“Missed it by half an hour.”

Angela smiled brighter at Neil’s thin tone. “Oh, well. I’ll get better the more I do it.”

Very aware of the neat way they were being manipulated–this tactic was used regularly on the camp–Adrian turned to Neil. “See you at lunch?”

“You know it.” Neil was sure Kenn would hate the way Angela fell in on Adrian’s right as they left.

Adrian checked his watch. “Ready for food yet?”

“For lasagna and garlic bread?” Angela chuckled. “I’d do dishes for that!”

“Me, too.” Adrian liked it that she was taking the time to read signs they had posted. The sooner she learned the rules and settled in, the sooner they could get rolling toward the future. “Meet you in the mess in half an hour?”

Angela wasn’t sure where she should go. “I’ll wait in Charlie’s tent, if that’s okay?”

Adrian didn’t waste his time telling her which one it was. She had tracked him across the country. She would find it. “You can roam now. People know you’re new. They’ll help you, but if there’s a problem, have a guard call me.”

Angela was embarrassed by the concerns running through his sharp mind. “I’ll be fine.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “If you don’t tell me, one of my men will. I know everything that happens here.” He walked away.

Angela didn’t feel arrogance in those words, just pride and protection. She was encouraged. People no longer had a reason to tolerate a boss, yet they worked here, following Adrian’s leadership as if he was their savior. She could see why they would feel that way. How many other refugee camps, if there were any, would have old people and kids that were well cared for? Adrian appeared to take the useful and the burdens alike, and still had respect for both. How many of these people had been left for dead before he had taken them in and cared for their needs?

*Most, I’d guess.* Angela went to her Blazer, nodding to people she was starting to recognize. She liked the feel of this place, the constant reminders of good days gone by. Her decision on that front was easy. *I want to belong here too. If Adrian has as much sway as he thinks, there’s a lot I can do for him.*

**3**

Adrian went straight to his tent, eager to write it all down while everything was fresh in his mind. He drank a Coke and smoked on one of the blunts he’d rolled last night while heartburn was keeping him up. He’d been smoking a lot lately, trying to ease the worry. In the future, this sort of thing wouldn’t be allowed on a daily basis for any of Safe Haven’s members. Right now, it helped their grief, and it was better than staying too drunk to function, but it was an evasion of life that had to end*. I’ll handle it when the camp is ready.* Long before that, they would have to accept Angie for what she was.

Adrian had done a lot of things during his military career, including four years in an underground lab in the Utah desert. He had been involved in top secret programs that had tried to create people like her. The successes were minor. The best had been a kid who could tell which direction the enemy was, but the things he had witnessed today were genuine, natural. She hadn’t spent time in a lab or taken chemicals. Adrian tried hard to record it all. She was the first descendant he’d come across since the war, though her son could also be put in that category once he came of age. Adrian had no real proof, only odd words and odd moments, but he knew it as sure as he knew they would find no place on American soil that was safe enough to rebuild.

The radiation was already making slow changes, working on the smaller animals and plant life, lingering in the air they were all breathing. The mutations would come next, which made Angela a crucial link in his circle. She would help him figure out where they went from here, as long as he didn’t push too fast. If the camp found out she could read thoughts, she would never be trusted. Eventually, they would drive her out despite his support. It could get tense, but it could also be perfect. If he was careful, the camp would accept her as another much-needed doctor. Through that, she would get the chance to become more. He would see to it, especially if her gifts were what he was hoping. If she got flashes of the future, he would give her whatever she needed to stay. *The rules won’t apply to her.*

Adrian changed his gasoline-splattered clothes, then stepped outside. As he cleared the row of kids’ campers, he spotted Angela going toward the QZ with a heavy looking black duffle bag. She stopped at the tape.

Marc came from the QZ tent with the wolf heeling alertly. Adrian knew he wasn’t the only one who felt the sharp, yearning connection between them. How close were they? A thousand miles was a long time to resist such a strong attraction, especially when the only rules a person had to obey now were their own.

Marc stopped with a few feet of space between them.

Angela sat the kit down and pushed it under the tape with her dusty boot. “I packed you a few things.”

Marc could feel Adrian studying them. “Thanks. You’re not being quarantined?”

“No.” She stared at the ground. “You out today?”

“No.”

Their mouths said the right things, but Adrian read between the lines. He had forgotten about Marc, too excited at having Kenn’s mate turn out to be even more valuable than he was. She didn’t want Kenn. She wanted Marc. Life would be full of sinkholes and black ice for the three of them until things were settled.

Adrian turned toward the mess but caught Angela’s motion. He waited, watching as she said something to Marc. Sparks of attraction flew between them until she left, breaking the magic.

Angela could feel Adrian’s disapproval as she caught up to him. She let out a soft sigh. “I won’t give up my…friendship with Marc to stay and help you. We should have that clear now.”

Adrian waited, hoping she would trust him with something important to who she really was on the inside.

“Marc and I grew up together. He’s the only person I trust without reservation. When we…lost touch, it almost killed me.” She drew on her courage. “I understand your dreams, Adrian Mitchel, and yes, I could be useful to you, but I won’t trade anything or make deals. What I give will be willing or not at all.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, but if I can give you what you want, I will.” Adrian pushed, needing to know there was a chance at that future. “My word on it.”

Angela found Kenn in the front of the mess line, where a gusting breeze was cooling the sweaty skin of those breaking for lunch from various chores, games, and activities. “I want my family back. To give me that, you’d have to tear apart your framework.”

Adrian assumed she meant Kenn couldn’t be here anymore. “That, I can’t do.”

“And that’s why there will be no deals between us. You can’t give me what I want the most.”

Adrian knew she was right–for now. But it wouldn’t always be so. He knew where she belonged. He would form his plans to make sure she got what she wanted, providing his assessment of Marc went well. Adrian frowned. *Kenn also has to be handled.* “You can’t just end it with him and move on?”

Angela snorted, hand rising to her lip. “Not without one of us dying.” She stepped into the mess line, not looking at him or the angry Marine studying them from the center table. She wanted to be certain about Adrian before she turned her gifts over; she slipped into the leader’s thoughts, concentrating on appearing normal.

Adrian felt as if someone was squeezing his chest. It was a struggle to act like nothing was wrong. Her response was a confirmation. Kenn was a woman beater. How long before the camp found out, forcing him to banish one of his own? He had put complete faith in Kenn. These people would no longer trust his judgment. It was only a matter of time before it fell. All it would take would be for the truth to come out publicly or for Kenn to hit her again. His newest dream didn’t stand much of a chance if Angela was a battered woman.

*They won’t excuse it if you do?*

It took his full concentration not to show a facial response as Angela lit up a mental doorway between them. *Never. Most of these people were lucky to escape the draft trucks and then the gangs. They won’t go back to that environment, and I won’t condone it, in any form.*

She swallowed a deep frown*. We’ve called a truce. It’s some time for thinking, making choices. He’s fighting old demons too. I might be able to get him to let go, but it will take time.*

She felt Adrian’s despair. The tide of misery was heavy enough to crush them all.

The witch jumped forward. *Where’s your will now?*

Adrian’s bitter fury rushed out to greet her*. I have enough will for all of you!* *I’m not a problem.*

Angela saw his anger, and the immediate denial that he had given up. *I accept your rules and your hospitality, but Marc is my protection. We’ll be careful, but I won’t sacrifice him. Nothing has to change for your camp, except they’ll have a new awareness that some of us were weak before the war. It can all work out as long as Kenn sticks to your rules and our truce.*

Adrian brought up a thick wall around his mind, attempting to shut her out. He had no doubt she would get through. He was just curious how long it would take. He concentrated on finding a doorway. They’d been talking on her connection. He labored to open his own and still appear normal to those who were watching but leaving them alone. The camp assumed he was feeling her out, but he was giving her time to check them out without as much pressure.

*Is there no chance for you two?* Almost breaking a sweat, he closed the mental door in relief. *I have to start practicing again.*

Angela moved up with the line, trying not to think about how it felt to be with someone like herself. She would do that later when she had time to cherish it. *That’s what he expects, but I don’t think I can even try.*

The trapped tone came through as clear as if she’d spoken aloud. His wall was nothing to her, but her obvious discontent bothered him. It made him feel like he already wasn’t doing right by her. Angela wanted him to stay out of it and he would for now, but Adrian hoped she didn’t expect that to last. *Fixing people is in the fine print of my job description.*

# Chapter Thirty-Nine

**My Job**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**A**ngela sat between Kenn and Adrian, more than a little uncomfortable as she drank her tea. The meal had been good; the garlic bread had been great. She enjoyed the full stomach and remained silent, smoking while the five men talked shop. She knew all their names now. They’d exchanged friendly banter when she sat down. These were Adrian’s closest men, his chain of command. She was aware that Kenn was powerful here, more…

*Pissed,* the old Angela filled in.

She let out a sigh of agreement she knew was heard by the observant men around her, but she couldn’t help it. The anger was rolling from Kenn. Everything she’d said and done today had made it worse, but Adrian’s introduction as they sat–“You guys remember Angie, Charlie’s mom and our new doctor.”–had been the straw pushing on the camel’s hump. She thought Adrian had done it on purpose. She liked him for it even as part of her wished he’d just said wife to calm Kenn down.

Adrian glanced at Angela. “Feel like answering some questions about where you’ve been? It’s makes my job easier to have a lot of information.”

She felt Kenn tense; she paled. “Uh, sure.”

“Have you heard of any place safe to go?”

“No. It’s better right here than any place we came through.”

“Mutations?”

She nodded, thinking the constant noise made this place feel like a crowded amusement park… *Is that intentional?* “We saw some kind of spider-cricket cross near Kirksville, but the big ants were in every state we passed through.”

Adrian wrote it down.

Angela forced herself to keep going, sure he needed to know these things. “Ohio had a weird mold climbing up everything, even telephone poles, along with very aggressive rats and flooding. Most of Indiana was burnt up. Illinois…” She hesitated as the dead eyes of her first kill flashed through her mind.

Adrian shook his head when Kenn would have said something sharp.

Angela blinked away the past. “Sorry. Illinois was ugly. I don’t think we saw one good thing in the whole state.” She went ridged in pain. “There was a rabbit, but I’m pretty sure it died too. Illinois and Nebraska were killing fields.”

She gave him a brief rundown of their battle with the wolves and then fell silent, liking most of the thoughts floating around the table.

“What about radiation?”

She answered in detail, but her escort wasn’t mentioned.

“Thanks.” Adrian went back to handling business with his men.

Angela swept the guards in view, recognizing patterns and weapons from her training with Marc. Seeing them was a comfort.

Adrian noted how she stared at one part of the camp and stayed on it until she figured out how things worked before moving on. *Like an Eagle would*. How much real training had Marc been able to give her?

“Are you going to defend your title tomorrow?”

Doug’s question drew Angela’s attention.

“Yeah.” Kenn leered. “Be at the practice if you want to know how much I’m going to win by.”

The table erupted in challenges, making it the place everyone else wanted to be.

“In that case, excuse me while I go rig the targets.”

They laughed again as Neil left.

Angela was surprised by her longing to be a regular at Adrian’s table instead of a guest. The sights and sounds of everyday life here were bittersweet. She both loved and loathed the voices lifted in conversations, the low mutters of curiosity and disapproval, the almost constant crunch of footsteps as the guards monitored their surroundings for problems. It was worlds away from how she’d spent the last months, but every peal of mirth from the kids’ area sent fresh pain into Angela’s heart. If she had been with these people, she wouldn’t have lost her baby. Adrian would have been able to help. Angela didn’t need the witch to mutter it. She already knew.

Adrian, and others, noticed that she and Kenn didn’t speak to each other, didn’t even make eye contact. Adrian saw her wince at the can of Mountain Dew against her lip. He frowned. *I’m going to talk to Kenn. If he gives the wrong answers, I might do exactly what she wanted and tear apart my framework.* “Ready?”

“Sure.” Angela got up and cleared her mess.

Kenn took out his notebook, stalling. The more time alone with Adrian she had, the sooner the blond man would figure it all out. “Will you be at the practice?”

“We’ll be by, but I have a lot of stops left.” Adrian’s voice was tight. “I’m not shooting anyway. I’m officiating.”

“John says the woman, Samantha, is all right for the most part. Severely underweight, dehydrated, exhausted. Says she’ll be out of the QZ by nightfall. Said he’s taking his time on the men, especially the one Samantha came in with.”

Angela could hear the others at the table wondering why Kenn hadn’t mentioned all that right away to ease Adrian’s mind.

Adrian also caught it. “Have you gotten his *full* yet?”

“No. They’re separated. I told the guards to come get me if they’re seen together, but she’s out.” Kenn gestured. “John gave her another sedative.”

Adrian nodded. “Collect his story first thing in the morning. The earlier the better.”

“You want me to do it?” Kenn was surprised and pleased.

“You’ve been with me enough times. Make sure I get the report.”

“You know it.”

To the camp, Adrian appeared to be fully behind the Marine.

Angela knew Adrian planned to have the new couple watched anyway, and maybe even talk to the new man himself. She was comforted a bit under all the misgivings, understanding this was to remind Kenn of how much he was trusted.

Kenn was indeed warmed by the public display of his high place, wanting Angela to be impressed.

Angela was, but not with Kenn. Adrian obviously knew how to handle her temperamental Marine.

As they left, the men at the table noticed she and Kenn hadn’t even acknowledged each other’s presence. There wasn’t love between them. Even couples who fought all the time had more warmth. Confused and getting more suspicious, none of the guards lingered, each wanting Kenn to feel their disapproval.

He did. Kenn’s heart was thumping as they fell out of sight. Angela had been here less than six hours and it had already begun to damage his place. *What am I supposed to do now? I never planned on her surviving.*

**2**

“Where to next?”

Adrian led them to a corner of the long camp with only a single perimeter guard in sight. “Your boy should be working outside with the dogs soon. I thought we’d watch.”

Angela’s pleasure lit up her face.

Adrian forced himself to glance away. She had a man. Two of them, actually, and she had won over almost all of his chain of command in a few short hours. If she was a demon in disguise, they were in trouble.

“I’m not; I won’t.”

His brow arched as he glanced at her. “Won’t what?”

“Play with your men.”

A little embarrassed, a feeling he didn’t experience often, Adrian answered coolly. “You sure? We have a resident whore, but there’d be no competition.”

Stung, the witch surged forward, sending out a sharp wave of need.

Adrian sucked in a breath as vanilla wrapped around his body like an inviting hand.

“Only two men have ever been between my legs and either of them would kill to be there again. A whore, *I* have never been.”

Adrian fought the desire to take her up on the challenge. “It was a tasteless joke. I ap–”

“Don’t.” Angela stopped him, red haze clearing. “I’m the one who should apologize. I haven’t…fed well. It weakens my control.” It was hard for her, even letting him have much information. She glanced away. What was it about Adrian that made her want to spill her guts?

Adrian lit a cigarette, wanting to offer whatever she needed.

Angela’s voice was distressed. “I hate to do it. It’s…intense.”

Adrian knew she had to power her gifts. He would take care of that. “I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“I didn’t mean to provoke you.”

“My men couldn’t keep up with you anyway.”

Angela blushed at the compliment, smiling.

The tension eased for those observing.

As they started walking again, the silence grew thick. Angela stopped, looking around as the witch whispered.

She swept the tents near the showers, the curious groups of people, then settled on a sexy redhead in calf high black boots and a short red summer dress. The woman was sneering, locked onto Adrian as she sauntered toward them. Angela felt the man at her side tense.

Angela took a step forward, not questioning the need to do battle for him.

Adrian wasn’t the one who noticed.

Tonya had been watching them all morning, anger and jealousy growing at each introduction. She moved in front of them, recognizing Kenn’s woman for what she was–a threat. Tonya already suspected Adrian’s interest was more personal than business. “So, who’s the Barbie?”

Adrian blew out a sigh of annoyance that hid his eagerness to witness Angela handle this. First, he had to tell her it was okay to do so and hope she took the hint. “This is Angela, our new doctor. *Useful*. This is Tonya. She’s no one. *Useless*.”

Tonya’s painted face iced over; she gave Angela a glare that said meanness was coming.

“So, you’re the timid little mouse he didn’t want enough ta go back for.”

Angela gave a knowing glance as the witch whispered the accent was faker than the lashes. “You must be the resident whore Adrian spoke of…” Angela’s smirk widened. “And the piece of ass Kenn’s too ashamed to admit to.”

Adrian laughed aloud. He couldn’t help himself.

Tonya’s cheeks flushed to the color of her dress. “He never said that!” The accent was gone now.

“Didn’t have to. My Marine likes women with their mouths and legs always open. I just added up the clues.” Angela leaned in. “When I’m threatened, I don’t play games. I go for blood…but in this case, he’s not worth the effort. You want him? He’s yours.” Angela moved away.

Adrian followed, sniggering at the unusual flash of fear he saw in Tonya’s reaction of silence. “Next time, be nice.” He caught up to Angela.

“Sorry. Some people rub me the wrong way. She’s going to be one of them.”

Adrian chuckled, mood growing better by the minute. “Tonya’s a snake. She has no real friends here.”

“That does not surprise me.”

They slipped under the caution tape that wound around the entire perimeter. As they got out of sight of camp, Angela heard male tones lifted in excitement. She stiffened. Five long semis were parked bumper to bumper, blocking her view.

Adrian turned to her. There were no words, only thoughts.

After a minute, she agreed, liking it he would talk to her this way. “You have my word. I won’t discuss it with anyone, not even Charlie or Marc.”

He led her around the trucks.

Angela understood the need for secrecy right away. It looked like a military base. Two dozen sweating men were decked out as if they were training to go to war. Closed on three sides, the huge grassy area was under an enormous green canopy, with dark canvas walls that flapped in the gusting wind. The open side was hidden by the semis, and covered by that single perimeter guard. When Angela saw the rolled tarp on top, she understood if a warning was called, the tarp would be dropped to hide the training.

“Welcome to Fort Haven.”

Angela couldn’t keep up with everything she saw at first, eyes drawn to the flag over the doorway. She could feel the power of the place. “This is special to you, to your vision of the future.”

Adrian nodded. “This is the most important part. The camp thinks I’m training a police force back here, but it’s really the new world’s first army. *My* army.”

Angela felt a shiver of connection.

“We survived because we’re strong. I encourage that, but I also teach them honor and strength of mind. They spend two hours a day here, usually a bit at each area, being assessed, guided, taught. I’ve made it the most respected job for a man again, and only those who believe in what I’m doing are able to climb the ranks.”

“You stack the deck.”

Adrian didn’t consider lying. “Of course. I walk a fine line for it, but the good of this camp always comes first. I promised them safety, and the future is part of that. A well-trained group of soldiers is a must-have, especially in a world where the old government could crawl out of their holes at any time and demand control over everything again. Most people wouldn’t have a choice, but we will.”

His conviction was clear, as was his belief in himself and these men. She was humbled by how deeply he carried his American spirit. “Show me your army.”

The sun was no longer able to fight its way through the grit as they stepped into the tent. They kept out of the way of the man running full speed around the edges. Nearby, a guard held a clipboard and a stopwatch.

There were three cubicles set up to the far right that Angela couldn’t see into from where they stood. They were also being watched by a guard. In front of them, four men labored on big home gyms, while a fifth man was trying, with some success, to tread the length of a tightrope tied to two low cinder blocks that were the size and shape of ten manhole covers stacked together.

A table sat next to the gym, covered in guns and ammo. The men there were deep in concentration as they speed loaded their weapons at the guard’s call. They were blindfolded, like Marc had made her do almost from the start. He said vision was needed in other places during a fight, that hands had to know what to do.

To the far left, walls of straw bales formed a neat barrier all the way up to the roof. *What’s in there?*

“We’ll watch for a minute, then slip out the back.”

Angela noticed none of the men had glanced their way. Were they taught to block everything out? *Is that wise?*

They rounded the cubicle corner. Angela saw monitors and game systems set up, with cords all running under the tent...to where? If it was a generator, it was so quiet she couldn’t hear it. To a battery system of some sort? Was it solar? That’s what she and Marc had used during the trip here.

“Son of a bitch!”

Angela’s hand flew to her gun, startled at the shout.

Adrian put a finger on her arm as men stood, came their way.

“Stand down.” His tone said he was pleased by their reactions.

Angela flushed, realizing she was the threat they were responding to. Her cheeks stayed red. She’d underestimated them. They had been aware of her from the second she’d come in.

“Angela is one of us. Resume your sets.”

They all returned to what they’d been doing, but they stared, shocked at the implications of his words.

Adrian stopped her from apologizing. “Don’t be sorry. It shows me who’s serious and who’s still learning. Come on. This is the fun side of the room.”

The cubicles each held a different game, a different type of training. The first man was using plastic guns to shoot at ducks and clay pigeons–a classic as far as she was concerned. The second man was ambushing the enemy on a strategic game that had been popular before the war; the last cubicle grabbed and held her attention.

The man inside was one of the guards who had responded to her flinch. Tall, he wore no shirt over his swimmer’s body. His lean, sweaty hips disappeared into army fatigues. He was beautiful. For a moment, the woman inside was frozen.

The redhead stood on a white mat with colored designs, adjusting mirrors and earpieces as the instructions challenged him to hit the arrow on the mat that corresponded to the ones set to flash on the screen. Angela observed as the round began.

His movements were graceful, sensual arms flexing in the rhythm he was hearing. She wondered what it was as the hunger inside sniffed eagerly.

The man jumped, scoring a bonus. As he turned, hips thrusting provocatively, their eyes met.

He stumbled.

Seth tore his from hers to locate his place in the mirrors.

Angela expected him to turn around so he could concentrate, but the sweaty guard only tried not to make eye contact, body moving in unspoken invitation.

Angela slipped into his thoughts to discover the haunting strains of *Hotel California*. It was one of her favorites.

There was magic in the way he controlled every muscle in his body, not missing a beat of the dance as the tempo increased. Angela felt herself swaying along. Electricity sparked every time he glanced at her.

Adrian could feel the desire rolling off the woman at his side. Seth was responding to her silent pull, though he was trying hard not to. Adrian wondered if the lust in the air came from her or the hunger she’d spoken of.

Adrian’s thought sank in. Angela shoved the witch back into her cell.

Seth slid the earpiece out so he could hear them. He already felt as if he knew her.

“You okay?”

Angela nodded at Adrian’s question. “Sorry. Dancing runs in our blood.”

Her tone was rough, sexy. When Seth tripped again, losing the round, Adrian sighed. “You can do it all again.”

Seth stared at the woman. “Whenever she says.”

Adrian rolled his eyes as he stepped by the cubicles. “Kenn has no idea how full his hands are. Come on.”

Angela followed quickly, embarrassed and disappointed in herself. She could feel Adrian’s disapproval as they moved to the far left of the spacious tent area. She could feel Seth still staring at her. It was almost as if she knew him…

Adrian’s frown was drawing notice; he smoothed out his expression, but he would have to talk to her about the men in her life. While he was at it, he would also bring up control of her pull on his army. It would have to be dealt with if she meant to stay and help him.

Adrian heard her sigh.

“That won’t fix it all. It’s drawn to kindred spirits and it’s…famished.”

“Then we’ll have to find a way to feed it that you can tolerate, won’t we?” Adrian soothed her even while telling her what she didn’t want to hear.

Reluctantly nodding, Angela was willing to leave it at that. They slipped out through a rear corner of the tent.

Adrian checked his watch. “To your right.”

Angela spotted her son’s thin frame through the spruce trees. He was leading a beautiful black and white Collie around a series of obstacles, followed by two other teenage boys with similar animals.

“He just became our top dog trainer. He’s good with them.”

The teenagers were working on commands. It pleased them both when the collie obeyed without hesitation. It was clear Charlie had a connection to the dog.

Angela studied her son as he joked with the other boys while teaching them. He had been happy here, cared for. *I owe Kenn for that.* “Do you have all the teens do this, or just certain ones?”

Adrian leaned closer to talk; her scent–sweet, thick vanilla–came to him. It was intoxicating. He let his nose have its fill as he answered. “I try to put everyone to work. There’s so much we need, I can’t waste even one warm body, but things like this matter more than others. I picked him personally.”

Angela frowned. “Charlie’s trying to listen.”

Adrian recognized the moment for what it was, surprised.

Angela lifted a brow, voice cool. “Tell me you didn’t already know what my choice would be.”

He shook his head. “I can’t do that. My offer is amazing. No one says no.”

They were silent for a long moment, both subtly observing the teenager and each other.

“He’s upset.”

“I brought along the person he also least expected.” Angela grunted. “He’ll adjust, once he understands no one has to die.”

“I’ll keep him busy.”

“His dad’s good at stuff like this too.”

Adrian understood the hint. Marc would also need something to do until he settled in. “I’ll keep that in mind.” And he would. She wouldn’t stay without Marc. “You’ll talk to Charlie, try to explain things?”

“He’s not ready to listen yet. When he is, I will.”

They watched the boys groom the dogs.

Adrian was thinking of his good fortune to have them both as eventual members of his army. Charlie had the paler skin of his mother, the full lips of his father, and yet, he had Kenn in him too, in the rounded face and the quicker temper. The teenager had earned an extra day of shit labor last week for fighting with his tent mates. He now had his own next to Kenn’s. Adrian was almost sure it had been on purpose.

“I think one of them said something about Kenny. He felt bound to defend him. It doesn’t feel like he wanted to.” Angela didn’t want Adrian to think Charlie was a troublemaker.

Adrian didn’t. “He’s a good kid. You’ve done an excellent job.”

Angela’s frown wasn’t what he expected; neither were her words.

“He’s got a nasty side, too. He learned it well. At some point, he’ll push for freedom from all of us.” Angela searched for her smokes. “Probably sooner than I think. He has a lot of anger under that obedient demeanor. He’ll find an outlet.”

Adrian smirked. “I suspect we both know who that’ll be.”

“Yeah, his dad.”

They shared a smile of understanding.

“Thank you. It helps me to know he’s had these things. I owe you a great deal.” Angela tested him.

The ground shook under Adrian’s feet as she slid into his mind.

*I’d pay it any way you want.*

Adrian was a bit winded from the shiver of lust that dove into his balls. “It’s why I’m here. I expect no payment.”

“Thank you.”

He sensed her gratitude had multiple meanings and didn’t ask her to clarify. He would figure it out in time, but Adrian already assumed it was connected to his XO. Everything now depended on Kenn.

**3**

Kenn was in charge of the camp; he was the Eagle on Point. It was a post he usually loved, but not today. He’d watched Adrian and Angela as they moved through camp, upset they were talking so much when she would share nothing with him. People had been tripping over themselves to tell him about Angela’s exploits. Their stories were fanning his flames.

She had flirted, said she wasn’t his wife, turned her back on Adrian while he was talking to her, smoked a joint, had a confrontation with Tonya, and made Adrian bark at her at least twice. One of those had happened in a training tent full of Eagles, but not one of them could tell Kenn why. The anger was consuming. The camp was already talking about how tense he was now that his woman had arrived. The questions were blunt. Some of them had been outright provocative. It had finally toned down when he’d grabbed Danny and shoved him into a truck. Kenn had walked away by picturing Adrian’s reaction, but word had spread faster.

By late afternoon, almost everyone in Safe Haven was nervous or curious about his lack of answers.

# Chapter Forty

**Yes, You Will**

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**1**

**T**he next hours were a dusty blur for Angela as they talked to curious people whose names she was too nervous to remember. She was astounded by everything Adrian had going on here. There were driving classes, kids and adults in teaching circles, groups of women changing tires, karate and archery near the livestock area, kickball where the football had been earlier. Everywhere, she found healthy, normal people coming and going, talking, laughing, living. It was almost overwhelming to someone who had been alone with one man for six weeks, and by herself for twice that long.

The longer she and Adrian walked, the further the trip here seemed. She was overjoyed to be with her son, but being around so many strangers was hard. She considered telling Adrian she wanted to go to her tent, but she forced herself to hang on. She had figured out these hours were an evaluation. The open nosiness was difficult compared to the quiet privacy she’d had on the way here though; some of the questions were outright nasty. It was harder to keep from saying the wrong thing as the day wore on.

Adrian was pleased with her. She had been politely interested, easily sidestepping questions about Kenn and Marc. She was adept at distracting even the most persistent people, drawing them into discussions of things closest to their hearts. Adrian was certain she would win them over if given enough time, but Kenn was going to have problems. Angela wasn’t even close to the weak, inept woman Kenn had hinted couldn’t have survived, thus his reason for not undertaking the hazardous trip back to Ohio. The Marine had left her to survive on her own. People would recognize that quickly. At the least, it would cost him respect and leave unanswered questions, like why didn’t he want her here? She was smart, useful. What hadn’t he wanted Adrian to know? From there, clues would fill in the blanks if they searched enough. The Eagles were already becoming aware that Kenn had lied to all of them. After watching Angela, it was hard to miss. Adrian felt the anger at Kenn growing with each stop they made. The Angela they were meeting was also more alert minded than the other females here. The only time Adrian saw her hesitate, except when around Kenn, was as they headed to the shooting area.

Dusk came on around 6pm, with heavy rainclouds rolling over the distant South Dakota landscape in a solid wall. The center pool was lit and blazing, along with eight charred garbage cans around the corners of the long camp. It drove away some of the darkness, but not enough. Angela stopped at a feeling of cold danger, hand dropping to her gun.

Adrian took notice of the intense stare she shared with a nearby guard. He wasn’t surprised when the radio lit up a second later.

“Permission to double the sentries and roll in the camp?”

Adrian pushed a button on his belt. “Roger, ten and two.”

Angela was once again grateful to Marc for all he’d taught her on the way here. “Channel switch?”

“Very good. What did you tell him?”

Angela lit a Marlboro, studying the shadows. “There’s someone spying on this camp from one of the houses on that hill.”

The hill in sight was at least five miles away. Adrian relaxed visibly. He tapped a message to Kyle, not needing to ask if the spy was bad. He knew from the way she’d reacted.

Adrian got them moving again, wondering if it was coincidence that Seth was who she had alerted first. Did she know Seth was his secret protection, or had they formed a bond this afternoon?

“Both.” Angela frowned at him. “Why aren’t you keeping me out?”

Adrian returned her frank stare. “I don’t feel like I need to. Couldn’t if you wanted in anyway, right?”

“There are ways.” She stared at the ground.

“I know some of them.” He shrugged. “I won’t. It’s all or nothing with me. I believe in what I’m doing, and I believe you will too, in time. There will be hardships; I have no doubt of that. Our journey has just begun, but we’ll hold them together with our belief.”

“You’ve seen these things.”

It wasn’t a question. He smiled, sure she would settle in once he had her under his wing. “Every night shows me more. Will you come by my tent in the morning, around 11am?” Adrian felt her tense as a large group walked by, staring and whispering. “Give it time. That feeling will go away.”

She looked at him with a frightened girl’s allure. “You promise?”

Adrian gave it without hesitation. “Yes. I’ll handle it personally.”

A volley of gunshots rang out from the training area.

Adrian gestured. “That will go away too. You’ll end up with nerves of steel and a heart of ice.” *How fast can I settle her in?* Depending on her restlessness, her needs… Less time than it had taken with Kenn.

“I’ll get back to you on that.” They continued toward the loud noise, one Angela was dreading; it was the sound of people. Adrian said when the fires were lit, all but one activity was ended. The fires drew a crowd to the final entertainment of the evening. Laughter echoed, backdropped by voices lifted in conversation and support. They were all sounds she’d been missing for the entire time she was on the way here, but now that she had it, she wanted to be alone again.

Huge spotlights sat on roofs of trucks alongside a lit baseball field. Gunshots echoed almost continuously amid cheers and moans.

The crowd parted to let them through. The breeze was cooling, but Angela forced herself to leave her sweater around her hips despite the chill, sure it would be viewed as a sign of weakness if she put it on right now.

Adrian leered at Tonya as he stepped by, but he didn’t talk to her or any of the others. It had been a good day.

Angela was tense. They were in the thick of over a hundred laughing, talking, whispering, pointing, yelling, staring people now. It was too much…

*Easy,* Adrian sent*. In time, they’ll be like your family.*

Angela was drawn along, hoping he was right.

More shots rang out as they neared the shoulder high, chain-link fence. Angela saw three tall men waiting by a row of bales, aware of more people turning to get a look at her as she came to a stop on Adrian’s right. Doug was one of them. He and Neil were chuckling at something Kenn said.

*They really are his men. How can I get them to give Marc a fair chance?* She couldn’t. They would have to judge for themselves.

*Maybe you should examine your Marine again,* the witch coaxed. *Be sure you’re ready to let him go.*

She did, searching hard. The things she saw were surprising, disconcerting. *He’s more relaxed than I’ve ever seen him.* Also, more attractive despite the anger she could feel. Concentrating on the targets, Kenny was tall, dark, and handsome. Even his small beer belly was gone. The stray curl of lust was an unwelcome reminder of her naivety. She had been attracted to Kenn when they had met. She had assumed that because it had been magical with Marc, it would be that way with any man. It was a reminder of when she’d been young, dumb, and easily fooled.

Her thoughts were interrupted by more gunfire.

It occurred to Angela that she felt safe enough with Adrian next to her that she had gotten lost in her own mind in a large crowd of strangers. Eager to be distracted from the choices she knew were coming, Angela stepped closer to the fence.

She missed the surprise of his men when Adrian followed, assuming the bodyguard’s place behind and to her right.

“Bull’s-eye!”

The crowd cheered.

Neil groaned, eliminated. As the targets were replaced, he joined Adrian and Angela.

“You remember Neil.”

She noticed Adrian hadn’t reminded her of anyone else’s name. She caught the hint that Neil was someone important here, but she didn’t need it. It was clear by all the attention he got and how he was everywhere, like Kenn, doing a little of everything.

“Now it gets good.” Neil watched Angela. He hadn’t heard all the stories when he’d met her earlier. He wanted to believe Kenn wouldn’t hit a woman, but there were witnesses. Not full members yet, their word wouldn’t matter to the camp, but it would to the Eagles.

“No fair! Kenn’s got his wife here!” Kyle gestured, grinning. “No good luck charms!”

Angela blushed at the mobster’s joke, but before she could respond with a joke of her own or deny the title, Kenn unloaded his mag.

“Eight bull’s-eyes! We have a tie!”

A loud cheer went up.

Adrian gave Neil a motion before climbing the fence. He dropped to the ground with an easy grace that made Angela’s stomach tighten. *Sexy.*

“Too late for another shooter?”

Kenn and Doug groaned as the camp members cheered in approval. Angela could feel them behind her, whispering, staring. She couldn’t help resting her hand on her gun. She could hear the conversations; most of them were about her. Marc and Kenn were being mentioned, but there were also words about the quarantine rule Adrian had broken…and her carrying a gun. Apparently, none of the other females here had passed the class yet. Angela understood she was the first woman he had shown this much interest in because some of them were wondering if it was personal. After a minute of consideration, she decided those few were idiots. Adrian wanted her gifts.

Neil slid closer so she could hear him through the fence. “Those three men outshoot everyone here. Adrian schedules these contests every few weeks. The camp loves it.”

The three remaining contestants lined up–first, second, and fifth in command–and began checking their weapons. As everyone fell silent, she saw how many reasons Adrian had for doing things like this. She was curious if his army knew half of them.

Doug stepped forward. Hoping to rattle Kenn, he waved to Angela.

Angela returned his greeting in embarrassment.

The crowd roared at the big man’s tactics.

Kenn wasn’t amused. He was determined not to miss a single shot. Right now, he knew where to put his anger.

“Bull’s-eye!”

Doug grinned as Kenn moved forward. Before he could tease again, the Marine pulled the trigger...then he emptied the mag.

The crowd muttered in surprise, then quieted as everyone waited for Adrian’s reaction.

“Put Doug’s targets up after the call.” Adrian shrugged at the big man who was now the one rattled. “You started it.”

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

The crowd was boisterous in their approval as Kenn leered at Doug. “I get the title and the girl.”

Doug was chuckling as he took his place.

As Kenn joined Angela along the fence, he gave Neil a nod, but they exchanged nothing else. Angela understood they weren’t friends.

Following orders, Neil stayed close.

When Kenn scowled, Angela caught his attention. “What title?”

“Best gun in camp.”

“Who has it now?”

Kenn was cocky. “You’re looking at him. Doug gets a chance to take it away tomorrow.”

Angela was flooded with bitterness. She had been fighting for her life, struggling to get here, and he’d been in all this safety, shooting for meaningless titles.

Doug took his turn, then studied the new woman while waiting for the call. She seemed upset. Anger hunting for a target, his mind zeroed in on Marc. *That split lip has to be from her new man. Kenn wouldn’t break Adrian’s rules.*

“Eight bull’s-eyes! Tie!”

The crowd quieted as Adrian stepped forward.

Kenn glanced at Angela. “He tell you how things work here?”

Angela didn’t look away from Adrian, who was lining himself up to the targets. “Enough.”

Her tone was full of warning. His bluff had been called. Adrian was an ardent supporter of women’s rights. Kenn let out a sigh, hoping she would still keep her mouth shut. “Want a better view?”

Angela nodded, but before he could help her, she swung her body up and over, movement almost an exact copy of Adrian’s.

Kenn scowled, knowing Neil had understood she didn’t want him to touch her.

Angela did stay close to Kenn as they watched the shooting, but Neil sensed it was to soothe his ego, not because she wanted to.

Unlike the rest of his men, Adrian didn’t hold and aim. He left his weapon in the holster, long fingers dangling. He drew in a graceful blur. The 9mm thundered, bullets slamming into the targets in rapid succession.

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

The crowd’s enthusiasm was catching. Angela let herself be carried away, clapping. When Kenn stepped forward, she wished him luck.

He smiled at her, the first friendly moment they’d exchanged.

“He doesn’t need any more!” Doug protested.

They all laughed as the targets were relocated. The tension was gone. Though it was only a brief second, Adrian recognized it.

Kenn pulled the trigger gently, repeatedly.

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

The crowd went wild.

Angela was glad she was now on this side of the fence as the crowd pushed and shoved closer. Neil was right. The people here loved this... Marc could match anything she’d witnessed so far. Would that help him?

Doug limped up to the line, not joking anymore. He wiped an arm across his sweaty face before lifting his gun. Bullets flew.

The immediate slump of his shoulders said Doug knew it wasn’t good enough.

“Seven hits. Four bull’s-eyes!”

The crowd cheered again, many chanting Kenn’s name.

Doug shook his hand, as he’d done the last time he lost to Kenn, though now he didn’t feel so bad. Kenn was just better with a gun. There was no changing that. “You’re going to win.”

Kenn picked out too many of the men glancing at Angela’s long curls blowing in the cooling wind. She’d taken it out of the braid. “True that.”

Angela winced, slapped by flashes of their past from that hauntingly familiar expression.

Adrian and Neil weren’t the ones who noticed her reaction.

Silence fell as Adrian stepped up, shooting straight from the hip.

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

The noise was deafening. Their worries gone for a small instant, the crowd roared approval. Angela was sure most of them didn’t care who won. This shot-for-shot competition was what mattered.

The targets were relocated again.

Kenn returned to Angela’s side, grinning at her in the rare, playful way that had never failed to get her to smile at his antics. He added an eye-cross, suddenly wanting to hear her laugh.

When she did, men turned toward her, drawn.

Kenn’s scowl reappeared.

Adrian recognized the spark between them. He felt obliged to at least try to help his right hand man. *It would be easier if those two stayed together.* Would a win here help the Marine? Kenn’s happiness mattered too, and his loyalty had been steadfast… Adrian didn’t think it would be enough to sway anything. Angela knew what she wanted, and it wasn’t Marine number one. Still…

Adrian drew, firing. When he stopped, he met Kenn’s surprised stare over the crowd.

“Seven bull’s-eyes!”

There were cheers and groans.

Adrian shrugged. “Can’t be perfect all the time.”

Kenn took his place. “Just practice anyway.” He blew out a breath and began firing.

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

Kenn locked onto Angela across the short distance. “Boo-yah!”

“Nice shooting.” Adrian shook his hand, pulling his attention away.

Angela trembled as nightmares rushed over her. Kenny was always inventive when he won something he really wanted.

Neil had been watching her while pretending he wasn’t. He didn’t like any of the things he noticed.

“I’m sharing a tent with Charlie?”

Neil gave her a confused stare as the crowd broke up. “We assumed you’d be with Kenn.”

Fire flashed in her eyes. “Assumed because he said so?”

“Yes.” Neil felt like he’d done something wrong.

Kenn stared at Angela over the men congratulating him. *I’m almost in charge. Do what I say or you’ll regret it!*

Angela turned to the frowning guard at her side. “Will you take me to Marc?”

“Yes.” Neil’s lips were thin as they climbed the fence. He didn’t offer her a hand over as he might have with the other women here. He could sense her reluctance to touch or be touched. His time in Adrian’s army had made all of them more sensitive to female moods. Neil’s scowl grew. *Except for Kenn, apparently.*

Angela was able to feel Neil’s disapproval. She leaned closer. “Marc has my medical bag.”

“Uh-huh.” Neil had respect for Kenn, though he couldn’t say he liked the arrogant son of a bitch. He wasn’t afraid of him, but he was scared of destroying all Adrian had going, and of losing his second chance. Neil did hope no one would stress to Kenn that he had escorted his wife to another man’s tent. He didn’t need that type of drama.

Angela picked up the thought. She was unable to stay quiet this time. “We’re not married.”

Neil shrugged, not realizing he hadn’t spoken aloud. “It doesn’t matter. Common Law counts.”

“We weren’t that either.”

“That’s the way it appears.”

“Why? Because he says so? They don’t know me.”

“We listen and watch. Kenn introduced you as *his* Angela; you began talking to Adrian with no denial. Kyle even called you his wife tonight; you laughed with the rest of us. It’s how we judge lady or tramp here.”

“It’s not like that and I’m already tired of saying it! I haven’t even been here a full day. They know nothing.”

“What Kenn says, his respectability, gives it credit.” Neil steered them toward the QZ. “If Adrian hadn’t taken you under his wing today, you might have been viewed as a mother trying to get to her son by cheating on her husband.”

She was angry, he could feel it. Neil was sympathetic. He couldn’t wait to see her in the sun and happy, rather than the darkness and fear she was trapped in now. He hoped Adrian handled things faster with her. “Sorry, but I never sugarcoat the truth to people I like. Things are different now. You got a chance to show you can be one of us, and you did well, but your wolfman… It could get ugly for him if people think Kenn’s been reunited with his wife, but she has a boyfriend along. Be careful.”

Angela sighed in frustration, not understanding the rules.

Neil was stopped from further explanation by the tent flap opening.

The wolf padded out, studying the trooper. He crossed under the tape with no signs it existed to him. Angela wasn’t sure that was the case, but she would never tell on Dog.

The wolf was followed by his master.

Angela dropped to one knee to greet the animal, lingering when she knew she shouldn’t.

After a minute of tense silence, she stood to take the kit Marc had brought out, being careful not to touch him. “Thanks.”

“Sure.”

Angela tried hard to sound normal, aware of eyes on them in the dim light of the fires. “Guess you’ll be out in the morning?”

“Yeah.” Marc silently asked what was wrong, but she didn’t respond. He wanted to say something, but he couldn’t, not with a guard standing behind her. He clamped his lips shut*. Just be cool.*

“I’ll see ya, Marc.” Angela turned, feeling like this was goodbye for them.

The desperation made Marc open his mouth without knowing what might come out. “I’ll wait until you decide, Angie. I’ll accept it. If I can’t, I’ll leave.”

Neil saw her freeze mid step, then actually stop herself from responding… From begging him to stay?

Angela forced herself to move, too aware of Neil missing nothing. He and Adrian were right. She would have to be careful.

Following Adrian’s pattern from the contest, Neil walked a little behind and a bit to her right as she went to her son’s tent, thinking hard about what he had witnessed. Their attraction was strong, undeniable, and it had taken less than a minute to recognize. *Does Kenn love her that way?*

Like his boss, Neil thought women should be happy and treated well. Everyone was wondering about the wound on her lips, especially since the couple had gone all day without speaking to each other though they’d been apart since the war.

Neil wanted to ask questions, but knew he wouldn’t get answers from her. He would have a tough time believing anything she might say anyway. It would force him to do something, and a mere sit down wouldn’t be enough. For beating on Angela, Neil wanted Kenn dead.

Neil admitted to himself then that he was attracted to her, that he might even want her. Neil made himself think of the expression on Marc’s face when he’d blurted he would wait for her. *Complete devotion.* It was what a woman like Angela needed. He envied the man a little. Marc… *Maybe I can get some answers there.*

**2**

Neil tapped on the tent flap. He had to wait for the wolf to move from the doorway before he could step inside. He immediately noticed the odor of gun oil. Soft, sad music came from a radio near a threadbare, camouflage sleeping bag. The broad shouldered man in the middle of it looked up from a stack of notebooks with a genuine grin.

“Thank God! Company!”

Neil chuckled politely. “I was here before it was a rule, but everyone says being in the Quarantine Zone sucks.” Neil scanned the man, thinking his first impression still held, even when the man was relaxed. It was old west cowboy crossed with modern day soldier. Marc wore it comfortably. The long black coat and faded hat were draped over the cot that Adrian had them put in each tent; everything else was folded or stacked on the end of his bed.

*His rack,* Neil corrected himself, noting the beautiful guns were off the man’s hips, but within reach. The new guy seemed like more of a Marine at a moment of ease than Kenn had been when he’d first joined them.

Marc motioned to the empty tent. “Have a seat.”

Handing over one of the two bottles he had squeezed out of the cook, Neil sat. He crossed his legs to the left of the wolf now viewing him with golden eyes from the shadowy corner.

“What can I do for you?”

Neil stared him in the puffy, purple eye. “I’ve got some free time and thought I’d come meet the man who has Kenn so upset he didn’t miss a single shot even though it was only practice. The real contest isn’t until tomorrow.”

Marc sat the beer down, unopened. “You saw me earlier.”

Neil decided the discolored jaw and scabbing knuckles added to Marc’s image. *Is this man the hardass he appears to be?* “I’ve had time to think.”

Marc tried to preempt the coming warning. “She just came to get her doctor bag. She hates to be without it.” Marc knew it was more than that. Something had upset her, and he had been unable to help.

Neil didn’t fall for it. “Bullshit. She was fine until Kenn looked at her after he won. Then she got scared and asked to be brought to you. The bag was the excuse most convenient to her.”

Marc didn’t answer. Kenn was already testing her new nerves. *Lovely.*

“What’s going on between you two?”

Marc delivered a cool glare. “Nothing. Don’t ruin her chances here over a reaction you probably imagined. You don’t know them, not really. Kenn isn’t the saint you all think he is.”

Clearly, he’d spoken to people despite being in quarantine. Neil asked the question he desperately wanted an answer to. “Did he give her that split lip?”

“Ask her.”

Neil frowned at the quick, curt answer. “She won’t talk to me yet. Right now, I’m on his side as far as she’s concerned.”

Marc was glad to hear genuine distaste in the guard’s tone. “It’s her business. If she wanted it known, she’d tell you.”

Neil gestured. “Why are you protecting him? Adrian will punish him. He’ll lose his *place*.”

Marc blew out a frustrated sigh. “So I’ve heard, and like I’ve told the others, it would just make things harder for her. She hasn’t made up her mind about what she wants, and I won’t force her hand on it.”

Neil took a moment to think it over, respecting him. These two new people didn’t seem to be eager to cause trouble. In the silence, he gave the orderly tent another scan, searching for clues. Gear stowed, boots at attention, even his sleeping bag was neat. Marc was a lifer, unlike Kenn, who never talked about his past, something most people here did, a lot. Marc was in love with a woman he couldn’t have. Neil felt a connection to him beyond his own dislike for Kenn. “He really hit her?”

“She didn’t fall or run into anything, no matter what she says later.” It was the first time Marc had caved and told that secret, but he already liked Neil. He sensed they could be friends, and Marc was very aware that he didn’t have any here. He also refused to let them believe whatever excuse Angela had invented.

Neil was full of disappointment for Adrian’s dream. Deep down though, he could see the abusive nature Kenn had hidden. It came through in the flashes of arrogance and possessiveness.

Noises came to them. When the muffled sounds cleared into laughter and excited voices, Neil relaxed.

Marc’s heart kept thumping. *She’s out there, alone*. He heeded the instinct saying Neil was one of the good guys. “Will you help her? Show her how things work here?”

“I already have been; she just doesn’t know it yet. She’s important to Adrian.”

Marc hoped that would be enough. He was an outsider. He wouldn’t be able to get close to her again for a while.

“You’ll try to keep your distance?”

Marc’s expression betrayed nothing. “Yes, even if she chooses him. I won’t stand in the way of what she wants.”

Neil got up and held out a hand. “I’m Todd O’Neil. You’ll be busy for a bit, I imagine, but I might be able to pass an occasional hello. You’ll have a lot to prove if you hope for a chance here.”

Marc shook with him. The last three people he had talked to hadn’t cared at all about the truth. Marc was relieved at least one person was offering friendship rather than cleverly worded threats “Marc Brady. You say there’s a shooting match tomorrow?”

“You’ll be out in time for it.” Neil lifted a brow. “You any good?”

Marc ran a throbbing hand over his swollen jaw. “I usually hit what I’m aiming at.”

Neil grinned, thinking he would take the man under his wing the way Adrian had done with Angela, just more aggressively. His amusement increased. Doug flirting with Angie hadn’t rattled Kenn, but Marc surprising him might. Especially if the man really was good. For some reason, Neil liked the idea of Marc and Angie together. It was wrong of Kenn to keep them apart if they loved each other. “Appearances mean a lot here. You’ll never be accepted if you chase her.”

Marc gave him open honesty. “I’ll stay back, and I’ll follow the rules, but the minute she wants or needs me, I’m going, and I won’t be stopped.”

Neil felt his respect grow. It took courage and self-belief to say something like that to a complete stranger. “You want someone to hang with tomorrow, to show you around?”

“Absolutely.” Marc was curious where Neil was in Safe Haven’s chain of command. He had no doubt that the trooper was.

The wolf watched Neil with his tinted ears perked. Neil wondered how Marc had earned loyalty from a wild animal, but didn’t ask. Stories like that were shared with friends and they weren’t that yet. They would be though; Neil was sure of it and anxious to hear the tale. “I’ll see ya in the morning.”

“Yes, you will.”

It was an odd response. Neil could tell from the tone it meant something, but again, he didn’t question, sensing it also required real friendship to share. He left Marc alone with his thoughts.

Marc wasn’t bitter that Angela hadn’t been quarantined. He just wished he was out there too, watching over her. It hurt his heart not to be able to protect her now, when she was surrounded by strangers and facing old dangers.

# Chapter Forty-One

**Dark Revelations**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

Night One

**1**

**W**hen Angela stepped from Charlie’s tent, he was waiting for her. She grabbed him for a quick hug that he tolerated with flushed cheeks. “Sorry, boy, but I missed you!”

Charlie felt the same way. He snickered. “Couldn’t tell. Come on.”

The mess lines were short. Most of the tables were empty. Angela only saw twenty or so people eating and staring at her as they arrived. “We’re late?”

“By about fifteen minutes. You’ll get used to the schedule.”

She nodded as they got in line. Charlie sounded older than he was. She wanted to talk to him, to find out how he’d been, but the eyes on them were constant, persistent. For a brief second, she wished Kenn hadn’t found them yet so she could have one more quiet night alone with Marc.

*You can!* Charlie shoved the words at her. *You can leave anytime!*

Angela said nothing. Later, when they were alone, they had a lot to discuss.

The sullen boy took two trays, handed her one. He grabbed a pair of green cans from the icy cooler. “Come on. Adrian saved you a seat.”

Whispers followed their progress, then increased in volume when Adrian slid over to clear the place on his right. *Again*.

Kenn’s even mood vanished.

Angela sat, feeling like a fish in a glass bowl. *Don’t they have anyone else to gape at?*

“I have to deliver trays.”

Charlie’s tone was agitated. They all sensed it was directed at her.

Angela smiled at him. “See you in a while.”

Charlie sighed. “Yes, you will.”

The men felt some of his anger go away. Neil and Adrian both recognized the words, and understood it was a bond.

“He’s a good kid. He does a lot here.”

Angela smiled again at Adrian’s words. Charlie would have to adjust. She opened her pop. “He’s so grown up now, so responsible.” Angela gave Kenn a warm glance most of them were glad to see. “Thank you. I meant to say that right away. I’d be lost without him.”

“He’s my boy, too.” Kenn managed to sound uncomfortable and arrogant at the same time.

Fire flared in her heart. Angela took a long drink to keep from asking when that had started.

Neil and Adrian noticed her reaction. Both men thought it was too bad she had passed up the perfect opportunity to get free. They respected her for not wanting to cause Kenn embarrassment, but a public breakup was the only kind that would free her. He said-she said, didn’t exist here.

As the men talked, Angela ate and wondered if Marc had been fed yet, if he was okay, if he missed her as much as she missed him. Angela knew her sadness would draw too much attention from these men. She forced herself to pay attention. The sooner she figured out how things worked here, the sooner she would know how to handle the future.

“Jeremy found everything on his list, says he has pictures of an entire town that’s undamaged. Cherry Creek. It’s deserted, but the stores are intact. He figures the whole town evacuated in a neat, orderly fashion.”

Adrian snorted. “Be the first one of those we’ve run across. Okay, that’s it.” He closed his notebook. “You’ll put the dogs out?”

“Yes.” Kenn stored his book. “Chris says Star’s gonna have another litter come May.”

Kyle smiled. He loved animals. “That’s great. We need all the babies we can get.” He glanced at Kenn, speaking before he thought about it. “Didn’t you tell us you had one on the way?”

Angela froze, heart ripping open.

Kenn flushed, turning her way to find out.

Every man at the table scowled. He hadn’t asked yet? They’d been alone in his truck for hours!

*My baby!* Angela couldn’t hide the awful pain that dug into her chest*.* “I lost my other son.”

Her voice was like broken glass. No one was surprised when she stood up.

“Excuse me.”

The entire mess came alive with condemning mutters.

Kenn knew they were all thinking he’d been too busy giving her a split lip to ask about their baby. He got up. *There it is. The first blow to my ship and she didn’t even fire it.* A few more of those and he would go under.

Angela knew Kenn would follow. He’d been waiting all day for the chance to be nasty to her. She chose a public place, heading for the bathroom. Only one woman was in line for the restrooms; the tall brunette went in as Kenn stopped at her side.

Angela braced.

“I’m sorry. I should have asked.”

She was shocked.

Kenn shrugged bitterly. “Things have changed. I’m not the same man here. It’s not allowed.”

Angela said nothing; her eyes screamed vile profanities.

Kenn reddened further, embarrassed gaze on her split lip. “We can work it out. I’d never do that here.”

Silence.

Kenn blew out a sigh. “We’ll make a new deal.”

Angela lifted a brow, thinking she’d won the second battle before it had started. She chose her answer carefully. “No more deals. If we stay together, it will be because I want to build a future with you.”

Familiar rage came back into Kenn’s expression. “You can’t end it. I won’t let you do that!”

Angela wanted to get away from him, but she knew it would be a mistake to run. Her only option was counting on the sense of fairness and justice she’d felt in this camp. She braced to take a hit. “You don’t own me anymore!”

Kenn came forward, big body blocking most of the camp view.

Angela’s hand slid to her gun. *I hope they don’t hang me for this. If they do, please don’t let Charlie see it.*

The brunette coming out of the restroom recognized the situation for what it was. She gestured to the nearest guard and got out of the line of fire.

“You belong to me for another six years. Do what you’re told, or your boy will get hurt, come up missing!”

Angela knew he was barely in control of himself. He only needed one little push now to become violent. She tried to step by him.

Kenn grabbed her arm, spinning her around and drawing a lot of attention. Kenn sucked in air…control. “Don’t make me kill you!”

He let go and marched toward the tents, fury on his face for everyone to see.

Kenn felt the displeasure of the Eagles. Some of those men, he’d just shared a meal with. He knew he was causing a lot of unrest. The camp was questioning him about her lip and all he could say was *I don’t know*. It was an answer the camp never heard from him, but Kenn couldn’t fight the rage of the past. *I have six years left to get her power or break her. Either will do.*

**2**

“Coming in with dinner.” Charlie ducked into the dim tent.

Marc saw the boy’s first quick glance went to the wolf. He took the opening. “That’s Dog.”

Charlie set the tray down, keeping his attention on his target. He’d decided to use the techniques he’d witnessed Adrian and Kenn employ on men they weren’t sure about–silence and a cool stare.

Marc waited patiently, impressed when the teenager didn’t fidget. Charlie didn’t resemble the small boy Marc had viewed in the pictures. The male in front of him was approaching maturity.

“Why are you here?”

Marc blinked at the adult tone despite what he’d been thinking, impressed again. “Your mom needs me.”

“You want her.”

When Marc nodded but said nothing else, Charlie’s anger deepened. “Adrian and Kenn will take care of her. You can’t stay here.”

*He has his mom’s courage*. “Only she can get rid of me.”

“You don’t know these people. If they want you gone, you are.” Charlie waved. “I’ve seen them do it.”

The teen’s smirk was a good copy of Kenn’s. Marc instantly hated it. He shoved brutal truth into the moment. “They’re already trying. I had hoped you would be on my side, but hear me and be clear. Only your mom can get me to go away. Not another person on this planet can do it. They’ll have to kill me.” Hoping it wouldn’t come to that, but not so sure now that they were here, Marc stood up to get his tray.

Charlie cringed.

Marc froze, mind slamming the obvious clue into place. It was the same reaction he’d seen in Angela during the first weeks of their cross-country journey, and sometimes even now, when she was startled. “He hit you too?”

Charlie shoved the tray at him and ran from the tent.

**3**

Angela flipped the radio off and lit a smoke. She was waiting now, writing in her journal while killing time until Kenn would be on duty. She hated it that Charlie’s tent was next to his. She had her gun resting under her thigh. She planned to sleep with it in reach in case he came for her during the night. She was glad he’d walked away this time, but it wasn’t over.

Voices went by. She identified them as Adrian and Doug. Angela mulled over the fast kinship she felt, worried over what the leader would want from her later…and what he already wanted.

She sighed. Two questions had been answered, at least. It was just Kenn she feared, not all men, and it wasn’t just Marc she could respond to. Both Adrian and Seth had drawn reactions.

Angela let out another sound of frustration. It was good here. She had found things she could help with, but Kenn was high up, with serious responsibilities. He was different from the man who’d kept her so upset during her pregnancy that she had been having pains long before the war. Even now, he still hadn’t cared enough to ask what had happened. She knew it was a side of him these people didn’t often witness, but that would change; it was already starting. Kenn had been normal all day, then morphed into a nasty SOB while they were in plain view of everyone. Was he really fighting old demons, or was he putting on the act of a lifetime?

Marc’s worried words came to her.

*He’s headed your way. He’s upset. Sorry.*

Angela tensed, lifting her gun.

She was relieved when her son came in and not Kenn. She slid the weapon back under her leg before Charlie saw it. “You okay?”

“No! Why did you bring him here? This will get you in big trouble!” Charlie was crying.

She went to him, held him as much as he would allow. “I have some things to tell you.” It would still be a censored version of the truth. There couldn’t be more until she made her final choice.

“About…my dad?”

“Yes, and about you.”

**4**

Adrian studied Kenn’s approach through the open tent flap; awkwardness invaded the cool night air. *He thinks she told me everything.*

Adrian chose to encourage that idea while staying as neutral as he could. He needed Kenn. Angela didn’t.

Kenn put the envelopes on the table and dropped into the empty chair with a grunt. He didn’t meet Adrian’s eyes as he got right to business. “We’re short on–”

“We have something else to discuss.” Adrian’s voice was like stone.

Kenn wasn’t sure if he would lie when Adrian asked if he had put his hands on Angela. He wasn’t sure that he could.

“Are you mine or hers?”

Kenn’s head flew up, mouth opening, hesitating. “Sir?”

Adrian pointed. “You can’t serve two masters. You were the first one here, the first member of my command, and you have the most active part in everything I do. You’re my right hand. What happens to a man if you cut that off?”

“He’ll bleed to death.”

Adrian nodded at Kenn’s mutter. “He, and all his dreams. The death of Safe Haven alone would be unforgivable, but worse, what else would we lose?”

Kenn’s reason warred with his anger. He struggled to find the right words. “Our last chance. Our way of life… America.” Kenn felt genuine regret.

Adrian was satisfied for the moment. He studied Kenn before speaking, no longer staring at his even-tempered XO, but the short fused, mean mouth, second in command that people were already starting to avoid after just one day. He needed to get this under control if he could. Adrian suspected it had already gone too far. Kenn didn’t believe Angela and Marc were just friends either. “Because she asked me not to, unless someone comes to me, we won’t discuss this after tonight. So long as it never*, ever* happens again.”

Kenn was shocked…stunned that Adrian would protect him. It went against everything they were trying to build here. Kenn was filled with guilty gratitude.

Adrian, however, was furious. “The war changed life for every living thing on this planet, including her. She has the right to pick her own future. You will back off.”

Kenn was humiliated. Adrian knew who he was now. He no longer had a reason to lie. “We were happy. She’ll settle back in with me.”

“No! She doesn’t want that, and the rules here are for everyone. She knows it now.”

“She and that boy are all I’ve got left.” Kenn gestured in frustration. “I can’t just let him have them.”

“Give me a yes to this question and you’ll have my support.” Adrian laid the trap. “Ready?”

Kenn already knew, but he nodded anyway.

“It’s easy to see that Marc would do about anything for her, maybe even die. Would you? Do you love her enough to give your life for hers?”

Kenn didn’t respond.

Adrian frowned. “Then let her go.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“You have to. We all know you gave her up for dead. That gives her the right to end things. And so what? You have a good life, a good place here. You’re admired, treated well, and a certain redhead is sniffing around, giving out samples. That’s always fun.”

Adrian’s words worried Kenn. He hadn’t thought the boss knew about his trysts with Tonya.

“Think on it, but understand me, Kenn. You can’t make it work. You can try, and you can destroy a lot of lives, but you cannot have this position and that woman. I’ve met her. No man could balance the two.” Adrian ignored the male heart insisting that he could. “Let her go, Marine. I need you so much more than she does.”

Kenn desperately wanted this conversation to be finished. “I’ll try to do what’s right. I will.”

“Good. Let’s move on. Schedules first. Put her with John; add her to Neil’s class. Can she use the .357 on her hip?”

Kenn nodded reluctantly, humiliated mind flashing to the ride here. “Probably the least of what he taught her.”

Adrian ignored the bitter tone, but he responded to the impression that Kenn knew Marc. He set another trap. “Tell me about him.”

Kenn lit a smoke, thoughts chaotic. *I can’t tell the truth without giving all of it, can I?* “We served together. Same platoon for a few years. He’s a good Marine. I don’t know him personally.”

Adrian lifted a brow, waiting for the details he knew were there. The anger at Kenn for withholding that information until now was stored for later examination.

Kenn couldn’t refuse Adrian’s need to hear the observations he had stored over the years. It was part of the job, and he knew Marc better than he knew any of the people he’d reported on since getting this position. “He’s quiet, likes to work alone. He’s a stickler for the rules during regular business hours, but I’ve seen him get drunk and beat the hell out of men off base. He wasn’t close to any of us that I know of. He usually wanted a corner table alone, but he always supported us in brawls. When we lost two members of our team in Iraq, he retrieved both bodies, then helped the widows financially out of his own pocket.” Kenn let out a sigh, hating the truth. *Damn Boy Scout!* “He’s one of the good guys.”

Adrian reached into the cooler. “So are you. The past is dead. Try to leave it there.”

The Marine nodded, but Adrian was sure he had wasted his breath as he handed Kenn a beer from the cooler. “You have things for me?”

Grateful, Kenn opened his notebook. By all rights, he should be on the way to a dark road where one of Kyle’s bullets waited for his brain.

When Kenn left Adrian’s tent, he was calmer, but the ball of anger remained, waiting to be reignited. It flared to life once again when he got to his tent and found it empty. *Did Angela break our truce and sneak out to Marc?*

No. He could hear the soft murmur of voices nearby. She was in Charlie’s tent, and he couldn’t just jerk her out of there by her long hair like the rage was demanding. What to do?

*Find a release.*

**5**

Tonya moaned, wrapping her arms around Danny’s narrow shoulders as he pushed her against the boxes. Images of her night with Adrian flashed through her mind, increasing the heat.

Danny thrust against her, shoving her into the corner. “Yeah…ohh…yeah!”

Danny’s bare hips flashed in the dim lantern light.

Tonya arched up to meet his wild thrusts, already knowing he was going to blow before she could. *What a waste of time.*

The man dipped his mouth to her ample chest, nearing the edge.

Tonya froze as a menacing shadow stepped up into the semi and closed the door.

“What?…uhhh!”

A cold draft hit Danny’s twitching flesh as he was spun around. Milky white splatters sprayed the truck floor, boxes, and Kenn’s boots.

Danny, caught in the moment of climax, didn’t even try to avoid the meaty fist that flew toward him. He hit the metal floor with a loud thud, fading.

Tonya cowered in the corner.

Kenn stepped over Danny’s limp body toward her. “I see you found someone to do in my short absence.”

Tonya kept her mouth shut. When his big hands slid to the buckle of his jeans, heat and relief flooded her.

Kenn grabbed her arm and shoved her over the boxes she’d been leaning on.

Tonya, unsure about him at this moment, felt a tremor of fear and an earthquake of lust. She had written him off after seeing his woman. She knew her limits, but apparently, things weren’t peachy in their world.

The angry Marine kept a hand on her arm, holding her as he nudged her thighs open. When he rocked forward, sinking deep, Tonya pushed back against him in pleasure, body clenching around his. This was what she’d wanted when she’d found Danny alone by the fire.

Needing her to know who was boss, Kenn pulled out of her hot heat and pushed into the next opening, wrapping a hand around her mouth to stop the scream from following the surprised breath she’d sucked in.

Tonya moaned against his hand, sounding a lot like the man coming to at their feet.

Kenn pushed deeper, her gasp swelling him, and then he pulled out, spinning. He hissed in satisfaction, seed falling on Danny’s bruising cheek.

Kenn delivered a nasty kick to the moaning man’s ribs. “Find your own whore!”

He glowered at Tonya as he fastened his jeans. “Get this shit cleaned up and get back to your tent. We’re not done.”

Tonya giggled. “You got it.”

**6**

By 10pm, most people were inside. Safe Haven was quiet.

Angela slipped out, eager to get a shower without standing in line and being stared at. She scanned, finding Adrian and a group of guards at the center mess table. His words of knowing everything that went on rolled through her mind. He was a man to take at face value for sure, but there were wells in him deep enough to get lost in.

Angela was thrilled to have the shower camper to herself. She chose the farthest stall.

Gun in reach, Angela quickly got in and let the hot water beat on her. She hadn’t had a real shower in hot water since December, and it hadn’t felt this good. She soaped her hair twice, humming as some of the stink from her journey washed off and went down the drain. *I made it. I’m really here.*

Angela was frowning by the time she flipped off the water, wondering if Marc had gotten a shower yet. She hated being away from him, but she didn’t call out like she wanted to. They would have to be careful or leave, but every time Angela thought of that, of being alone with just Marc and their son, the witch whispered of death. She knew better than to ignore the warning. She had Charlie, and some of her freedom. Plus, there was that sense of being in the right place. It all made her want to stay. She would unless Kenn forced her hand.

As Angela left the camper, she lingered on the dusty top step, gentle breeze cooling her skin. She swept the camp. *Safe Haven*. *Is it really?* “Show me.”

The flickering flames in the nearest can fire formed movies, revealing dangerous rescues, defenses, and…secrets, lies. It made her frown as she swept the mostly darkened tents again. Black clad shadows patrolled the well-lit group of weary travelers, but they were surrounded by a violent, unknown world*.*

*He’ll protect them with all he has.* The witch rattled doors in her mind–forbidden, locked doors to the future. *We could open them with his help. The future waits.*

As if called, Angela turned around to find the object of her thoughts nearby.

Adrian joined her, trying not to stare. He gave her a polite glance, the scent of vanilla thickening in his nose. “You have everything you need?”

Her heart went straight to spending the night without Marc.

Adrian stored her wild need. “I’ll rephrase. Do you have everything you need that I can give you?”

“Everything’s fine.” Angela was sorry she wasn’t hiding it better.

Adrian grunted. “So, have you chosen to stay and help me?”

Angela shrugged. “Kenn will get in the way of anything I try to build here. My dreams don’t mean shit to him.”

Adrian’s tone deepened. “But, he does believe in mine. He’ll see the benefits of having you here.”

“Only if you send away my protection.”

Her voice held a desperate plea in that last word, a cry for reassurance. Adrian gave it firmly. “Never. Marc belongs here too. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Neither do I.”

“You will. Give it time; give *me* time.”

Angela sighed, looking over the peacefully settled people. “I’ll need to keep busy.”

Adrian kept control of his triumph. “I have work for you.”

Angela’s heart leapt at the offer, needing something to replace her time with Marc. If she waited, if she thought about all the trouble it would cause, she’d never do it. But right now, with Adrian’s patient attention on her, she felt this was her chance, her place in time to change the world. She wouldn’t get another. “Yes, I’ll stay, but give me real work, something that matters.” She unknowingly mirrored her son’s words to him. “I don’t want smoke blown up my ass, but if you can make me feel needed, wanted, then maybe I too can follow where you lead.”

# Chapter Forty-Two

**Smoke and Mirrors**

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**1**

**“I**’d like to talk, if you have a minute.”

Samantha spun around to find Adrian standing by the camper she’d just come from. She had been hoping the intimidating leader would have other fish to fry right now.

“Sorry. Busy?”

Flinching again at a trio of loud, curious people moving by, Samantha shook her head.

“Good.” Adrian motioned toward his tent. “Let’s chat.”

Sam went slowly. She wasn’t ready to have this conversation with frayed nerves and a sleep hangover from the sedatives. When they walked in silence, she was glad for the moment to collect her thoughts.

Adrian left the flap open, but she was reminded of her time in Cesar’s camp–of José’s attack. Samantha’s stomach twisted.

Adrian gestured to the small table and chairs. “Have a seat while I get us a drink. Soda, water, or tea?”

Picking the one hardest to tamper with came automatically as she sat in the chair closest to the exit. “Soda.”

Adrian observed as he poured himself a cup of tea. She was too worried for someone who’d found safety. He joined her at the table, hating her flinch when he set his cup down too hard. He suspected she and Angela had a lot in common, but where Marc had been there to help Angie, this woman had been alone. She’d survived as best she could. “We have rules here, and you’ll learn them, but one is more important than any of the others. We have no violence against women or children. The penalties are too high. I know you’ll feel better with this, but you don’t need it.” Butt first, slowly, Adrian extended the .45 from his boot.

Sam took it. She didn’t want to offend him, but she was eager for the comfort it would provide tonight while she was sleeping alone. No one could take away what the boss had given her. “Thank you.”

“Keep it close until you feel you don’t need it anymore, then give it back for the next abused woman who comes here.”

She slid the weapon into her pocket.

“What did you do before the war?”

Sam froze at his unexpected change of subject.

“Your career? What did you contribute to society?”

Samantha sighed. “I was a storm tracker.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“I chased the wind, played with the equipment, and tried not to get myself killed.”

Adrian’s tone cooled. “If you have a gift, Samantha, now’s the time for using it. We need you.”

His chiding tone sank into her loneliness. Some of the truth was out before she knew she was going to tell him. “I can sometimes predict them, from the data. I had a pass to the Essex compound. My chopper crashed.”

Hiding his pleasure, Adrian leaned forward. “We would have a place for you even if you only babysit, but I have one question. Are you a spy?”

Sam shook her head, frowning. “No. Never.”

“What about the man you came in with?”

She looked away. “I don’t know…maybe.”

Adrian was surprised; he had expected a firm denial. They were both already under watch.

“Can I have a smoke?”

Adrian slid his lighter and full pack toward her. “Keep those. Why don’t you think he’s good, like you?”

Sam felt better, as he had intended. She recognized the ploy, but it succeeded. “Because he was a slave too. We never should have been able to ride out. It was too easy, as if he was waiting for me to suggest escaping.” She drew in a lungful of smoke that shot out as she spoke. “I told Kenn everything I could remember. Rick got me out, but I wonder what he used to buy our freedom. There’s no way we escaped, and the only currency Cesar takes is blood. I have no proof…but I think Rick is risking his life as an inside man. They made a deal. I fell for it.”

“We have good security here. He’s already being watched.” Adrian’s words betrayed none of his increasing worry. “We’ll catch him in the act if he is a spy, but for now, we wait and watch–myself and the Eagles, not you. It’s my job.”

Sam knew she was being manipulated but she agreed without hesitation. It would keep her from being responsible. A heavy weight faded from her shoulders. She was giving that job up to this man. “Will you have me watched too?”

“Do I need to?”

“No, of course not, but I would if I were you.”

The calm, reasonable tone made Adrian crack a real smile; he changed the subject again without giving her an answer. “Tell me more about your job, Sam. What exactly is a storm tracker and why did that earn you a pass?”

**2**

Rick paced his tent, nervous and confused. He had spent all day in here. It was well into the evening now, and he was still being quarantined by the elderly doctor who had taken his time coming, then had left as fast as he could.

The disapproving healer had given evasive answers to even normal questions. Rick was tense. He hadn’t handled this level of alertness before, but someone should have been by to talk to him, wanting the information Samantha didn’t have. He’d expected her, some guards, Kenn, and their leader, but no one had come.

*Why not? A trick? Improbable. Maybe they didn’t recognize the threat, even with all the alertness?* Most of the people he had viewed so far were prey. The fear was obvious to Rick after surviving the slavers all this time, but there were also men here who were as dangerous as Cesar. Rick already had an idea of how shift changes worked but gathering more information had to wait. Suspicious glares returned to him repeatedly whenever he opened the flap.

He would have to be more careful here than in the other places where he’d helped Cesar gain control. He also couldn’t contact the Mexican on time. He would have to lie low for a while and blend in. This was a large, well-organized group, and judging from the almost constant gunfire, they were learning to defend themselves. He would have to find their weakest point or Cesar and his nasty men might not be enough for these people.

*These are good people, Rick. We have to warn them about Cesar.*

Samantha had told him that from the passenger seat of the Blazer, saying she knew he’d made a deal, but it wasn’t too late to do the right thing. It was, of course. Rick didn’t like fearing for his life because of the color of his skin, but he did like Cesar’s way of life. He had no intentions of backing out. He would give the Mexican this camp, then he and Samantha would go away for a while. She was never far from his thoughts now, body crying out to him from two tents over.

Even if she reneged on their deal, and he already knew she would, he’d get her in the end. If he treaded lightly. The leader here had a warden’s coolness that watched and waited, knowing his convicts would offend again if given the chance. Rick planned to stay out of Adrian’s line of sight for the duration of his stay. He had received a copy of the rules within his first hour of being here; he understood the warning. If he was caught, he would pay with his life.

**3**

Back in her tent, Samantha laid on her sleeping bag, tired but unable to drift off. The sedative hadn’t faded until her shower. Now, she was wide awake. The shrewd doctor or his sweet wife would have given her a sleeping pill, but she hadn’t asked. There were things going on in Safe Haven that she needed a clear head for.

Sam wasn’t sure if this was another slaver camp, just with prettier edges. Some of the people here were bad, like Kenn. He beat his woman. She suspected Kenn was a lot like Cesar on the inside. The difference was these people didn’t know that side of him existed. Or at least they hadn’t until his woman had shown up. There was no way they could have known, because Kenn was Adrian’s right hand.

Sam frowned. There was something familiar about the leader, something that made her think of Washington. *Did I see him there? A flash of a man getting out of a cab in the rain?* It didn’t matter to her who he’d been before, so long as he was a good man now, but she was curious.

Sam curled an arm over her cheek, other hand caressing the gun under the blanket. She felt better with its cold comfort, and she was glad to have found people who were decent, but Rick was dangerous. She wished she had more experience with guns, other than knowing they were now the difference between being free and being a slave.

They’d traveled hard and fast; he hadn’t talked to her at all unless he had to; he hadn’t answered any of her questions, not even about where he was from or what he had done for a living before the war. He’d kept moving them northeast by day and crawled between her legs at night. The fact they hadn’t made a single detour told her Rick had known these people were here. He had wanted Angela too, but he’d noticed the men with her too late. His actions were not those of someone searching for good people to join. Rick was infiltrating them.

*Has*, she corrected herself. She had no proof, but she knew it. She had to distance herself from him, publicly, so it would get to Adrian. Rick had taken advantage of her; she never wanted him to touch her again.

*Really?* her body challenged. *What a liar.*

She was hit by erotic images of them on the way here: bent over the hood of a limo, pushing against each other in his sleeping bag, straddling him on the horse as it thundered under them. His touch had been like fire to her. She felt her body responding to thoughts, followed by a familiar ache that eased her mind a bit. At least she hadn’t gotten pregnant. Samantha had worried over it a little in the last week, not quite sure if she was late. It was a relief to know she wasn’t.

Sam rolled over, cradling the gun. He hadn’t forced her; he hadn’t abused her. Deep down, she hoped she was wrong. *I’ll rebuild my life, either way*. *I will survive.*

She was finally able to sleep, but in her dreams, the voices whispered she and everyone else was in danger because of her lover’s loyalty to a vicious killer.

**4**

Adrian began his nightly rounds in the small sea of sleeping tents that surrounded his. He frowned when he saw one hadn’t been put up for Angela. Kenn’s doing? *Probably*. He went to the perimeter men first.

His stops were brief and full of comments about Kenn’s behavior. The only place he lingered was the QZ, where Neil was pulling extra hours to cover the doubled sentry posts. Tomorrow night Neil would sleep like a baby, but tonight, the trooper was their eyes and ears. Adrian went to him for information. He’d witnessed the cop ducking into Marc’s tent. Neil wasn’t one to break his rules lightly. Adrian wanted to know what had happened, what he had missed.

Adrian advanced through the darkness beyond the perimeter tape, realizing Neil’s post was the one without a second man. *That* *explains the extra man two stops back.* “What happened to your help?”

“He got on my nerves.”

Adrian was almost certain Zack’s words about unfaithful women had almost caused a fight. Zack was a notorious woman hater. It didn’t matter who she was. *Makes sense now*. *A perfect right hand for Kenn.* “Broadcasting again when he should have been tuning in?”

Neil chuckled as he swept the dark landscape around their sleeping people. “Been one of those days.”

“Yes, it has. Put a twenty-four hour watch on Danny. He’s our thief.”

Neil’s thoughts went straight to Angela. *Did she tell him that? Does it matter?* “I’d love to be the guard on him at the trial.”

Adrian knew there wouldn’t be one if the thief were caught in the act. Another problem with the clogged legal system, fixed. If there was absolute proof, why have a trial? Guilty didn’t change just because someone forgot to sign a paper or read them their rights. They were criminals. They didn’t have any.

The chilly wind gusted by, bringing drizzle. Neil swept the landscape again. He drew in a breath. “What’s our penalty for hitting a woman?”

Adrian chose his words carefully. This was Neil’s chance to get rid of Kenn, but it would destroy Safe Haven. “A trial. If found guilty, the camp votes on a second chance with harsh punishments or for the person to be branded and banished.”

“What if it’s one of *your* circle doing the hitting?” Neil gestured angrily. “Do the same rules apply?”

Adrian’s stomach twisted. “Yes. Our laws are for all of us. Is there something I should know?” *Did Neil see something? What else did Kenn do?*

“Just suspicions.” Neil didn’t want to say more.

Adrian pinned one of his most trusted men with a hard look. “Your instincts are part of why you’re here, Neil. If you know something, especially if it concerns a woman, I expect you to tell me. Even when you know I don’t want to hear it.”

Neil sighed, torn. He understood what was at stake. “I didn’t witness it. I don’t know those who say they did, but I believe it.” He gave Adrian a brief run through of the encounters he’d had today, lingering on the scene between her and Marc. “He does love her. Marc will let her go if that’s what she wants, I’m sure of it. He’s already following our rules, and he doesn’t even know what they are! Then, there’s Kenn, trying to force her back into a relationship she doesn’t want. He didn’t give her a tent–told Charlie not to put it up, that she would spend her nights in his bed where she belongs. He plans to put her in all his classes and activities–so he can keep an eye on her is my guess–and he’s telling people that Charlie is his biological son.”

Adrian remembered Kenn’s words to him when they first met. He had asked if that was his son. Kenn had said*…“He might as well be.”* They had all assumed he was caring for a child that wasn’t his. It had impressed them.

*As he knew it would*. More than just the Eagles would be pissed over this. Either Kenn had lied then, or he was lying now. “We’re going to give them a chance to settle in, but I won’t let either of them force her into anything.” Adrian ignored his own guilt. He was about to herd her in a way, and though it was for the greater good, that didn’t make it right.

Neil kept his voice low. “Good, because I don’t think there’s many left like her.”

“Pretty, isn’t she?”

“Beautiful, but it’s more than that.” Neil thought of the way she had read his mind to start their conversation. “She’s special, more than just because she’s a doctor. You know?”

Adrian did. He wasn’t surprised the trooper had noticed too. Neil wasn’t as quick as Kyle in most areas of their training, but about people, he was quicker.

“I’m going to look after her when I can, maybe ask a couple of the Eagles to do the same.” Neil didn’t need to see Adrian’s frown to know it was there.

“Got hopes, Neil?” Adrian was relieved when the cop shook his head.

“No. Marc asked me to, but I had already decided I would before I talked to him. She’s got a strong pull, a gift we need. A lot of men will want her, not just those two.”

Adrian didn’t betray how much those words pleased and bothered him because they were true. He was glad Neil planned to take Marc under his wing. The trooper hadn’t said so, but Adrian had spent months getting to know Neil. It was encouraging that at least one of his circle was willing to give the man and his wolf a chance. Almost everyone else was talking about making Marc’s life rough if he got between Kenn and his wife. Marc was now cleared, but he’d been told not to roam until morning.

These people wouldn’t accept him easily. To stay and have a chance at building a life, Marc would have to prove himself. Neil could help him with that. The guard was popular. There would have been serious trouble if he had taken a stand against Kenn in the beginning and made Adrian pick. “You’ll let me know how your day with him goes?”

“You know it.”

Adrian was almost smiling as their long day ended. “Yes, I do.”

It hit Neil again how grateful he was for Adrian. Anyone else would be using it all to their advantage, or things would always have to be spelled out. With Adrian, he saw it before it became a problem, then handled it quickly and quietly. Considering what they had done to the old world, Neil thought Adrian was more than they deserved.

# Chapter Forty-Three

**A Trooper’s Welcome**

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Day 2

**1**

**K**enn strode through the camp to the heavily guarded quarantined zone. It was 5am. He was hoping to catch the man unprepared and be able to give him what he clearly deserved.

Rick’s eyes flew open when the crunching steps stopped in front of his flap. His grip tightened on the gun he always slept with.

“Hello in the tent.”

The voice was hard, as was the rapping on the flap. Rick grunted, rolling off the cot. He slipped on his boots, but waited for a second tap and call to convince whoever it was they had woken him up.

“Yeah! Hang on!” Rick didn’t bother buttoning his shirt. He shoved the gun into his waistband and fished for his smokes. “Come in.”

Kenn moved quickly, letting in a blast of wind that cleared a little of the reek. The Marine scanned the messy floor and even messier man, then flashed a sympathetic smile he didn’t care if Rick saw through. The man had only been here one day, but he’d already filled a tent with trash. It said a lot. “I know it’s early, but I’ll be busy later.”

Rick lit a smoke, and dropped into the chair. He lifted a brow as he adjusted the dirty bandana around his throat. He was glad the leader wasn’t coming. “Thought someone would be by sooner with all the security you guys got here.”

“Big camp, lot of shit to handle.”

Rick blew a disrespectful cloud of smoke in Kenn’s direction. If this dog tag wearing putz was all he had to deal with, he’d gotten lucky. “Is this the part where I get warned to follow the rules or hit the road?”

Kenn didn’t like Rick at all in that instant. “Yes. We always check out the new people, but you came from a known group of killers, so yes, we have questions to ask and things to say.”

Rick picked up a half full can of pop from the dirty floor. “Samantha told you everything we know.”

Kenn’s lips thinned at the flippant tone.

Rick cautioned himself to ease off a bit. There was a reason this man was second in command here, and it wasn’t because he liked to hit women. Though, in Cesar’s camp that might have earned him a high place too.

“We need to know other things, like where you hail from, what your career was, and why not one Caucasian male has been spared by that group. Except you.”

Rick tensed even though he was expecting it. “I was a janitor at a minimum security jail in southern Arizona.” Rick knew how to make Cesar appear less of a threat. He’d done this before. “When the power went off, the generators didn’t come on, and there was a riot. The guards were outnumbered. It was during exercise time, when most of the men were out of their cells.”

Kenn believed that. It had been the same across the country. Almost none of America’s prisons had held. Those that had were filled with bodies. “Where were you?”

“Hiding in the basement at first. Then I figured out I could get out if I could start the generators.”

Kenn’s words were sharp. “Yeah, you could go, after setting all the killers loose.”

Rick didn’t flinch at the accusing tone. He’d heard it too many times before. “Their crimes were minor. I wasn’t going to die for them. I had to get out, and I did.”

“You were caught?”

Rick’s chin lifted. “They let me live because I set them free. They *owed* me that.”

Kenn tried to pierce him with the hard stare Adrian used.

Rick finished his soda, not impressed. “I was the leader’s slave from there. If I had insisted on leaving, he would have killed me.”

Kenn was able to see the truth of that. “How did you two get away?”

Rick dropped his butt into the soda can and set it on the filthy canvas floor, controlling the nervous tremor. Instinct said they already knew. Why not use it? “His men think we escaped, but Cesar knows where we are. I gave him this camp for our freedom.”

Kenn’s gun came out of the holster as he stepped forward, anger blazing.

Rick fell over his cot in his haste to get away. He landed with a loud thump, hitting his shoulder hard. He held up a hand as the angry Marine came toward him. “That’s just what I told him to get away!”

Kenn hesitated.

Rick let fear bleed through his voice, knowing it was expected. “Come on man! I’m an American too! I said what I had to so we could get out of there.”

Kenn took a minute to pick the right response, but he didn’t relax or put away his gun. When he spoke, Adrian’s words flew out of his mouth. “A real American would have died before releasing them. Every life they’ve taken is on your hands!”

Rick flinched. He hadn’t heard that one before. It echoed in his head, even though he already knew he was damned.

“Will they follow you? What was the plan?”

Rick grunted. “Already on the way, I would think. He told me how to get here and to report to him in two weeks. When I don’t, he’ll know I betrayed him.”

“Don’t leave this tent for anything except the bathroom.” Kenn glared. “You already know to use the ones in here. If you need something, tell one of the guards, not the doctor or the people who bring your food. They won’t talk to you. Leave the quarantine zone for any reason and I’ll shoot you myself!” Kenn ducked out before Rick could respond. He marched straight through the sleeping people to Adrian. This guy was no good–from his pack of half lies to his insolent, smug eyes. Kenn would make it clear to the boss, but also to the guards. When Rick left that tent, he would have a dozen eyes on him at all times.

**2**

Angela headed to the livestock area as the dim sun began to rise behind the gritty sky. She nodded greetings to the surprising number of people also out and about so early. Inside, she was still fighting the urge to hide in her tent. Intimidated or not, these people wouldn’t see it. Not with so much at stake.

Angela had woken to a note on Charlie’s pillow saying he had to deliver trays. She understood he was giving her a teenager’s coldness because she had refused to make Marc leave. Charlie was afraid of what Kenny might do. So was she, but she couldn’t back down now, not when she was already making real progress. One day, they might both be free of him.

The rift between her and her son so soon after being reunited bothered Angela, but she knew it would take time for him to come around. She wasn’t going to push, and she wasn’t going to hide. She was building a new life. That meant showing she could do the dirty chores and work her way up. Her plan was to help the vet today and be close to her son. Hopefully, they would be too busy to talk, and she would be asleep tonight as soon as she hit the pillow.

Angela didn’t glance at the QZ or Marc’s tent as she went by, but she knew he was there and awake. It was a comfort.

She entered the dark animal area and went to the small tent in the far corner. The vet was sitting at a folding table just outside the flap. “I guess I’m all yours today.”

The vet glanced up from his lantern-lit papers, grunting. N*ew girl got in trouble already. Doesn’t surprise me.*

“I brought you a cup of–”

“Don’t drink coffee!” He went back to his paper.

Angela slammed the mug onto the metal table. “Good. I brought tea.” She dropped onto the damp ground nearby and lit a cigarette without saying anything else. She smoked and sipped her coffee. Her time with Marc had been everything she needed to handle being around people again, no matter how uncomfortable she felt. Whether this cool shield held all day though, was another story.

Angela hid a snicker when the vet put the paper down, anchoring it with his glasses.

“You just going to sit there? You’re supposed to work.”

Angela snorted. “You going to give me something to do? You’re supposed to teach.”

Chris blinked; he stood up with a wider scowl. “Come on.” He stomped into the shadows of the small zoo.

Angela noticed he took the mug.

They worked mostly in silence, watering and then moving the animals to different pens so those could be cleaned. She didn’t hesitate to get dirty, eager to lose herself in the labor. She was glad to be isolated as she listened to the sounds of the sprawling camp behind them. Pots banged, dogs barked, tents flapped and zipped. They were all sounds she’d missed, needed, and they were a comfort as she did what the sullen vet told her to, but they were also a source of tension. Marc was out there somewhere now; so was Kenn.

Charlie arrived not long after they started. Angela greeted his surprise with an eye-cross that got him to snicker. *I love you. We’ll make it work somehow. I promise.*

Charlie shrugged. *How? He gets angrier every second you let that man stay here.*

Angela sighed. There was nothing she could do about that. In fact, now that Marc was out of quarantine, the tension was only going to get worse. Try to hang on, for me, but also for yourself.

Charlie’s face tightened, but he didn’t reply with his first thought.

Angela knew, but he would see it in time. Marc would never hit her, and he would never hit Charlie. When they were finally free, her son would understand this mess had needed to be cleaned up so something beautiful could take its place.

**3**

Neil was at Marc’s tent at 6:30am, ready to wake him up. Marc’s lantern had still been on well after midnight, but there was no sign of him or the wolf in the foggy morning dimness.

Neil scanned for the nearest guard, then motioned toward the empty tent.

The Eagle pointed to an area outside the caution tape, where Adrian had netted off a bathing and laundry area.

Neil turned that way, uneasy. The forest was covered in a blanket of knee high, gray fog that he jogged through once he was out of sight of the main camp. *Who passes up a hot shower for a frigid and maybe dangerous dunk in the open?* Neil increased his pace. *A man with something to prove.*

Marine or not, Marc would need help today. He was about to learn… Neil crested the small hill of thick pines and stopped.

Danny, one eye a nasty shade of purple, along with two of his lazy friends, were huddled behind a mossy spruce tree. Wearing only boxers, all three men were shivering in the morning chill.

The trio heard his steps and looked up, but none of them moved.

The wolf sat a few feet away, while Marc, Seth, and Billy enjoyed a swim.

Neil burst out laughing. They’d meant to rough Marc up, and the wolf had made them into fools.

Dog’s rigid ears twitched at the cop’s arrival, but his eyes didn’t leave his targets.

Neil thought they were lucky not to have been bitten or worse.

“Tell him to call it off, O’Neil. We’re late for duty.”

“Yeah. It’s not funny. He’s getting us in trouble.”

Neil pushed his cover up to reveal amused scorn. “First, I think I want to hear how you got like that.” Neil wondered who’d beat on Danny yesterday. He knew from the coloring it had been at least eight to ten hours ago, and Marc had been in the QZ then.

“All right, Dog. Let ‘em go.”

At Marc’s order, the wolf advanced on the tree instead.

The men behind it jumped, tripping over each other. They all flushed in embarrassment when the animal hiked a leg and let go of a long stream of urine.

“Dog says piss on you.”

Neil and the men in the water laughed at Marc’s translation.

Dog, who had been waiting for his turn to enjoy the water when trouble had started, trotted to the bank and jumped in.

He paddled toward Marc, who splashed him and swam away. They began to chase each other, diving around the two men in the creek with them.

Neil kept an eye on the sullen males dressing and casting furious glares at the animal in the water. Kenn had gained three weak allies. Hopefully Marc would do better than that today. “No one’s going to tell me what happened here?”

The tone of command was clear, even to Marc.

The three men gave the answer Neil had expected–silence. They obviously regretted it and just wanted to slink away but they couldn’t. His place here was too high to be ignored. “Get out of here, children. Try to play nice next time.”

The bored sarcasm made them move faster.

Neil stepped to the muddy bank, where lush green ferns and brambles lined the steep sides of the clear creek. “Well, you’ve met the welcoming party. Ready to discover how the other half’s been living?”

Marc slapped water toward Dog, who obligingly ducked it and slapped his own paws down, drenching his human.

Marc shook his head, cold water flying as the guards laughed again. “They gonna play any nicer?”

Neil snorted, watching the animal in pleasant surprise. “I wouldn’t count on it.” He exchanged a glance with Seth and Billy as Marc climbed out. He turned in time to see the tattoo on Marc’s hip as he stripped off his boxers and used his shirt to dry himself. Kenn had one like it on his arm. Except… *Does that say Angie?*

Marc slid on his jeans and guns, aware that the savvy cop had just discovered a vital clue. He waited for the questions with a cool facade.

“How long were you Recon?” Neil watched the wolf pad into waist high sticker bushes on the opposite bank, then disappear into the thick fog.

“Eight in Recon. Fifteen in the service.” Marc pulled on his socks and boots in seconds. When he knelt to tie, he was ready for the bigger questions he saw coming.

“You’ve been in longer than Kenn. You guys served together, right? Same unit?”

Marc used the lines he’d drawn last night–honesty as much as possible. “I was his team leader. We didn’t see eye-to-eye on most things, but he followed my orders, so it worked out.”

“You were his boss?” Neil gasped, mental alarms blaring. Kenn hadn’t told Adrian that, and even lying by omission was forbidden when it came to their leader.

The two men in the water were also staring in shock. Seth and Billy immediately made plans to pass the word.

“Just for the last four years.” Marc slung his wet shirt around his neck like a towel.

Neil added the clues quicker than anyone in camp might have given him credit for. “Kenn was your second?”

“Yep.” Marc adjusted his gun belts with practiced movements. “He was communications, explosives, organizing. He was the go-to guy. Like him or not, he always got the job done.”

Neil was a little surprised to hear Marc say something good about his rival. “He does the same here. All our CBs and radios have been installed or upgraded by him. He trained all of us on this new hands-free system.”

That was child’s play compared to the temperamental explosives Kenn had manipulated before the war. Marc volunteered nothing else, asking about their first stop instead.

Neil thought it was interesting to see Marc in the daylight without the long gunfighter coat, but those matching .45s slung low on his hips said not to be fooled by how normal he seemed in jeans and a camouflage shirt. Neil chuckled. “Self-defense class is next. You’ll need it while the wolf’s out roaming.”

Marc snickered as they strode back up the muddy path, giving eye contact and casual nods, but no conversation to the few souls also coming to brave the frigid water.

Neil led them through the cover of the thick trees and swirling fog, preferring to work behind the direct view of the camp for as long as possible. He was glad to only see six people at the defense ring when they arrived.

The large circle was made from double-stacked bales of straw and set up at a distance from the main camp to distort the noise and sometimes hide the intense training that took place here. Neil often wondered how many of the Eagles realized Adrian would lose command of Safe Haven if his secrets were exposed. The higher levels were very aware of it.

As the dim orange sun began to brighten the area, the two men settled on overturned water buckets to watch. Marc understood this was the teaching staff, gathered to practice before the students came.

Three men, all stocky and dressed in black, were lined up across from a hulking, redheaded man in a dirty vest. Towering over them by at least six inches, the giant wore dusty jeans and a black Harley Davidson shirt under his red vest. The big man appeared eager. Marc hoped they didn’t plan to use body shots. *I’ve driven softer trucks.*

The trio of men moved together, working as a team; they all threw solid punches that landed and had no effect.

The huge man nailed the center fighter in the neck. He dropped like a stone, struggling to breathe as the giant’s arm flew out again.

The big man spun.

The other two joined the first on the ground, blood dripping.

“You’re done. Get out.” The big Irishman wasn’t winded.

The two men picked themselves up and exited. The third was already back on his feet despite the hit to his throat.

The waiting challengers took their injured colleague’s places.

“That’s a rule here.” Neil explained things to Marc quietly, not wanting to interrupt the practice. “There is no shame in bleeding, only in not following the rules–especially against Doug. We want people to learn to defend themselves. When he’s the teacher, you’re all right, but only men with a death wish or something to prove will challenge or accept one from Doug. He’s brutal. *Few* here are better.”

Marc stored the information, automatically putting Adrian, Kenn, and Neil into that category of *few*. There was something about the way the cop carried himself that said he could be deadly.

“Maybe 4-1 next time, eh, boys?” The big man laughed as he stepped over them and left the ring. Doug had spotted Marc when they emerged from the trees. He went toward them now, frowning darkly. *Why did Neil bring him here?* “Did you come by for a lesson?”

Thunder cracked in the distance, as if in response to the menace in Doug’s voice.

Neil shook his head, surprised. “I’m showing the newbie around. Marc, this is Doug, unofficial fifth in command. Doug, this is Marc. He came in yesterday.”

“Yeah, with Kenn’s *wife*.” This had to be the man who’d hit her. Doug couldn’t accept that Kenn would do such a thing.

“Her name is Angela and she’s not his wife.” Marc didn’t back down from the giant’s glare.

The two men shook hands.

Doug lit up when Marc didn’t flinch or pull away from the harsh grip. “You may not need a lesson, Neil, but your friend does.”

Neil shook his head again, aware of the sudden tension and the five men watching. Even those who were injured didn’t want to miss what might happen. “New people get a few days to settle in, you know that.”

Doug smirked. “Yeah. The boss doesn’t wanna scare off the new sheep.” Doug gave Marc another glare. “I think home-wreckers shouldn’t be allowed in Safe Haven!”

There were murmurs of agreement from the others, but Neil was shocked at the hostility from the war vet, who was usually hard to rile. He and Doug were friends, but Neil wasn’t sure how to handle the situation.

Marc was. His first encounters in Safe Haven had been bad. *Why should this one be any different?* It was what he would spend the coming days and weeks doing–proving himself. Marc stepped forward suddenly, so the big man was forced to retreat a step. “What are the rules?”

Doug’s anticipation faltered a bit as he noticed the dog tag and recon emblem on Marc’s arm as he unstrapped his guns. The new guy was a Marine.

“Rules?” Marc was eager.

Doug felt he had to follow through. “It’s normally over when someone bleeds, but for you, Jody, it’s done when you agree to leave Kenn’s bitch alone and get out!”

“Deal.”

Lightning flashed again, closer this time. Marc handed his gun belts to Neil, ignoring his protest.

Neil was worried about the hard looks the two men were exchanging. Hadn’t Marc heard him say only men with a death wish or something to prove…? Neil snapped his mouth shut, almost certain Marc was in over his head.

Marc entered the ring. “What happens when I win?”

Doug snorted, trying to pretend Marc’s lack of hesitation didn’t bother him. Only one guy here had that kind of sand: Adrian, who had been able to bring him down. Even Kenn had been leery of the match. “Don’t worry about that, wife stealer.”

Marc’s fury was a hard pit of ice as he swept his opponent. He evaluated, chose, and got set as Doug joined him.

“Get ready, *boy.*”

Marc felt his violent streak flare up. He let it burn, vaguely aware of rain sprinkles evaporating on his hot skin.

Doug’s confidence faltered as Marc’s expression filled with the need for blood, but it was too late to withdraw the challenge. The big man lunged forward, making Marc jump out of his reach.

Doug sneered, confidence restored. “Leave now. Last chance.”

Marc’s response was calculated. “You talk a lot of shit, big man. Where’s the action?”

Doug’s advance was fast. Marc jerked his fist up as he sidestepped, catching Doug’s nose. He leaned his weight into it, but didn’t give the final, killing shove like he wanted to.

Marc felt the bone give way under his hand as the Irishman’s heavy hit glanced off his wounded shoulder in a painful thud.

Doug screamed as blood sprayed. He dropped to his knees, cradling his nose in his hands; he struggled not to cry out again or puke from the pain.

Marc leaned down.

Doug flinched back, unable to stop from moaning.

“Don’t ever call her a bitch again or I’ll finish this.” Marc straightened. “Kenn doesn’t own her. She’ll make her own choices.”

“She can’t if you keep hitting her!” Doug braced to be hurt again.

Marc stared in shock. “You all think I hit her?” He laughed, loud and hard.

Everyone who’d thought it immediately knew they were wrong. Doug wanted to apologize, and go kill Kenn, but the pain!

“Now that we have that clear, let’s get the rest of it out of the way. We are not sleeping together; she is not a whore. She needs protection. She wants to stay here. She won’t if she doesn’t feel safe.” Marc stepped out of the ring. He didn’t feel bad for telling them these things and creating more sympathy for her with the truth. *If I can’t watch Angie’s back, at least these men will be there.*

Neil handed Marc his gun belts back as the other men gathered around Doug.

Marc lit a smoke as he waited for someone to call Adrian or just throw him out.

Neil was thrilled. Even Adrian had taken a vicious hit from Doug, and he’d had to use both fists to win. The state trooper let out a cheer the other men wanted to echo but didn’t out of respect for Doug. That kind of skill was admired here. “Did you break his nose?”

Marc was relieved, but still pissed. “Probably. Angie can tell him for sure. Unless she finds out what he said, and then she might add to it.”

Thunder boomed, but the storm was missing them as it raced by.

Neil snorted. “You sure aren’t what you seem.”

“Neither is she. I hope she isn’t being treated to this kind of welcome. She doesn’t deserve it.”

“Adrian won’t allow it here among the females, but until she makes a public choice…” Neil let the words trail off.

“Until she chooses, they’ll try to get me to leave.”

Neil was sympathetic. “It’s a close group here, and most people like Kenn almost as much as they do Adrian. They view you as a threat to the only security they’ve had since the war.”

“All I want is her happiness. No matter who she’s with.”

“People will see that.”

Marc hoped Neil was right. His anger faded into frustration. One thing was for sure; it was all going to be just as hard as he’d thought.

Neil turned to the men who were helping a dazed Doug to his feet while listening. “Two of you get him to John. The rest of you finish setting up. Students will start arriving soon. Alex, you’re in charge.” Neil lifted a brow at Marc, knowing this story would spread like fire. “Ready?”

“You know it.”

As they walked through the woods, Neil made a mental note for his nightly report. Marc would be considered deadly with his hands. It was a classification only five men here had, and Marc had just dropped one of those with only a single hit.

“I’m going to ask a dumb question now.”

“Shoot.”

“How do so many people know so much? I was in quarantine, and I know Angie isn’t saying anything, so how do they know?”

“Kenn.” Neil shrugged. “His behavior changed. It says something’s different, and of course, there’s his mouth.”

“Damn. He didn’t waste any time.”

“Can’t blame him. I’d put up a fight too.”

Marc didn’t take offense. “She’s even prettier on the inside.” He lifted a brow. “So, what’s next?”

Neil grinned. “Single women and guns.”

“Sounds dangerous.” Marc laughed. “I’m in.”

They walked a short distance through the trees to a softball field where twenty women in jeans sat on bleachers behind the gate. Men dressed like police were setting things up on home plate inside the fenced area. The guards were putting up targets and sharing smirks, but they kept their attention on each other and not the females.

Except…*they are making subtle eye contact.* Marc realizedAdrian only picked nice guys to teach this class. Probably everyone wanted to do it because the students were women and, Marc was guessing, all single. No need of a dating service here. Even the setting was ideal. Towering mountains and thick green trees surrounded Safe Haven. Marc realized it was that way through the entire camp. Not one remnant of the war was visible. He understood it was intentional, but he didn’t agree. The truth was always better. *Right?*

“Come on. We’ll talk to Billy first. He’s running the class this week. Then I want a seat next to little Becky.” Neil leered. “Her smell drives me nuts.”

Marc chuckled, matching Neil’s confident stride.

“Hey, Neil! Who’s your friend?”

The question came from a cute teenager with a firm, young body.

Neil threw a smile over his shoulder and kept walking. “We’ll stop by.”

The girl went back to her conversation with the other females near her, but Marc could feel her keeping track of them. As they headed toward the ponytailed man he had briefly met at the creek, Marc wondered if Neil knew how badly the teenage girl wanted his attention.

“Hey, Billy, got time for a level test?”

“Sure, Neil…” Billy grinned. “Yours?”

Neil snorted. “Funny. This is Marc. You guys met this morning.”

Their handshake was short, civil. Marc waited as the guard scanned him from head to boots before looking back to Neil.

“What level?”

Neil considered, letting Doug’s injury influence him a little. He had planned on a two. “Level four.”

There were murmurs from the women close enough to hear. Six was the highest level they had so far.

“You got it. Come on over here.” Billy gestured. “Marc, right?” They hadn’t spoken at all earlier. Everyone had been too busy watching the wolf corner Danny and his friends.

“Yes.” Marc followed, not sure what to expect as they stepped over to a small stack of hay bales littered with guns, ammo, hand wipes, and first aid kits. Smart, organized… It made him uneasy.

“First, take your gun apart as fast–”

Marc was already moving, hands almost a blur. Seconds later, he slapped the magazine back in and held it out, butt first, for inspection.

Billy hit the timer. “New record, though it won’t make the books without enough witnesses. Pass.”

Billy handed Neil a black handkerchief, still speaking to Marc. “We do one simple test for this level. You have thirty seconds to hit as many bull’s-eyes as you can, blind. Seven or more to pass to level four; a bulls-eye in the farthest target is an automatic go.”

Marc lined himself up with the roller-bound boards, then motioned Neil to tie the blindfold.

In his element if only for this moment, Marc fired once from where he stood. He gave his gun a single twirl, unable to resist. He could have made it from twice that distance with only a brief glance.

“Bull’s-eye! Farthest target!”

The women cheered loudly, now taking an interest in the new man.

Marc reloaded and holstered in smooth movements that drew more respect.

“Man, Kenn’s going to hate you being here.” Billy snickered. “Pass. Give him his paperwork, Neil.” Billy peered at the sheet on his clipboard. “All right. Class has started. Samantha, please. Adrian said you go first every day until you can hit seven of nine targets with one magazine.”

Neil was all smiles as Marc joined him. They stayed on the bottom row of the sturdy bleachers as the tall, skinny blonde moved toward the targets. She barely resembled the woman who had stumbled from a dying horse and asked them for a gun. She had cleaned up nicely.

*Great eyes.* Neil stared. Not like Angela’s, which were softer and changed color, but strong and attractive.

“Hey, Neil. Where ya been? Me and the girls looked for you at breakfast.”

Becky drew Neil’s attention back to her, automatically marking the new woman as an enemy.

Neil reddened. He waved at Marc as the women whispered and giggled. “I’ve been showing the new guy around.”

There were a dozen women here, all between thirty and forty-five, except for little Becky. They wore short shorts or tight jeans, bows, and flowery perfumes that made it clear they had come to snag a man. In Marc’s book, that made it time to go.

“This is Marc. He has trouble making friends.” Neil ignored Marc’s embarrassed protest. “Anything we can do about that?”

Becky glanced at an older woman Marc thought would fit into a Nazi documentary. “Hilda?”

Neil gave Marc a nudge. “*Stop glowering*.” He struggled not to ogle the bare thigh of the teenager in cutoffs next to him. Like the rest of their people, she was enjoying the warmer weather, but the sight of bare flesh was an instant draw in this camp.

Everyone was quiet, waiting for the older woman to speak. She reminded Marc of Adrian as she scanned him. *That deeply evaluating look is going to wear thin.*

“Is he useful?” Hilda paused, cracking a toothless grin. “Single?”

Neil was glad he’d thought to include her as everyone snickered. The old woman didn’t have any official authority, but when a better cook had come, Adrian had made Hilda a den mother to the new women. Those she had helped now followed her lead. If he hadn’t included her, she could have caused trouble. Neil knew she wouldn’t have, though. She was a Kenn-hater and not quiet about it. Still, with her support, Marc would have a better chance at winning over the rest of the camp. Keeping the females happy was a priority in Safe Haven. “He’ll be one of Adrian’s circle, I’d wager, and he keeps company with a wild wolf. As for the single part…” Neil shrugged. “That’s undecided, I think.”

“Then it’s true. He lusts for Kenn’s wife.”

Neil held up a hand, interrupting Marc’s anger. “They aren’t married. Kenn lied. Marc loves her. You know we don’t get to choose that.” Neil’s gaze flicked to Becky and back. “It chooses us.”

Hilda’s expression was hard. “You speak truth, but if they are already sleeping together–”

“That’s none of your business!” Marc broke in hotly. “What the hell gives you the right to …” He stopped at Neil’s horrified expression.

Most of the women were disappointed, sure he had just blown it.

Hilda waved it off. “Must be love. He is too tense to have been laid.”

Marc’s mouth dropped open as surprised laughter rang out; he was unable to keep from chuckling with them. Several of the females around the old woman were now silently offering to help him with that problem. He looked away, cheeks scarlet.

Hilda shifted on the hard seat. “The females will not follow Kenn’s lead on this. The man will be judged by his actions here.”

“Thank you.” Neil enjoyed Becky’s body heat as she subtly shifted closer. “Anything I should tell the boss?”

Hilda gave Marc another onceover. “Tell our guardian he is not seeing the true value.” The woman lifted her voice to include the guards, who had come closer to listen. “When does this class end? *Accidentally* shot Kenn’s tire, my ass! Making me do this again is cruel and unusual punishment!”

“For the men running it.” Neil laughed with them. He leaned toward Marc as the women chattered and stared. “We’re done here unless you want to stay for the show. It will probably be funny. She’s in good form today.”

Marc shrugged, uncomfortable. “It’s your call. You are my agent.”

Neil didn’t deny it. “We’ll go. She doesn’t need a bigger audience to play for.”

Marc noted the satisfied glint in the old woman’s expression as they stood up; he knew he’d pleased her somehow. Because she saw Kenn for what he was and she was glad someone had finally come who could give him a run for his money? Marc sighed, nodding a polite goodbye. He saw Becky, while facing Hilda, hold up a hand to pass Neil a small note that he betrayed no sign of receiving. *Ah. So that’s how it is.*

“It’s been a pleasure, ladies.” Neil bowed, making them all laugh again. “We’ll see you at the contest?”

There were promises and more giggles. Marc was glad when they were out of sight of the hot, female stares burning holes into him. *Angie won’t like this.* He grinned suddenly, wondering if she would be jealous. “That was fun.”

Neil shrugged. “You’ll learn to use things to your advantage too, but first, you need a foundation here. That only comes from one of three ways. Adrian’s attention is the quickest. Working hard and fitting in are good, but slow. The last option is FND. Foot in the door. Add the women’s approval to any of them and it’s an almost indestructible place.”

Marc was a little confused, but he had no problem with what Neil was trying to do. He was glad he had a friend in the guard, who clearly had a lot of pull here.

“The parking area is next. I need to find out if Kenn got the other refer truck running. Adrian plans to butcher today, so we need to get a rig ready.”

They neared the area quickly. Marc hated to admit he was nervous as the lake of vehicles came into sight. He wasn’t afraid of Kenn, but with the exception of a few, these were definitely Kenn’s people. Everything that had happened so far confirmed it. The fighter inside didn’t like not knowing what to expect.

The wide area was filled with rusty, dusty steel. Almost every driver door sported a flag, with some cars covered in red, white, and blue. It gave the area a feeling of sad honor. It only took a few seconds for Marc to understand the vehicles weren’t randomly parked. Some were being shielded. It was hard to steal or destroy what you didn’t know was there.

Marc drew in a steadying breath as they neared the group of eight men standing around the front end of a faded blue semi with an open hood and two men sitting half inside the engine compartment. He hated being nervous, but this wasn’t like fighting the enemy. He needed to maintain his cold strength and still make friends–that was so much harder.

“Hey, guys. Any luck yet?”

Marc hung back as heads turned to Neil. Marc already knew anything he had to offer wasn’t welcome.

Cold attitudes slapped him. Kenn was one of the men under the truck’s greasy hood; the mood was already aggravated.

Seth was the second man inside the truck. Marc took a chance by nodding hello. Seth had protested when Danny started on him at the creek, but Dog had handled the problem before anyone else could.

Marc was relieved when the guard returned the gesture, then looked around for the wolf.

Marc shook his head, shrugging.

“Compressor’s shot on the trailer, and there’s a short in the engine wiring. We’ll have to strip it down.” Kenn answered Neil in short tones, glaring. *What the hell is Neil doing with him?*

Marc was a bit surprised at the responding challenge in Neil’s expression. The trooper knew Kenn was on edge. It looked like Neil was trying to push him over it. *Adrian missed Kenn’s evil, but this man didn’t?* It was hard for Marc to swallow.

“We’ll help.”

Kenn couldn’t refuse Neil’s offer. He wiped a greasy hand down his dirty jeans so he could light a smoke and suck in enough air to sound normal. “Chris is bringing the truck around. Adrian wants a count.” The Marine bent back over the engine, pretending Marc wasn’t there. Giving Tonya a workout had settled him a bit.

Seven of the other men tried to do the same while listening for every word the new man might utter.

Neil spoke to Marc. “Keep track of how many boxes and crates you carry. You’ll be asked for totals when we’re done.”

“Should I count each one out loud so no one can bitch when my numbers are good?”

Neil continued as if he hadn’t heard, but he liked it that Marc was telling them he was also irritated. Neil was hoping Kenn might be goaded into doing something that would get him in trouble, but he honestly agreed with Marc. She loved him and he loved her. It was simple. “We’re moving food. Crates of bread dough mostly, but we have some potatoes, cheese, and oranges. Adrian got most of it at big factories right after the war. A lot of what we find now went bad without refrigeration.”

Marc nodded. “It was smart to check the warehouses and plants. Most people wouldn’t.”

“That’s Adrian.”

“So you need more refrigerated trucks?”

“Yeah. The dust clogs everything up. We go through a lot of compressors, but we haven’t found a big enough auto store that hasn’t been destroyed or too looted to have what we need.”

Marc knew where one was. He and Angie had spent a night there a week ago, doing tune-ups. It was a small solution to one of this camp’s many minor issues, but Marc wasn’t sure yet who he would give his ideas to.

“You don’t happen to know anything about wiring or compressors, do you?”

The question came from Zack, Kenn’s right-hand man according to scuttlebutt. Marc hesitated before shrugging, aware that none of them, Neil included, wanted him to fix this right in front of Kenn.

“Very little.” Marc was already sure the loyal ally wasn’t going to let it go. Zack was hoping for an opening to a fight and he’d just given him one.

Neil tried to move on. “Okay, then. We’ll–”

“He didn’t say no.” One of the other men interrupted Neil before Zack could.

Neil shook his head, aware of camp members stopping to observe. Tension was noticed a lot faster now. “Don’t start shit, Jeff.”

The level two Eagle gave him a cold glare. “Shit started when *he* came here.”

The stocky man glared at Neil in a way that said he wanted Adrian to get involved. Neil understood he couldn’t stop it. Marc would have to handle this one on his own.

“So, how about it, *Wolfman*? Kenn won’t mind this time because it’s not behind his back.”

There were murmurs of agreement to Jeff’s taunt.

Marc snorted. “I’m sure he can take care of it on his own in either case.”

Jeff hesitated at the cold tone of warning, thinking of Doug’s nose, but Kenn was listening, waiting. Jeff pushed harder, eager to be the one Kenn thanked, not Zack, when the new man was made to leave. “Come on. What’s a truck compared to a wife?”

Marc kept his tone cold, but calm. “Once you turn your back on something for so long that you’ve created a whole new life, it no longer belongs to you but to the one who cared for it while you were gone.” Marc knew. He’d done the same thing to her all those years ago. It gave his voice a tone of regret the men were surprised to hear. “As for the truck, if Kenn says it’s done, then it is. No one was better at shit like this on *my* team.”

Marc lit a smoke, heart thumping with awareness that he was bringing to light realities Kenn didn’t want known. He waited for the Marine’s reaction with steady, ready hands.

“You guys talk more than women.” Kenn gestured. “Here comes Asswipe with the truck. Let’s get it done.”

Kenn’s tone betrayed none of his anger or embarrassment, but his red cheeks did. A few of the men began to wonder more than they already had been. They wanted to be loyal to Adrian’s XO, but only if he was worthy of it. Except for Zack, who didn’t have much of a moral line yet, but even he was forced to admit that Kenn had been keeping secrets and then telling lies to keep those secrets. If all that stuff wasn’t true, Kenn would have argued, right? *In a heartbeat.*

While the others went to the truck as it came to a jarring stop, Marc waited for Kenn to climb down, letting them get out of earshot.

The two men stared at each other in cool dislike.

Marc didn’t want to deal with the fight he saw in Kenn’s expression, not unless they could end it all right here. “Her choice, not ours. I won’t influence her.”

Thunder swept over Kenn’s face. “You already have. She’s changed.”

“You’re the one who changed her. This is how she should have been.” He shook his head when Kenn’s eyes narrowed with more questions. “I saw an undamaged AutoZone in Lincoln, Nebraska. It’s a super center, even still had glass in most of the windows. It should have some of what you need.”

Marc stepped by him. He was surprised when Kenn wrote it in a small, glossy black notebook with lettering on the front cover he couldn’t read. He hadn’t expected the sullen Marine to listen. He’d assumed he would have to tell Neil later, but he had to try to show these men he could follow the chain of command too.

The group of quiet, tense men began unloading bags, crates, and boxes. Marc was silent, shut out of their occasional jokes and taunts. As he kept pace, he wondered what Angie was doing and if she knew the price that he would pay every day he stayed here waiting for her.

# Chapter Forty-Four

**FND**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**I**t took a lot longer than Marc had expected. They stripped the entire rig from gas to brake pads and headlights, packing and marking everything. When it was done, all of them were greasy and sweaty. They split up with little talk.

“We’ve got a few minutes if you want to put up your tent now.” Neil led them in the opposite direction Kenn had gone.

“Sure. Where?”

“See the two big tents in the middle?” Neil pointed. “Male and female. Now, see the empty corner on the left? That’s where mine was. Put yours there. I’m now in the tent on your right.”

Not understanding but almost sure Neil hadn’t gotten permission first, Marc frowned. “Is this going to get you in trouble?”

Neil shrugged. “Those are defense slots; they can only be assigned by Adrian and a couple other people. Angela is across the bonfire from you, next to the tent the women are putting up for the new blonde… Samantha, I think.” Neil studied the rippling waves of corn silk being blown around by the cool wind. *She’s kinda cute.*

“Won’t it cause problems for you?”

Neil kept staring. *She needs to gain some weight. I’ll talk to Hilda about it.*

“Neil?”

Neil blinked. “Uh, yeah, so...trouble. Maybe with Kenn, but it will tell the camp you have support. As long as Adrian doesn’t overrule it, you’ll get more respect.”

Marc met Neil’s eye at the confirmation of his earlier suspicions. His friend did have a high place. “It’s a blow to your authority here, right, if he says to put it somewhere else?”

“He won’t.” Neil waved. “Let’s get your new home up.”

As they carried things from both Blazers, his and Angie’s personal stuff was mixed up, Marc wondered what Kenn had thought about the identical vehicles. He knew it wasn’t coincidence. Marc believed it was fate that a second match to hers had been there at all. He and Angie had always been alike. All those years apart had faded for him the minute his lips had touched hers.

They were finished quickly; Marc had been putting up tents for decades. He was glad the area had stayed mostly empty because the guards covering the inside of the camp were anything but accepting. The people who walked by were also frowning and whispering as they stared. He hoped Neil didn’t get into trouble with them too.

Marc glanced at his watch.

Neil caught the movement. “You won’t be late.”

Marc kept his tone even. “He must find you handy to have around.”

Neil got them moving. “That’s the idea.”

“Where do I fit? What do you get for helping me settle in?”

Neil’s answer was honest. “Exactly what I have now–more of Adrian’s respect. He asked me a long time ago to watch for people like him. I might have overlooked you if not for Kenn’s behavior. Not many men here can compete with all he does for Adrian. Even I can’t rattle his cage very often. If Kenn considers you a serious rival, and he clearly does, then you must be one of those special people the boss needs.” Neil pointed. “Wait here.” He slid into the shadows behind the tent and vanished before Marc could respond.

Marc waited patiently outside Adrian’s tent, able to smell himself. He hated it, but he had to give them credit. The men had dealt him a tough couple of hours with the heaviest boxes, the weakest bags, the crates that were cracked, the leaking cans of gas. But they had all worked hard and felt like it when they were done. The difference was that he would smell himself longer since his boots had gotten most of the pungent drips.

“Penny for one of those thoughts?”

Marc rotated to find the breeze flirting with a high hemline of a red dress covering a sexy woman with spiteful green eyes and too much makeup. He remained silent, willing himself to feel something, anything, for the redhead. He’d noticed her around; the bright clothing was an instant intentional lure.

Tonya smiled at him. “Like what ya see?”

Nothing. *Damn it!* “You’re pleasing to look at.” Marc was familiar with the hollow ping of comparing other women to the one who haunted his dreams. Polite was the best he could do.

Tonya’s smile faltered at his disappointed tone. “Only ta look at?”

Marc trusted his first impressions. “Beauty is skin deep comes to mind. I wonder why?”

Not expecting that response, Tonya wrinkled her nose as the heavy smell of fuel came to her on the stiff breeze.

“Because it’s never been truer than with Tonya.” Adrian ducked into his tent, leaving her to wonder how much he’d heard.

“She’s trouble. Untrustworthy…the bottom rung of Safe Haven life.” Adrian enjoyed her sputtered protests. “Come on in, Marc. The whore will keep.”

Tonya stomped away, muttering.

“You probably shouldn’t turn your back on her.” Marc stepped into complete organization and the light smell of smoke. He sat in the chair Adrian motioned to. The table between them was covered in small, perfectly aligned stacks of paperwork.

Adrian removed a little brown box from the long footlocker by his made-up cot. “Good instincts. Tonya is as dangerous as the slavers, maybe more so. When they attack, I’ll have a small chance of seeing it come. She’ll try hard to blindside me.”

Marc grinned uneasily. She was the only one he’d met so far who wasn’t happy with Adrian’s leadership. “What’s her problem?”

Adrian rolled a thick, neat joint from the green buds in the box. “Power. She wants it and can’t find a better way to get it than by spreading her legs.”

Marc thought the mirrors sewn into the tops of the canvas walls were a clever way to illuminate the tent. “Neither you or Kenn are interested, so she’s pissed?”

It was an observant question that would give a confirmation if answered honestly. Adrian called those word traps. He shrugged, listening for the calm footsteps of guards walking their posts outside. “I can’t speak for Kenn, but me, no.” Adrian lowered his voice and began the bonding process that had never failed. “At least, not anymore.”

Marc chuckled, understanding the boss man had been there and hadn’t been impressed.

Adrian lit the joint, inhaling deeply. He met Marc’s eye as he got things started. “Before we talk about anything else, I have a question. A lie will get you an invitation to leave. Ready?”

“Shoot.”

“Are you sleeping with Kenn’s wife?”

Marc went cold. The Marine inside sat up and began storing information. “She’s not his wife and no, not that it’s any of your business. Angie isn’t like that.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me it’s just friendship.”

“I won’t. I’m not a liar or a Jody.”

“Sex, then. You just want to sleep with her.”

Marc snorted at the obvious. “You’ve seen her. What man wouldn’t? She’s beautiful, inside and out.”

Adrian groaned. “Oh, God. It’s worse than sex. It’s love.”

Marc said nothing.

Adrian leaned in, passing the joint. “You brought her here, and you’ll close even though you’ve already begun to realize you may never have anything more.”

“I’m not the only one with good instincts.” Marc’s expression darkened. “When it gets too bad, I’ll go.”

Adrian leaned back. “Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

Marc inhaled. “It’s the only thing left to me now that she has her man back.”

Adrian thought he would probably end up liking Marc despite the unwelcome tension that had come with him. He was miserable. Angie was right. Marc would need to be kept busy if he was going to settle in. They needed him, even if he did have an ache for another Marine’s woman. “Backing off is the right choice. They were together a long time before the war.” Adrian took the smoldering weed back as the tent flap rustled in the wind.

Marc gestured. “What if I told you I knew her before he did? That I grew up with her? Would that help me here at all?”

Adrian’s stomach tightened. *That explains Charlie.* “If people knew, yes. Childhood sweethearts?”

“Something like that.” Marc didn’t hold back on the bitterness. “I was the first hands under her shirt, the first blowjob she ever gave. I taught her to use a hammer, to swing on a tire, to smile. The first love letter she ever wrote was to me and I still have it. It almost killed us both when we were…split up.”

The two men finished the joint in silence as Adrian put the rest of the pieces together. He had thought Kenn had the clear claim, but Marc had been her first love. When war came, Marc had found her, protected her…while Kenn hadn’t searched at all. *What a mess.* “Kenn know any of that?”

“No. She doesn’t think he can handle it. I agree.”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t really know him.”

Adrian took offense. “Let me tell you what these people know. She’s his. He’s been telling us that all along. We’ve had no reason to doubt him. She was on her way to him when he found her.”

Adrian’s look was hard. The note-taking Marine inside Marc wanted to answer it. “If she was coming to him, then why is she avoiding being alone with him? She spent the night in *Charlie’s* tent. She came for her son and she was hoping to find people she could build a life with. She hates Kenn.”

Adrian knew it. He also knew Angela longed for a place with people who could accept her for what she was–special. But he also needed more of the past, more of the truth. He waited to see if Marc would reveal it to get his point across.

Marc gave the leader what he wanted. “She spent a lot of years unhappy. She deserves the chance to start over, the chance to be loved and protected. None of those are things your heavy-handed pet can give her.”

Adrian’s face turned to stone.

Marc blew out an angry breath. “I apologize. No matter what it looks like, I shouldn’t have said that, but you don’t know how special she is.”

“Yes, I do. She’ll help me more than either of the men who want her.”

Marc shook his head. “Not with Kenn. She can’t go back under his control. *I won’t allow it*.”

Adrian didn’t doubt the man would do something drastic if it was called for. “The females have power here. She can do what she wants if she can settle in and be accepted.”

“With Kenn.”

Adrian blew out smoke. “The camp would be calmed faster, but I mean it when I say female choice matters. We need them happy and spreading around all the good things that come with them.”

Marc almost believed him. If not for Kenn having such a high place here, he would probably be sold. The things he’d stored suggested Adrian was obsessive, territorial, and maybe even dangerous, but he was also one of the good guys. “You’ll look out for her?”

“Yes.” Adrian almost wished he were getting her with the responsibility. “As will others.”

Marc wasn’t sure what kind of place they had come to, but he was willing to give them the chance that most of this camp was already denying him.

“And her gifts?”

Marc tensed, dangerous anger rising to the surface. “She’s gifted with a gun.”

Adrian understood Marc wasn’t going to discuss magic at all; he respected it even as it annoyed him. “So what’s the plan for claiming her?” Adrian handed him a soda from the cooler at his feet.

Marc opened it. “Nothing. It’s her choice.”

“And if she chooses him?”

Marc was full of pain he didn’t bother to hide. “Try to make a life here, I guess. For a while.”

“So you can stay close to her?”

“It’ll be hard to leave either of them.”

Adrian leaned in again. “My next question is all about you. What does Marc need to be content?”

Marc snorted. “Beyond getting her here, I hadn’t thought much about it. I wouldn’t let myself.”

‘The life you want is here, but you’ll have to fight for it.”

Marc stared coldly. “You have no idea what I want.”

“Don’t I?”

“You may think so, but you’d be wrong. I’m a loner. I don’t fit.”

“That won’t get you what you want. I assume Neil told you about FND work?”

Marc sighed, annoyed and yet impressed by the ambush. Adrian knew how to accomplish his goals.

“If you have something to prove, I’m offering you my support.”

“Why?”

The tone demanded honesty. Adrian gave it. “Because she doesn’t want him; she wants you. That tells me you’re one of us, even if you don’t know it.”

Marc liked the words, but he only shrugged. “You talk sweet and make a lot of promises.”

Adrian nodded seriously. “Yes, and I deliver. Ask any of these people. All you have to do is what you already have been. Be patient, pay attention, and react to each situation as it deserves.” He paused pointedly. “And be useful to me, of course.”

Marc had expected it. “I can do that.”

“Good. FND is the hardest and most respected way to earn a place here.”

“I don’t understand all of it yet, but after this morning, I’m pretty sure I owe Neil a case of beer.”

Adrian crushed out his smoke, buzzing pleasantly. “Neil is a good guy. He has a cement place here. You couldn’t have a better reference.”

Marc stared. “Except yours.”

Adrian leaned down to pick up a manila envelope from his open footlocker. “You’ll have that when you need it. I have to ask you to stay away from her until she makes the official choice. I have great and shitty work for you, though a lot of it will be behind-the-scenes things you won’t get much credit for.”

The decision was an easy one for Marc. There had to be something to take the place of his time with Angie. “Like being a Marine. Shut up when someone asks a question they shouldn’t have, and fight until you win or die. Been doing it for a long time. No reason why that should change here.”

Adrian was pleased. “Good. We’ll start with the FND.”

Marc took the twin of Kenn’s notebook when it was held out to him, reading the word *Eagle* in glossy print on the front. Kenn would be pissed about this too. “Let me guess. You need someone to shovel dog shit?”

The observant leader snorted. “Close enough. I need a complete inventory and organization system for the supply trucks; maybe an alarm of some kind.”

“How many trucks and do I count supplies?”

“Just the semis for now. I also need to know what’s being used, a sign out system or something. Until it’s ready, Kenn, the cook, and the doctor will give you their lists.”

“Kenn?”

Adrian nodded. “He’s above you in rank, but on some things, you’ll report directly to me. This is one of them.”

“Sounds like fun.” Marc wasn’t anxious for all the awkward moments.

Adrian shrugged ruefully. “Highly improbable.”

“Start in the morning?”

“Yes, the earlier the better. Now, the no credit labor. I need a lethal defensive plan.”

Marc caught the tone. “You’re worried about being attacked.”

Adrian sighed. “Yes. We have food, water, fuel, women. Someone will eventually try to take them. I intend to be ready. But I don’t want a battle plan to trigger or escalate a war...”

Images stirred in Marc’s tactical mind. “You want a plan to *end* one.”

“Yes.”

Marc knew Adrian was thinking of someone specifically. Did Safe Haven have enemies? *Is that why undercover guards lurk in the shadows? I’ve been on bases with less security.*

“I want to catch them by surprise, then kill as many as I can.”

*Ah, the slavers. Adrian has big ambitions* Marc nodded. “Give me a few days.”

“My eyes only.”

“Not even Kenn’s?”

“No, but he did give me the idea to talk to you about it. He said you were good at shit like this.”

Marc shrugged. “We worked well together, but we were never friends.”

“It’s too bad you both want the same woman. You guys probably would have been great here together.”

“It’s more like ironic.” Marc stood, understanding the meeting was over. “Can’t wait to see how fate screws with us next.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Sergeant.” Adrian held out a hand.

Marc didn’t hesitate to shake. “You know it.”

Marc wasn’t surprised to find Neil waiting for him as he came from Adrian’s orderly tent. “What’s next? Roof jumping? A visit to the lion’s den?”

Neil chuckled. “We have time for one more stop before we get a shower and lunch.”

Marc snorted as they passed clusters of people going to the mess, none of them friendly. “You must enjoy your days off.”

“This is it for the week.” Neil shrugged. “I can’t sit on my ass when there’s so much to be done.”

“Point taken.” Marc’s good feeling about Neil increased. “So what’s next?”

Neil leered. “My tent for a beer and guy talk.”

Marc laughed, relieved. *Finally, something I can enjoy!* “You lead, I’ll follow.”

Neil gave him a long, searching stare. “It will probably be the other way around before long. Come on. Let’s get to know each other.”

**2**

When Neil and Marc stepped into the short mess line a while later, they were cleaned up, buzzed, and talking comfortably while ignoring the cold and curious stares.

The wind had died down, removing the chill. Neil saw Marc scan their surroundings, then sweep the forty or so people having lunch. *He’s searching for Angie.*

They got their trays. When Neil led them around Adrian’s crowded center table, the number of frowning people doubled.

Marc noticed. “You usually sit with Adrian?”

Neil nodded as they sat side-by-side, backs to the truck wall. “First time I haven’t since the day he changed my life.” Neil squirted a gob of ketchup onto his fries.

Marc frowned. “Changed your life how?”

Neil was aware of how many hostile glares he was getting, not just from Kenn, but also from the camp and the Eagles. “The day he asked for the help I’d been waiting all my life to give. For you, that’s today. You just don’t realize it yet.”

Marc acted as if he understood; he almost did. Adrian had handpicked these men, given them authority and respect. That kind of bond ran deep. “So shouldn’t you be over there?” Marc groaned as the crisp fish melted in his mouth. “Mmm… I haven’t had fish since December. This is great.”

Neil salted his messy fries. “We found a farm back in Utah and spent three days cleaning and freezing. We also kept some live tanks for when we settle down somewhere.”

Marc was impressed again. He was surrounded by order and efficiency, and like Angela had been, he was a bit overwhelmed. There were women wearing fake nails and too much perfume; dogs with bright collars walked between the trucks. Picnic baskets and coolers were being filled and noises echoed from every direction–voices, barking, dishes rattling, engines revving. But there were other signs too, like the heavy security that said it hadn’t always been this way. There were tables of men dressed as construction workers and elderly sitting at nearly every table, but it was the office types that Marc hadn’t expected. These different people were tolerating each other, bonding, finding friendships. It was amazing. How had Adrian managed it?

“You okay?”

Marc snapped out of his thoughts. “Just checking things out. Won’t Adrian be upset that you’re not eating over there?”

“I’d be surprised.” Neil dipped and dripped ketchup. “He knows I won’t tell you anything that you shouldn’t hear, but I tell him everything. You should know that now. I’m more Adrian’s than I ever was my mother’s.”

Marc heard the warning, but he was an open book. “What about Kenn? He has a lot of friends here.”

Neil tried not to frown. “He didn’t at first. It was what Adrian saw in him. He’s been in the thick of things since we found him; he got as close to Adrian as fast as he could. Some of us grumbled when he became the boss’s shadow, but when we understood how much Adrian needs him, we learned to get along.” Neil sighed. He and Kyle had to pin their hopes on somebody. “To be fair, Kenn’s earned his place here. He worked hard, and as soon as these people benefited from it, he had plenty of pals. Though I doubt he knows why. He probably thinks he’s popular because of his winning personality.”

Marc snickered. “It’s really because he’s so helpful to Adrian?”

“Yes. He frees Adrian’s time, keeps him from being overloaded, keeps him content with the progress we’re making. Anything that keeps Adrian in charge, this camp will agree to. He’s our strength, and no one, except Tonya, wants him to leave.”

Marc’s brows went up. “Would he? This is a great setup.”

Neil shrugged, watching people for problems the way Adrian did. “He threatened to once, back in the beginning. He said if we didn’t pull ourselves together and do things his way, he’d go. No one wants to take the chance.”

Marc leaned in, keeping his voice low. “Sounds a bit like a dictatorship.”

Neil wasn’t offended. “With any other man it might be, and we wouldn’t care if he left, but Adrian’s a true patriot. He loves this country. As long as he keeps giving back what was taken from us, we’ll follow him anywhere.” Neil paused, gaze going to where Kenn sat on Adrian’s right. “That’s Adrian. Kenn, well, some of us have always suspected there’s something wrong with him. You already have allies here because of your rivalry. When you can tell right off who they are–the allies, not the friends–talk to me again about Kenn and his secure place here.”

Marc was already able to guess where this was leading. “I don’t want it.”

Neil didn’t call Marc’s bluff. “You’ll have more friends that way, but not what you really want.”

Marc was heartened to think he would even make friends. He was able to give a cheerful welcome to Seth when the man sat down across from them, mug in hand.

Seth smiled. “Ain’t fish great?”

The murmur of the voices lifted another notch.

Neil shook his head at the redhead’s mischievous tone. “You’re going to piss Kenn off. He’s sure you’re his.”

“Guess it’s time he knew better.” Seth’s disgust was clear.

“He’ll make you pay.”

Seth snorted at Neil’s warning. “Kinda hopin’ so. It will take some of the heat off our friend here. Besides, it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve stung his pride.”

Neil shrugged. “No, but being sent to babysitting class had to suck.”

Seth leaned forward, leering. “Not that teacher, though I did try. Yummy, yummy, Miss Peggy!”

They all burst out laughing, drawing attention to how well the new man was fitting in.

It took the trio a moment to realize total silence was coming from the tables around them.

Marc found their leader in the tensing crowd, unaware of the connection that had already been made but responding to it. He followed Adrian’s line of sight.

Dog padded through the tables, following the exact route he and Neil had taken.

“Is he hungry?”

Marc nodded at Adrian’s question, shoving the fighter inside back to his place. “Probably. I have what he likes in the Blazer.”

Adrian was impressed when the beautiful wolf passed fingers holding scraps without even sniffing.

Dog sat at Marc’s feet and stared at him with reproachful golden eyes.

“We feed our animals at night, so they gain more weight. Stop by the vet today and pick up a collar so he doesn’t get shot.”

“We’ll do that as soon as we leave here.” Neil wrote down Adrian’s order anyway, just because it was an order.

Adrian stood and moved their way, much to Kenn’s displeasure. The center table had gotten tense when Seth revealed what most of them had already known. Adrian was almost glad to be away from the simmering man. “Okay to touch?”

Marc shrugged, not lighting the smoke he wanted in case he needed his hands free. “Dog loves Angie. She could ride him like a horse, but he tried to eat some of your guys earlier.”

“Our guys.” Adrian didn’t need to look to know Kenn was getting up, storming away from the mess. “You’re one of us now.”

Adrian let that ring as he sat on the bench across from Marc, extending his hand.

Marc slid his own toward his gun, knowing he would have to shoot his friend if Dog bit Safe Haven’s beloved leader. The camp would demand it. He tried to tell Dog that silently, but he wasn’t sure it had gotten through without Angie nearby to direct things.

Adrian also understood the risk, but he had to show them he approved of both man and beast. They would fall in line where they belonged.

Dog flinched as Adrian tried to touch him; the skin around his teeth drew back.

Adrian understood. Like its owner, the wolf wanted things on his own terms. Adrian put his hands on his knees, palms up.

Almost immediately, Dog advanced to nudge his fingers with a cold nose.

The witnesses were able to breathe again.

Adrian glanced up as his hands caressed the softest fur he’d ever felt. “Tell Chris at least purple.”

Marc knew Neil would fill him in.

Adrian’s next words were sharp and clear in the watchful silence of the mess. “Do you plan to let him roam free? Not worried he won’t return?”

The double meaning was obvious. Marc chose his words carefully, aware of the wolf placing himself between Adrian and the rest of the camp. *What is this feeling, this need to serve Adrian that everyone else feels except me and Tonya?* “You’re the boss, so his roaming free is up to you, but no, I don’t worry. I’ve never chained him. Who am I to keep him if he doesn’t want to be with me?”

Adrian liked the answer. So did everyone else who heard it. Kenn was right about this one. Marc was definitely fast on his feet. Adrian stood slowly, sweeping the curious mess as the wolf stayed by him. At least he’d converted one of the two targets today. The man would take more effort. “Level tests tonight, then the poker tournament.”

Earning scowls from Kenn’s allies, Adrian included Marc by jerking a thumb toward Dog. “Bring the wolf. We’ll see if we can get him drunk.”

Marc laughed with everyone else, but the minute Adrian was out of sight, the mood of the emptying mess became cold again.

“They’ll come around.” Neil grunted. “What you should worry about is that collar. Red is the most dangerous, with purple right below that. Only four dogs here have made it that far. If the wolf doesn’t pass, you’ll have to chain him up when you’re not with him.”

Marc blew out a sigh as he patted Dog’s chest. “Sorry, boy. Looks like I’m not the only one doing tricks.”

Marc noticed Seth scanning the shadows of the camp. *Is he checking in with an undercover guard? Yes.* Marc stored it. “Wanna come along?”

Seth nodded as he stood up. “Yeah, but I have a shift right now.” He stared at Neil for a brief second. Marc read an agreement on something.

“I’ll hear about it; heard a lot already.” Seth faded into the shadows near the path Adrian had taken.

*He’s Adrian’s guard. Damn. He’s good, coming right into the mess like that. I bet the camp people don’t know.* Marc was happy with his powers of observation, and his progress with a few people. He’d made two friends here, and that could be all the difference between sticking it out for a while and running in two weeks or a month.

Marc sighed, cleaning up his mess like Neil was doing. If he wanted to settle in with these people, he needed to earn a place by Adrian, that was clear. Marc didn’t actually want it. He longed to be alone with Angie and their son, who was avoiding him so far. But he already knew Angie wasn’t leaving. This was a good place, with good people. Safe Haven held strong survivors who needed what she had to offer; she would be stupid to go now that she knew there was a place for her.

*What about you?* his selfish side asked. *Doesn’t your happiness matter?*

Marc pushed it away. *I’m not Kenn. My needs and wants don’t come before hers anymore. I’ve already made that mistake. I’m not doing it again.*

# Chapter Forty-Five

**Testing…**

**A close up of an animal

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**“I** have to go.” Angela pulled off her gloves.

The surly vet didn’t look up from his tray. “Shift’s done. Whatever mistake you made, it’s okay now.”

Angela wiped at the sweat rolling down her neck as Charlie gathered their trash. “I wasn’t sent here. I’m on my own time. I’ll be back.”

Angela enjoyed the vet’s surprise. For some reason, she was determined to show him that not all females were useless, the same way not all men were.

When Angela arrived at Adrian’s tent, he was sitting inside the open flap at a small card table with an empty chair across from him. Angela hoped she didn’t smell like what she’d been doing all morning.

“You’re late.” Adrian was aware of how much attention followed her. Tonya was sexy, but Angela had taken the top spot in that category even when she’d been covered in months of travel. Now that she’d cleaned up, Tonya had been forgotten.

“Sorry.” Angela unbuttoned the filthy white overcoat, leaving it outside.

Adrian saw her careful look around before coming in. *Checking for threats? An escape route? Would Marc have taught her things like that? How much does she already know?*

“We were worming the pigs. I lost track of time.”

“Kenn has you on a schedule already?”

Adrian’s displeasure was obvious; she hurried to explain. “No, I volunteered. Chris needs help.”

Distracted, Adrian observed her jeans and tank top. It was what the other women here wore, but on Angela, it was so attractive that *obscene* came to mind. “That’s one of the best excuses I’ve heard. Have a seat.”

She did, noticing his tent was impeccable. He preferred things to be in their proper place. So did she, but not to this extreme. There were no personal items in sight, not a speck of dust or trash, but there were two guns on his pillow. *What a contradiction Adrian is.*

“How’s the first day on your own been?” Adrian was guessing it hadn’t been great.

Angela shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

Adrian lit a smoke.

Their eyes met over the dancing flame of the flag-wrapped lighter; Angela could feel doors rattling and voices whispering.

Adrian didn’t want to let go of the connection. He could feel something trying to happen, but the sounds of people moving by outside said everyone could see them. He leaned back, setting the hot lighter upright on the small table.

Angela blinked. The witch was telling her about new doors that had just appeared and then vanished again. Doors to the future. “Sorry. I didn’t get much sleep.”

“I won’t keep you long.”

She smiled, a genuine one this time. “It’s okay. You’re better company than Chris.”

Adrian noted her occasional glance toward the flap. It reminded him of Neil and Kyle. She was very alert for a female. “I’ve heard that. It’s why he has no help.”

“I’d mention it to him, but I’m pretty sure he already knows.”

Adrian snorted. “He should. We’ve all talked to him about it.”

Something banged outside.

Angela tensed, but didn’t draw her gun. She flashed a quick look of apology. “I haven’t settled in with all the noises yet.”

Adrian lifted a brow. “That sounded military.”

“Marc taught me a few things.”

Her tone was almost hostile. Adrian changed the subject. “Are you and Chris getting along?”

Angela shrugged. “He ignores me until he needs something. I roll my eyes a lot. Does that count?”

Adrian chuckled. “Most people take a few days to settle in, but we can start your schedule tomorrow if you’d rather stay busy.”

She nodded right away, aware that he’d recognized her need and saved her from asking. “Yes, please.”

“Good. You’ll be with John for a while, but you’ll move up to our second doctor soon. It will help the women here come to us with their problems. On top of all the other benefits, of course, but females are a priority for me. I’d like you to encourage them to tell you about any issues they’re having, medical or otherwise.”

“Sure.” Angela understood he also expected to be told what those were. He was smart to do it that way, and above most men because he knew it would work. He understood females more than even Marc did.

“You’ll pull four shifts a week with John, a self-defense or gun class twice a week, and eventually you’ll teach something, probably first aid. After that, if you have energy to burn, you’re free to volunteer for anything you want. Does that work for you?”

Thoughts of what those classes and interactions might be like came to her. Angela was again grateful to Marc that she could do more than hold her own. “Yes.”

“If you find something that fits, a certain shift or day off, tell me or Kenn, and we’ll put it on your schedule permanently.” Adrian already knew she would come to him, not Kenn. “Anything else you need?”

“Yes. I have a tent I’d like to put up. Does it matter where?”

“I had that taken care of a little while ago.” Adrian changed the subject again. “You’re welcome to sit with us at mess.”

Angela bobbed her head in acceptance, storing that. She’d needed two things upon waking this morning. Adrian had handled them both. “Thanks. What are we having?”

“Tuna helper today. Beans and ham tomorrow.”

Angela lifted a brow. “Real ham? With cornbread?”

“Yes.”

Angela sensed he wanted her to stay longer, but he also didn’t want to push her like he had yesterday. Adrian was a complicated man. “Happy butchering.” She paused. “You have one?”

Adrian nodded. “Says he was for twenty years. We’ll find out.”

She waited for more. When there was only silence, she took the hint. “Well, I guess I’ll go find out if Chris has any fingers left to flip off people with.”

Adrian chuckled, wanting more, wanting to talk, but he’d pushed her yesterday–too hard, upon hindsight. He had chosen not to bring it up today despite asking her here to talk. She needed time. He was impressed that she’d already been helping, though.

He had expected her to hide in her tent or at least join Neil and Marc, whose adventures this morning were already providing stories. Adrian was sure the level of those escapades was a bit more than even Neil had expected. Three camp members had come by to express their displeasure at Doug being hurt, but they had conveniently forgotten that Kenn had done the same thing when he first joined. Adrian had reminded them of it.

Angela paused at the flap, drawing his attention. “You okay?”

Surprised by the question, Adrian nodded. “5-by.”

The witch jumped forward. *Less stress. Your heart needs a break.*

Adrian blinked, caught off guard.

Angela left before he could respond.

**2**

Neil and Marc were in the animal area shortly after leaving the mess, walking by animals that grazed and dozed. Marc picked out sheep, goats, a small herd of cows, deer, chickens. In the corner of the small farm was a pup tent with a big desk in front of it. A large metal examining table was attached to the side of the mud-splattered vinyl. Surrounded by a thick green forest, the area had the feel of a petting zoo. There were moos, clucks, meows, barks, and under it all, the voices and footsteps of Eagles and camp members moving by.

In the center ring of this circus, a tall, angry looking man in a dirty white coat was wrestling with a big, orange cat on the metal table. He was trying to examine its bloody ears and getting nowhere.

Marc automatically came forward to help, holding the tom while soothing, rubbing. The husky cat calmed, letting the vet smear a thick, yellow salve over its wounds.

In response, Chris walked away, leaving him to keep the restless feline on the table.

Marc shot Neil a scowl as the vet disappeared into the tent without a word. “A little help?”

“That’s what you get for jumping in without asking first.” Neil snickered. “Besides, it’s just a little pussy.”

Marc laughed with him, trying not to get scratched when the cat bushed up. It had spotted the wolf.

Marc blocked its view, wincing as a sharp claw pierced his wrist like a needle, then another. Before the next one could, he followed his instinct. “No. Stop. Stay.”

Dog dropped to his haunches; the cat withdrew its claws from Marc’s stinging skin.

“Is he full blooded?” Chris had come from the tent with a syringe and a small, blue collar.

“No. At least, I don’t think so. He looks the part, but sometimes he acts exactly like a dog.”

The vet’s hands were gentle and quick on the cat as he relieved Marc of the purring feline. “You’re good with animals.”

Marc saw Neil’s surprise at the compliment. “They’re easier to make friends with.”

The vet didn’t respond to the hint. He took the cat to a small stack of carriers and put him inside. “You’ll have to register the wolf or one of the camp’s young guns will shoot him by accident.”

“That must be why we’re here.” Neil used the same level of sarcasm they were getting. “Do you have time?”

“Sure. I was about to take a break anyway.”

The words carried annoyance. Marc wished Angie were here to tell him what the man’s problem was.

“I had to leave for a while, and even though I told him I would, he didn’t think I was coming back.” Angela flashed a smile as she joined them, heart thumping when Marc said a silent hello.

Only Marc saw the vet’s expression brighten before it was quickly hidden away.

Angela went to the vet. “Sorry. Long lines.”

“I’m used to not having help.”

Marc frowned at the bitter tone.

Angela pulled her dirty overcoat back on. “I mentioned that to Adrian. So what’s next?”

The vet snorted. “Next was the cats I did while you were gone.” The vet pretended he didn’t care that she had spoken to Adrian on his behalf. It was something Kenn or Neil should have done. “Now is the wolf. We’ll draw blood and give the same vaccinations as the dogs. It’s all in the tent. Think you can find it?”

Angela moved that way without answering, aware of Marc glaring.

His scowl grew when Chris stole a quick peek at her retreating rear.

“I’ll do the physical exam first.”

Before Marc could tell him anything, the vet bent down and got busy, fingers gentle, knowledgeable.

Dog stayed still, not growling but tense, until the man’s hands slid between his legs. Then he jerked back, baring his teeth.

“Easy, boy.” Marc rubbed Dog’s rigid ears and hoped the vet hurried.

“He’s in good shape.” Chris examined the sturdy neck and the muzzle. He didn’t bat a lash when the wolf nipped at his fingers. Instead of fear, the vet flicked the animal on the nose, drawing a small, surprised yelp. “No. Stay.”

The vet continued the exam.

Marc was impressed when Dog relaxed.

The vet looked up. “Stud or worker?”

“What’s the difference?”

Neil spoke up. “We don’t have pets here. Animals are either food or security unless they’re breeders. Studding means being chained up.”

Marc frowned. “And the workers?”

“He passes an obedience course and gets put to work. He can do both, but workers are harder to breed for some reason.” Chris turned to go get what he needed from the tent.

Angela was there to hand him the syringe and a long, plastic tube with a blue ring on the end. “Very organized system you’ve got in there. Even an idiot can find what he needs.”

Chris sniggered, but said nothing as he drew blood from the wolf’s leg.

Neil was surprised when the big animal didn’t budge. He didn’t seem to feel it.

The vaccinations did draw a reaction. All done at the same time, it caused Dog to bare his teeth, but he didn’t snap or bite.

Neil wondered if Angela’s glazed eyes had anything to do with that.

“What’s the course he has to pass?” Marc fought to keep his eyes from Angie as she took the tubes of blood to the tent while writing on them.

“Commands first.” Chris gestured. “Have him do the basics. I may add some.”

Marc pointed at the wolf. “Heel, Dog.”

The animal came to his side.

Marc threw an arm out. “Up and over, by three.”

The wolf leapt almost straight up, clearing Marc’s arm. Upon landing, he repeated the exact movement twice more before returning to his master’s side.

“Pass.” The vet studied the alert animal for a moment, then turned toward the tent.

Neil blew out a frustrated breath at the man’s rudeness.

Marc nodded his agreement.

A few minutes later, they both stepped closer to the tent at the sounds of rustling clothing and grunting.

“Pull on the damn thing! It doesn’t bite!”

“I’m trying not to rip it off. It’s old.”

“That sucked! Next time, I’ll do myself!” The vet stomped from the tent.

Angela came out behind him, snickering at Marc and Neil.

Chris was wearing a padded training suit. He suddenly swung around toward Angela.

All three men saw her flinch, hand going for her gun, then the wolf flew by them, responding to her need without a single word spoken.

Those who had stopped to watch gasped in alarm at the quick blur Dog became as he streaked toward the vet.

Dog jumped for the throat and got a padded arm instead. He let go and lunged upward, latching onto small soft padding; then skin as his teeth broke through.

When Chris dropped to his knees, struggling to push him away, Marc gave a sharp whistle.

The wolf let go and backed up a couple feet. They all saw the blood on his muzzle, and on the outfit as Angela began helping Chris pull it off.

“So, we’re done?” Neil was almost glad when the vet shrugged away from Angela’s doctoring touch. Marc didn’t like it.

Angela frowned. “I hope so. He already needs stitches.” Angela handed him a large gauze pad to hold over his shoulder.

The vet’s face tightened. He retreated from her smell. “Not the first time.”

He approached the wolf without fear, something Marc respected and would remember.

“Good boy.” Chris gave the wolf a solid pat to his chest and a quick rub of its tense neck, then went to the desk to write in a thick notebook while holding the gauze in place.

The bystanders began to move again, murmuring and muttering.

Chris waved at Angela. “Red collar. Adrian will want him classified as a worker, but I’d like to try breeding too.”

Angela pulled a scarlet collar from her pocket. She handed it to Marc with careful fingers, not meeting his eyes but wanting to. She turned to the vet instead. “Next?”

Neil grinned. *She sounds like Marc.*

Chris grunted. “A real bandage maybe?”

She went to get one from his tent.

Chris turned to Neil. “What’s her story? I’ve been busy. I haven’t heard anything yet.”

Neil and Marc both frowned at him.

Neil tried to be cautious. “She’s going to be our doctor.”

The vet snorted. “I already knew that. Is she single?”

Marc rotated toward the path, scowling.

“You’ll have to ask her.” Neil followed Marc. “Thanks. Catch ya later.”

Marc paused and pointed to where Angela was coming from the tent. “Stay. Guard her.”

Dog padded to her side.

Chris understood this man was someone to her. He recognized the sharp tone of command and bowed to it. “She’ll be safe here. It’s *you* we’ll hate.” The vet turned away before Marc could respond.

Marc walked with Neil, not sure about this place, these people. Angie would be good here, he knew that already, and the wolf could defend himself. As for Marc, he had spent most of his life taking care of number one. These sheep may need a shepherd, but he didn’t. Just because he had agreed to help with some things, and do some quiet work for Adrian, that didn’t mean their boss had his loyalty. So far, that honor belonged solely to Angela.

Marc sighed, trying not to stay mad. The sour vet hadn’t told him anything he hadn’t already known.

Neil pointed. “I thought we’d join a game next. Right now, there’s soccer, cornhole, and darts.”

“Darts?”

Neil took them toward the yells and thuds coming from the opposite end of the sprawling camp. They both ignored the hard, unhappy glares of those they passed. “Adrian likes to have something on hand for everyone. Tomorrow is football.”

The field was spacious, freshly mowed, and almost empty. Twelve men were there, with no referee and even fewer spectators, giving them one corner of the area to themselves. The field was surrounded by thick trees and ankle tall grass. There were real goal nets at each end, outlined in painted white.

Marc waited eagerly as the game restarted. He had played as a kid.

“New soccer is fun.” Neil wondered if Marc had a weakness other than Angie. If he did, these men could find it.

Marc watched as the teams–one side with their shirts off–yelled and charged the ball as a group. They taunted and screamed, cheeks red as they tripped each other and traded serious blows.

Marc’s heart picked up as he followed the violent game. *Neil brought me here to prove I can take a hit.*

“You can’t touch the ball with your hands, but you can do whatever it takes to get it. First team to ten wins.” Neil thought it would be interesting to have Marc and Kenn on the field at the same time.

The wind gusted, blowing a cloud of dust over the dim field. A group of men rushing for the ball got tangled up and fell hard, drawing blood.

Three of them left the game.

Neil lifted a brow in challenge at Marc as both teams waved toward them. “We can just go play darts. Hilda’s probably there.”

The men exchanged a snicker.

Marc pulled his shirt off and led the way onto the field. *No sense ruining a perfectly good shirt.*

Other players came from the sidelines. Marc noticed they automatically adjusted the teams. Not for the first time, he was curious as to how high in the chain of command Neil was.

There were no greetings as they lined up, no chatter. Marc also wondered how much these particular men disliked him.

Someone blew a whistle.

Marc was immediately forced to concentrate on staying on his feet. He was hit hard, and not just when he got to the ball. He ducked punches and jumped over outstretched arms and legs, but he didn’t retaliate the way he had with Doug. He made contact, but he tried to be neutral about it even though the men brought him down every time they could. There were big hits, as well as a couple of dazzling steals that caused men to yell, point, cheer. The small crowd along the sidelines started to grow.

Neil hung back for the first half hour, letting Marc continue to do what he’d done all day–prove he belonged.

**3**

“Out!” The ref examined the newest injury. “That needs stitches.”

The score was now five to one, with Marc’s team losing. The crowd had grown to about thirty. When play resumed, Neil was at his side again.

“You’re back.” Marc was sweaty and bloody. He had scratches and bruises on his arms, back, and chest.

Neil nodded. “You’ve shown ‘em you can hold your own alone. Now, we’ll show ‘em you’re also a team player. Stick close.”

Marc wasn’t sure what Neil had in mind until he slammed into the first guy to challenge their progress with the ball, sending him out of the game with a nose gushing blood. From there, they were unstoppable, alternating as they traveled the field, one moving, the other protecting from as many sides as possible. When the game ended, seven to ten, Marc wasn’t ashamed of the loss. They had played hard and he’d loved it. His teammates hadn’t protected him, but they had been impressed when he defended them.

When they reformed for game two, Neil and Marc had more men on their side than they needed.

“I’m in for this one.” Seth joined them, removing his shirt.

Marc saw the other men adjust teams again. *Seth is someone important here too.* It appeared he had lucked into two powerful friends. “Threesome?”

Seth nodded as the wind gusted, bringing the scent of rain and decay. “Neil and I have been hoping for someone who can keep up. Too bad they won’t let the wolf play.”

They all shared a laugh.

“Stick close, gentlemen. I’m in the mood.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “That means he’s set to piss people off. Get ready to be hit.”

Marc’s grin widened, thinking he’d been hit already. Then the whistle blew.

They ran together, shoving through the pack that included some of their own men.

Neil kicked the guy with the ball in the leg, knocking him out of contention so Seth could get it. He and Marc ran block, taking and giving nasty hits. Losing their worries in the competition, they scored repeatedly.

Each time, a roar echoed from the crowd that was now yelling, betting, and enjoying time away from thinking about all the hell they’d survived.

**4**

“Preparing your own meat, class one. Today, we’re slaughtering a pig and a cow. We’ll put ropes around the hind legs, pull them up, then slit their throats so the blood will drain. Tomorrow we’ll skin the carcasses, clean them, cut them, and freeze it all. First, is equipment and preparing the area. We need rope. Measure it by the weight of the animal. For a cow, the rope should be how thick, XO?”

Kenn grunted, digging strong, yellowish coils from the various boxes stacked in front of the trees they were about to use. “At least three inches. Measure it with your three middle fingers side by side, like this.” Kenn held his hand up.

“And for a pig?”

“The same. Pigs are smaller, but not lighter.” Kenn kept digging out gear. “It’s mostly fat and fat is heavy.”

Men were sitting on truck bumpers, hoods, and the ground, listening intently. Adrian’s classes always had an energy their other instructors lacked. He was always the first one to start new things, to try a new setup. When he taught a class, everyone wanted to be there, no matter the lesson.

Adrian waved. “Tell us what’s first, Doug.”

“Canopy over the top.” The big, bruised, bandaged man was embarrassed but determined not to let it interfere with his normal job.

“Protecting your food supply begins by protecting the area where it’s processed.” Adrian dug out a large green tarp and two staple guns as he talked. “We’ll have to refine this, like we do everything else now. Two important things are bird shit and predators that will be drawn by the smell of blood. Who knows why the shit is more important than the predators?”

“Because of E. coli?” one of the rookies asked.

“Exactly. No shit of any kind near any food. One piece of infected meat will kill everyone in this camp.” Adrian let that sit for a moment. This was his newest group of rookies, but after tonight, a fresh level would take their place. He had no doubts about their passing. This was one of the strongest groups he’d put together since Seth’s team.

Adrian scanned his camp.

The short bathroom and shower lines told him people were missing. The faint, excited voices said something was happening *in* his camp, not outside of it. Adrian tried not to worry. Kyle would handle things or call for assistance. “Who can tell me how we’ll put the tarp over first limb? Without climbing.”

The fourteen men considered, exchanging ideas, and again, Kevin had an answer. “We’ll staple ropes to each side and shoot it over with arrows.”

Kevin was among the few men he was considering for leadership. Adrian was pleased. It was exactly what Kenn had come up with. “Any other ideas?”

There were, of course, but none as simple. No one spoke.

Adrian looked around. “Best shooter here?”

Everyone glanced at Kenn.

Adrian gestured him forward. “Who else?”

Logan, a tall, bald, private investigator from Utah stood up nervously. “I’m next, I think. Kenn got me by one shot on the last test.”

Adrian nodded as another roar echoed from the camp behind them. Louder this time, it made his guts tighten. “One miss is all it takes. Okay. Let’s do this.”

It went about as smoothly as the taking of a life by amateurs can: Adrian’s cut was deep enough to kill; the steadiers were a little squeamish but willing. The pulling was a little too rough, but the branch held and the tarp directed the pungent mess. Less than ten minutes had gone by, and the pig carcass was staked three feet off the ground, draining; fires had been lit in the corner cans to keep the bugs away.

Adrian and his men took a minute, being careful not to put bloody fingers on their lips while they smoked.

“We’ll have two guards here tonight, and motion detectors, so remember that when you come for your tests.” Adrian was eased by the motion he got from Kyle, who had come to the edge of the caution tape. Everything was under control. “All right. This time, Jeremy and I will supervise. Who’s cutting and who’s steadying?”

It didn’t go as smoothly with the cow, or nearly as fast. The crew had to fight to get the ropes around the animal’s stomping hooves. The mess was considerable, but they did finally get the job done.

“Class is dismissed. We’ll resume at dawn.” Adrian signaled Kyle over while the team washed up and repacked the gear.

Both men frowned when Kenn left without a word to any of the blood-splattered Eagles.

Kyle blew out a frustrated breath. *Where did this Kenn come from?* He was nothing like the helpful, resourceful XO they were used to.

Adrian stared at Kenn’s stiff shoulders. “Where do you think he’s going?”

“Where he shouldn’t be.” Kyle caught the attention of the nearest Eagle on duty; he followed the angry Marine.

“Observe only?” Adrian turned to avoid a strong gust of wind as he lit a smoke.

“Not anymore. Kenn’s been over there three times today, watching while she doesn’t know. I changed the order on my last round. If there’s a problem, the Eagle will interrupt and say you want him, but not why.”

Adrian thought Kyle was wrong about Angela not knowing Kenn was there. “I don’t want the Eagles to oppose him openly if we can help it, but pass the word among the higher levels. She’s under my direct protection. I want her to be treated as if she’s my heir and doesn’t know it. Stress the secrecy part. If it gets out too soon…”

Kyle shook his head, mind racing. “It won’t. You can trust us.”

Adrian filled with pride. “I do, most of them. I trust *you* completely.”

Kyle didn’t need to ask if the story was true. He was reading it in Adrian’s face. “Kenn thinks he has that honor sewn up.”

Adrian watched clouds gathering in the west. For a change, they appeared to be moving below the thinning layer of smog instead of through it. “Right-hand man. No higher for Kenn. Ever.”

Kyle felt a heavy weight roll from his shoulders. It had been a single, short conversation with Neil during one foggy morning shift, but he had felt terrible since then–like their pact to challenge Kenn for leadership if anything happened to Adrian made them traitors.

“I always knew.” Adrian’s tone was compassionate, approving. “You have great instincts, like Neil, but your secret isn’t one, and it wouldn’t be a betrayal anyway. The natural order is already in chaos. Kenn in charge would tilt us over the edge. He’s already where he belongs. He just hasn’t realized it yet.” Adrian sighed at another loud roar from the gaming area, sure Neil and Marc were involved. “Did everyone check in? Where are the other new people?”

**5**

“Mom?” Charlie tapped on the tent. “Kenn is waiting for you at the parking area. He said to hurry up.” Charlie stuck his head in.

Angela tensed, causing the pregnant orange cat to sink a claw deep into her wrist. Chris was taking its temperature.

“He said you’ll go to dinner with him after that.”

Angela hated hearing Kenn’s orders coming from her son’s mouth. “I’d rather stay. Do I have to go to the contest?”

“No.” Charlie stared at her, eyes saying *yes*.

“I can grab a sandwich later?”

Charlie nodded, not wanting to be the one to tell Kenn.

“Bring a double tray.” Chris didn’t look up from the clipboard. “She’ll eat here.”

“Deep six that!” Kenn marched into the large, smelly tent, glowering at Angela. “You’ve been in here long enough. It’s time to go.”

The dogs started barking, reading the tension. The vet wasn’t the only one who noticed, though he thought he was.

Angela sucked in a breath. “I’ll eat here. We’re about to start with the kittens.”

Kenn pointed at the flap. “Leave now, and maybe you’ll come back later.”

Angela tried not to shake. “I’m not ready to go.”

The vet frowned. *Who is Kenn to her? I thought Marc was her owner.*

Kenn glowered harder. “You’ll do what you’re told!”

“I’ll stay as long as I want!” Angela hated him as much as she ever had. When she’d told Marc that she didn’t want Kenn dead, she had lied. She just didn’t want to be responsible for it.

Kenn’s hands curled into fists before diving into his jacket. “Angela.”

It was an ugly tone, hinting at violence. Charlie retreated a step.

Chris saw Angela’s hand sliding for the gun on her hip; he stood up, drawing attention as the dogs continued to bark and transfer their unease to the other animals around them. I*t will bring the guards soon.* The vet didn’t wait for backup. He didn’t need it. He knew how to handle this. “I wonder what Adrian would say?”

Kenn’s face was a surprised mask of anger as he glared at the annoyed doctor. “Stay out of this! It’s none of your business!”

Chris shrugged, sensing the Eagle now in the doorway. He always knew when he was being watched. It was an effect of being in a POW camp for seven years. “You brought it in here, not me. She said she’s staying. Get lost!”

The vet wasn’t afraid of him. Kenn knew if he pushed any further, the doctor would put it in his report to Adrian. Kenn stomped out of the tent, furious profile promising retribution.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. He had been checking up on her all day, sending hostile waves of warning. She’d known she would have to face him eventually, but she hadn’t expected the woman-hating veterinarian to defend her.

Before she could thank him, Chris shoved another pregnant cat into her gloved hands, taking the orange one. “When it’s time, bring a double tray here for your mom and do it openly so he can’t hassle you.”

Charlie was pale. “You sure?”

Angela gave him a tight smile and reinforced the choice. “Yes.”

Charlie left with worry still burning in his heart.

Angela knew he was right to feel that way. Kenny was a dangerous foe who never forgot a transgression. In case all this self-control was play acting, she would avoid being alone with him. So would Charlie. Kenn was on the edge. She pitied the person who finally sent him over. They probably wouldn’t survive the encounter.

# Chapter Forty-Six

**Right on Target**

**A tennis player with a football ball

Description automatically generated**

Night Two

**1**

**N**eil and Marc’s team won the second match. As the dim sun started to sink below the grit, they left the third match, up by two points. Invitations to join their teammates for the meal were accepted.

As they walked toward the shooting area, Marc lifted a brow at Neil. “Did you plan all these encounters?” He paused to adjust his gun belts. “Or, did you get just lucky it turned out so well?”

Neil met the eye of a nearby guard for a check in and got a nod in return. *Clear*. “Both, I guess. I set up the hands. You played ‘em perfectly.”

Marc grinned. “Thanks. I need all the help I can get.”

“That’s what Adrian said. Come on. Let’s see how you handle yourself under pressure.”

Marc fell in step, tired, sore, and not nearly as wound up as he had been. “Today wasn’t pressure?”

They laughed together, moving with the thickening crowd toward where he had taken his gun test. The sound of a large crowd floated on the cool breeze.

Marc dropped back into cool and ready when the mob came in sight, noting guns, hostile attitudes, and hard bodies wanting to back up the glares. On the outside, these people were nice and normal in their jeans, jackets, and pain-lined expressions, but underneath, they had a glint of madness that Adrian hadn’t been able to erase yet. The leader still had a lot of work to do.

Wishing there had been time for a shower, Marc was a bit self-conscious as they merged into the first constantly shifting group of about a hundred. Marc was careful not to bump anyone, but he didn’t shy from those who intentionally got in his way. He scanned. There were blondes, brunettes, balds, redheads, and older, slower blue hairs everywhere, but no Angie.

The second crowd of people relaxed in lawn chairs and on blankets around two sets of packed bleachers. In this group, Marc and Neil were stopped repeatedly for congratulations on the games or for introductions to those who had heard about it or about Doug. They were only a little friendlier though, and a lot nosier. Marc could hear them whispering about him and Angie, and about Kenn.

Neil gave him a sympathetic look. He gestured at home plate, where bales of hay were stacked two deep in a neat half circle. “We have to sign in.”

Marc felt an immediate change in the atmosphere as they went around the chain-link fence, especially from these front rows of camp members. These were the people who had been here for hours to get good seats–the real fans of Kenn and Adrian, and every other shooter except him. They let out a cheer as he and Neil got into line, eager to see him beaten.

Marc tried not to be upset that most of the people here would be happy if Kenn just shot him instead of the targets, eliminating the problem. As it was, Kenn was now talking angrily to Adrian while casting furious glowers at Neil.

Marc dug for his paper as Neil held out a hand for it.

Neil leered. “Wonder how red he’ll get this time?”

Marc chuckled. Kenn had definitely rubbed the trooper the wrong way.

Neil handed the green sheet to Adrian, locking glares with Kenn.

Marc was impressed by Neil’s sand. It made him try harder to conceal his own anxiety. *Being alone hasn’t been healthy for me. I’ve become skittish around people…again.*

“He’s good. Get signed up.” Adrian handed the paper back, waving off Kenn’s protests.

The furious Marine stomped to the far end of the line, face thunderous.

Marc put the paper in his pocket. “If he didn’t hate you before, he does now.”

Neil nodded, both of them turning toward the field as four spotlights came on. “He already did. Kenn thinks I’m after his place at Adrian’s side.”

Marc tested their new bond a bit. “Are you?”

Neil grinned across the line of shooters, silently taunting Kenn. “Negative, but since it bothers him to think it, why should I say different?”

Marc laughed. “I knew I liked you.”

The men signed up and got in line. While they waited, Marc noticed a lot of space between them and the other shooters. He was glad Neil stayed by him. There were several hard stares from the other end of the line, but especially from those surrounding Kenn. Zack’s glares were bordering on dangerous. *I might have to watch out for that one.*

Seth was a few spots down, talking with Doug, whose taped nose and discolored face was drawing a lot of attention from the camp people who hadn’t heard about it yet. Marc met Seth’s eye; he nodded to him.

Marc’s gut tightened when both Seth and the burly man next to him stepped out of line and strolled his way.

Marc’s hand tensed; he knew a little more of how Angie felt when he had to fight not to draw on the pair. He really had lost some of his edge.

The first few rows of people went still. Marc could feel them waiting to be avenged, as if he was a part of the old world that still needed to be punished.

Tension rolled over the crowd, drawing more of the rear groups forward. The practice fire from the contestants stopped as Doug locked glares with him. The big man’s eyes bored into his as he and Seth stopped a few feet away.

“This time, no flinching,” Marc warned. “I’ll finish it.”

Doug held out a hand. “Welcome to Safe Haven.”

Marc shook, just as surprised as the disappointed and muttering crowd.

“Good luck. You’ll need it.”

“Thanks. You, too.” It wasn’t much, not in the grand scheme of things, but it was significant to these people. Marc could tell by the fresh fury on Kenn’s face. He’d thought Doug was one of his too, especially after hearing Doug had tried to stand up for him.

Seth stayed by Marc and Neil as Doug went back to his place in line; all of them openly enjoyed Kenn’s anger.

Kenn spat toward the big man.

Doug flipped him off.

Everyone laughed.

*It’s been an interesting day with Angie’s man out of the QZ.* Neil gestured*.* “Doug’s never been knocked down with a single hit. Only two men have brought him down at all, and some think Kenn cheated with the kick to the balls.”

Marc was able to imagine Kenn doing it that way. He would have been declared the winner when Doug couldn’t get up, but Marc was almost sure Adrian hadn’t liked the way he’d accomplished it. Adrian also probably didn’t like how his men were now deserting Kenn, but Marc loved it. Let the Marine suffer a little of what he’d dealt out over the years. How many new recruits had Kenn sent packing with stupid jokes and extra labor? How many female Marines had he harassed until they’d transferred out? *What does Adrian see in Kenn that outweighs all he’s done?*

Marc couldn’t think of a single thing.

Kenn was having another difficult day. Though he’d managed to avoid putting his hands on anyone, he had a sinking feeling the teetering edge was about to fall. That feeling of doom had arrived when Marc stepped into the shooting line; he glared at his former team leader, bitter. *I should have sniped them both through the window.*

Marc didn’t see it. He had spotted Charlie threading his way through the crowd. He locked gazes with the boy who was clearly surprised to find him in the contest. Charlie looked older than fourteen. His face carried the same lines of horror as the rest of these people. His jeans and black jacket couldn’t hide the pain he’d suffered while away from his mother…and father. *How’s your mom?*

Charlie stiffened, stopping well away from Marc.

Marc sighed. It was so unfair he’d never gotten the chance to be Charlie’s dad. It was years they would never get back. *I’m sorry. You’re the only one I can ask.* Marc could feel the battle raging inside the teenager. He let his pain bleed through their connection. *I love her. I always have. Does he?*

The other shooters were warming up now.

Marc lit a smoke, waiting, hoping…

*She’s tired and lonely and in danger, and I hate it. Let her go so he’ll stop being mad!* Charlie glared. *He’ll hurt her. You have to leave!*

Marc didn’t answer. When the MC asked Marc if he wanted a few warmup shots, eager to see what he could do, Marc refused. Knowing Angie was unhappy, *in danger*, had put him on edge again. Marc surveyed the setup activities, nerves gone. This was when he was at his best.

Adrian stood on the pitchers’ mound and faced his people. Slowly, everyone quieted to a low murmur backdropped by tents flapping in the cool breeze. He was calm, reassuring, happy with the way things were progressing. His pleasure was their light in the apocalyptic darkness; they always responded to it.

Adrian lifted the mike. “Who will your winner be?!”

The crowd roared in answer. Kenn’s name was the loudest.

“Well, let’s find out. We’ll eliminate one person from each round until level five with a single shot each, then it’s two shooters gone each level until we have a winner or need a duel.” Adrian gestured at Kenn. “Our previous winner will go first. Kenn Harrison, best gun in camp!”

The crowd let out another loud cheer as Kenn strode out to home plate.

Marc could hear betting going on behind the fence now. “Can I use my own weapon?’

Neil swept the shadows at the edges of the tape*. Crowds and noise often draw trouble–rookie lesson four.* “Most of us do. Any piece is okay as long as it fires. Adrian keeps extras on the bales for those who don’t have their own.”

Kenn pulled the trigger once, arm barely moving.

“Bull’s-eye!”

Kenn flashed a peace sign.

The camp roared again in response.

The Eagles waited to see if Marc could match him; they wanted him to beat Kenn. The title didn’t matter.

The next man up was someone Marc hadn’t met yet–a sandy haired man with the feel of a worker.

He couldn’t match Kenn’s shot. Almost none of them did. When Doug took his place, only Seth, Neil, and Marc were left to shoot in round one and no one had matched Kenn yet.

Doug found Marc again and gave him a nod of recognition, doing it for the camp’s view. He’d been wrong. He wanted to show everyone that Marc had his support now.

Doug drew in a tight breath and fired. His shoulders slumped.

“Out of bounds! No hit!”

The crowd groaned and cheered as the big man came to stand with Neil and Marc.

Seth went to take his turn.

“Vision’s a little blurred.” Doug was amazed someone smaller than Kenn had brought him down with one hit. He had considered Kenn to be his only real match here. He had too much respect for Adrian to even compare. The leader would always come out on top.

Neil scanned the bleachers of happy people. “What did John say?”

Doug frowned, then grimaced in pain. “He said next time I think about talking to Marc, I should just shut up.”

Neil laughed.

Marc silently agreed, watched Seth pull the trigger.

“Bull’s-eye!”

The crowd voiced their approval as Neil took his place. He smirked at Kenn’s open glare.

Neil counted to three, blowing out a calming breath. He wanted to still be in it when Marc and Kenn went head-to-head.

Neil pulled the trigger.

Marc knew it was good.

“Bull’s-eye!”

The noise was deafening. The crowd was louder for Neil than anyone else, even Kenn.

Neil blew on the barrel of his gun for their amusement.

Marc realized Neil was more a favorite than Kenn. Neil was high up here. Fourth or better, because Doug was fifth, and Marc had already met both first and second. *Who else here is in Adrian’s service?*

“Is there another shooter?”

Doug gave him a firm nudge.

Marc stepped toward Adrian. As he handed his weapon to the boss for inspection, he was aware of how many men tensed at his action, seeing it as a threat.

Adrian checked the Colt, then held it out to Kenn, who did the same, but much slower.

Kenn gave it back, barrelfirst, to its owner.

The crowd quieted, leaning forward.

Marc took it without hesitation, not responding to the silent threat.

Adrian waved them on.

Marc rechecked his weapon as he approached home plate, unwilling to pretend he trusted Kenn.

His actions drew frowns from those who understood what was going on, but it also said he was used to keeping himself alive. He was a survivor, like them, whether they wanted him to be or not.

Stewing about Charlie’s words, Marc saw the bullet slam into the center of the target. He drew and fired in a fast, smooth motion.

“Bull’s-eye!”

The response of the crowd wasn’t a cheer, but a mix of surprise and disapproval. The men in front, Kenn’s men, exchanged uneasy glances. So far, the new guy was a match for him in every way.

The Eagles exchanged the same uneasy looks, but they all hoped it wasn’t a fluke.

Marc smirked at Kenn’s unhappy glare the same way Neil had, then he joined the chuckling trooper.

Adrian held up a hand for quiet. “Doug is eliminated. Move the targets.”

Marc listened to the people betting chores, shifts, guns, and luxuries. He didn’t hear his name yet, at least not with any support, but he didn’t let it bother him. There was plenty of time to become popular. First, he had to show them that he could hold his own if he chose to stay.

“What’s the duel?” Marc followed Neil as they all lined up again.

The crowd continued to mutter and murmur.

“Just that. Adrian picks the target, but the shooters can challenge each other to something more specific, like plates or cans. They go until someone misses.” Neil reloaded, smirking. “I have a feeling we could see one tonight.”

At the start of round two, Kenn got another bull’s-eye.

Marc didn’t care. He forced himself not to scan the crowd. He wasn’t sure whether Angie was out there, but he knew any contact between them was forbidden. He could feel their son’s attention, but he wasn’t sure if Charlie might be rooting for Kenn too. It made Marc more determined to drive in the point he’d been making all day. If he decided to stay, he would *not* live in Kenn’s shadow.

The rounds went quickly. By the fifth turn, it was clear that Kenn, Seth, Neil, Marc, and Kyle were the best. All but the trooper had scored perfect on every shot.

The watching camp was stunned. The Eagles were thrilled.

“We’ll eliminate two each round now, and every bullet in the magazine counts. First shooter will go last, last shooter goes first.”

Marc blinked at Adrian’s words, caught off guard. As he moved to the plate, he was aware of Kenn’s gloating glare. *Shouldn’t he be mad to go last?*

*He doesn’t care so long as it rattles you enough to miss.*

Charlie’s message was thrown in a hesitant blur of hope and confusion. Marc also picked up the unsent plea. *Be good. Be what we need.*

Marc got set. *I am both of those, son.* He drew in the same easy blur.

Adrian and every member of his command knew it was good before the call came.

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

A small cheer came from parts of the crowd this time.

Marc didn’t look at Kenn as he switched places with Neil. The Marine was ready to pick a fight, and do it openly.

Adrian also felt it. He glared at Kenn.

Kenn glanced away, ashamed. Good sportsmanship was high on Adrian’s list.

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

The crowd let out a roar of approval as Neil and Seth traded places.

Marc ignored it all and wished he was alone with Angie and Charlie.

**2**

As the tenth round came, it was down to the five of them; Kenn, Kyle, Neil, Seth, and Marc.

Adrian was pleased when all five men again scored perfect. They were good. *What a force we’ll make against the slavers!* “We’re having a duel!”

The crowd cheered.

Marc listened as Adrian explained.

“We’ll do saucers first, five in ten seconds, then five in five if needed.”

Seth stepped forward to begin the round, guns crashing. Marc watched him struggle to hit the small white plates as Adrian tossed them up.

“Three hits.” Adrian noticed his bodyguard rejoined Neil and Marc. “Who’s our next shooter?”

Realizing they could go in any order, Marc stepped forward.

Everyone fell silent. Not as many hostile gazes were on him now. He motioned to Adrian that he was ready.

Marc shot the plates out of the dark sky. He didn’t struggle, didn’t miss. His Colt cracked rhythmically as he aimed and fired, fired, fired. He pulled the trigger twice more; china exploded.

Marc gave his gun a twirl before holstering. He was pleased with the small cheer he got in response. Now he heard his name being bet on.

Marc rejoined Neil and Seth. This part of Safe Haven he could come to *need*.

“Five hits. Next shooter?” There was deep pleasure in Adrian’s voice, the kind each of them longed to be the cause of.

Neil stepped forward. He wouldn’t be able to match that kind of shooting. He hoped Kenn couldn’t either. Marc was better than good.

Neil was ready for the first two plates, but the third fell too fast. He missed it, along with the fourth. He got the last one before it hit the ground. Ceramic dug into the dirt as it shattered.

When Kyle came up, Marc narrowed in on him. The stocky guard had been quiet all during the contest, not hanging out with Kenn’s or any other group, but mingling among all of them. As Marc watched, the mobster picked off four of five plates. Marc placed it. *That’s Adrian’s other officer*. Kyle was the missing link in the chain of command.

Everyone fell silent as Kenn prepared to shoot. The contest was Marc’s if the Marine missed even one.

He didn’t.

“Five hits!”

The crowd pushed against the gate and each other, screaming, red-faced.

Marc wondered how Adrian would calm them down.

The spotlights went off, throwing them all into darkness.

Marc dropped low as panic swelled through the crowd.

The lights flashed on, showing Adrian in the center of the field, cords in his hands. He unplugged them once more to make sure he had gotten his point across, then lit them back up. His demeanor said to settle down.

They all read it, moving back, helping those who had been knocked down.

Adrian jerked a hand toward Kenn and Marc. Both men were in the same crouched, ready position–as were most of the other shooters, none of whom had left yet despite being eliminated. “We’ll do five in five now.” The leader took a half dollar from his pocket. “Reigning champ picks. Call it in the air.” Adrian flipped the coin up.

“Heads.” Adrian picked it up. “Heads, it is!”

Kenn took his place as Marc watched from his small group of allies. Instead of pushing the jealousy from his mind, Kenn stared at the four of them, recognizing the friendships he’d been fighting for but hadn’t earned. He had thought differently with Seth and Doug.

When Kenn turned to Adrian, his hands weren’t steady enough for this task and he knew it. Kenn was unable to think of a delay; the plates began to fly.

The throwing was smooth, one each second.

Kenn nailed the first three. The fourth shattered when it hit the ground.

He picked off the fifth with slumped shoulders. *Marc’s better than that after half a bottle of Jack. Damn it!*

“Four hits.”

The crowd’s cheer wasn’t subdued.

Marc knew he should let Kenn win, but the thought of all the taunts he would have to endure, and the renewed respect everyone would have for Kenn, wrapped a cold band of determination around his choice. If he wanted to make a life here, one he could tolerate, he would have to show them he wasn’t second to Kenn. He needed to win.

Marc motioned as he came forward. He let his hands take control. When the plates went up, he blew them out of the air almost as soon as Adrian tossed them. He spun, fired, fired, fired. The last slug took out the final plate as Adrian let go, making the leader retreat to avoid the shrapnel.

“Five hits! New Champion! Marc Brady!”

The crowd exploded again.

Kenn advanced with his hand out and his rage held in. They shook quickly.

Kenn and Zack pushed their way through the mob of people who had rushed the field.

They congratulated Marc, yelling and patting. The three elated Eagles with him protected Marc from all the hands.

Adrian finally relaxed about Marc. One day out of the QZ and he had already made a name for himself. Things would start happening now. Those moments would be hard and dangerous, but worth every risk. Adrian wondered how high Marc would climb. Based on what he’d observed today, that was unknown. Settling in and expanding his goals from Angela to this camp would be the turning point. When that happened, Marc might go higher than anyone expected.

Until then, he would be worked into the ground.

# Chapter Forty-Seven

**Ft. Haven**

****

**1**

**M**arc pushed away his tray, yawning.

“Don’t wimp out yet.” Neil grinned. “You have two stops left on this introduction tour.”

“Why?” Marc scanned the crowded mess. *No Angie.* “Is there someone we haven’t pissed off yet?” He met cold stares and threatening glares as his gaze traveled the bright dining area. He swallowed a sigh. Winning the contest meant little to these hardened survivors now that they were off the field.

Neil snickered. “We’ll attend the bonfire party for a few minutes, then spend some time in the far south corner of camp. That should get the last of ‘em.”

Marc had begun to frown as he spotted Rick in line, a few places behind Samantha. That was another problem Adrian had. Marc understood there wasn’t proof, but he didn’t agree with the saying about keeping your enemies close. “The south end. Isn’t that area off-limits to me?”

Neil was glad Marc had paid attention to the map and rules he’d been given. Neil met Adrian’s stare across the crowded, noisy mess. “You need to be a part of everything he’s got going on here. Your first day with us will be the one we remember clearest. We’ll hang at the bonfire, then watch the rookies take their level test.”

Marc swept the perimeter. He found guards searching him with speculative expressions. Marc nodded to them.

As if on cue, the men all faded back into the shadows at the same time, vanishing without a response. *What the hell was that?* “You include the beer and joint in there somewhere?”

Neil laughed. “Right after we’re done here. Hurry up, will ya? I need a buzz.”

Marc chuckled. He let Seth draw him into a conversation about the wolf at their feet. Seth’s welcoming wave when they arrived had caused Kenn to grit his teeth and pass the mess instead of joining Adrian’s loud center table.

The picnic table Neil and Marc were at was a double; they were surrounded by the men they’d played soccer with and against. The females from the gun class were in the seats next to them. Samantha was sandwiched in the middle and looked like Marc felt–uncomfortable.

There was a lot of flirting between the two tables. Marc saw little Becky’s gaze go to Neil repeatedly. *Something about the note*, he thought. Marc couldn’t stop himself from scanning again for black hair and blue eyes.

“She’s not coming.” Kyle sat on the bench by Neil, He put his back to their table as he studied the one that he’d just left. “She’s with the vet. Said there’s a lot to be done.”

Marc heard the approval, the admiration. “Let me guess. Kenn said she couldn’t, so she stayed all day to prove she could?”

Kyle’s lips twitched as he scanned the sentries, doing a check in. *Clear*. “That’s the story. I’m sure it’s true to a point, but really, I think she’s just avoiding all of us.”

Marc sighed. That was his Angie. She wouldn’t rock the boat unless she had to.

“Congrats by the way. You’ve made it to the top of his list.” Kyle assessed the new man ruthlessly. This was Angela’s chosen mate if he was reading things right. *Is Marc worthy of her, of that honor?*

Marc frowned. “What list?”

“Kenn’s death list.” Neil shrugged. “When he snaps, we’ll know it first.”

Kyle slapped the trooper on the shoulder. “Neil here made it to second after today, and Seth now has third locked up, so at least you’re in good company.”

They all laughed as Kyle moved toward the line for a refill. It drew more attention to Kenn’s complaints and warnings. It was clear that he’d lied.

**2**

Adrian was pleased. It had been a good day. Marc had made real progress; Angela had shown she wasn’t afraid of labor, and his people had come through another momentous change together. They had realized his choice for second in command had serious flaws. Now, it was up to Kenn to prove he could control the things that had broken him in the old world. He would either accept Marc and Angela had a place here or he would endanger his own.

Lingering over a third cup of coffee as the mess emptied and the camp went about their nightly rituals, Adrian was glad when it was only the cleaning crew left. Quiet minutes to think were hard to come by.

Adrian hated it that Kenn hadn’t come to the table for the evening meal, but it was great that Marc was handling himself so well. He now had friends in high places. Adrian couldn’t help but ask himself if maybe it wasn’t too late to remove…

No. Marc would never give him the total commitment that Kenn already did. The Marine was born to be his right hand; Adrian had to believe that. When Angela made her final choice, Kenn would deal with it and things would settle down. Until then, he had plenty of work for all of them.

Cold wind spun through the mess, carrying a thick chill. Adrian was suddenly exhausted, but a bonfire party, a level test, a poker game, and rounds still waited. He sighed, draining the last dregs of cool coffee from his mug. Then, there was the gleam in Neil’s eye that had warned he wasn’t done getting Marc noticed. Adrian opened his notebook and started searching for anything he might have missed.

**3**

“Tell me more about how things work here.” Both men kept an eye out for Kenn and Zack in the shadows as they headed to Neil’s tent.

“What would you like answered first?” Neil was curious what was at the top of Marc’s need-to-know list.

“How often do you travel, where are you going, who decides what?”

Neil liked that. It was exactly the order he would have chosen. “We’re on the road three or four days a week, sometimes more. We have camp meetings every month to decide where we search next. As for the decisions, that’s all Adrian. Where he leads, we’ll follow.”

Marc nodded. *That, I get*. “When are you on the road again?”

“*We’ll* be moving out at 9am, day after next to collect food supplies one of the scouting missions found.”

Marc kept his voice low. “Is it a secret, where you’re going? Is that why you avoided my question?”

Neil wanted to celebrate. Kenn had a lot more competition than he knew, and not just for Angie. Marc was beyond sharp. He was the edge of a well-tended razor. Definitely a better match for Adrian’s right. “It’s more unknown than secret. We search, we vote, we search some more.”

“But…”

Neil frowned. “We don’t know. He hasn’t made a final choice.”

Marc realized Neil was uneasy about that. “You guys have been traveling since…February?” Marc was trying to give the file in his mind a creation date.

Neil finished his Mountain Dew and hooked it into one of the two flaming cans they were passing. “Kyle and I have been with Adrian since almost the beginning. Doug came in January. Seth was the first week in February. We’ve been traveling the entire time. We average a month in each state, picking up supplies and survivors. We’ve come to trust Adrian’s instincts as much as you do Angela’s. If he says we go on, we do.”

Marc scowled. It bothered him that people were noticing her strangeness.

Neil felt his new friend’s sudden worry and guessed at the cause. “Adrian hasn’t picked a final destination yet because we haven’t found one he thinks we can live in for long. It’s one of the things he has us watching for. Adrian is building a future for us where one doesn’t exist, but he can’t do it alone. He needs strong help who will support him even when the unpopular choices are made.”

“You mean like going into the caves.”

Neil blinked. *There’s that razor again*. “Yes. He loathes the idea, the same as the rest of these men, but there will be a bad winter this year, whether it comes in August or January. If we can’t locate a place and get it ready, we won’t survive until spring, no matter how well he cares for us. The first winter will be hard, and maybe even longer than we’re used to. He’s teaching us as fast as he can, but there are nights he doesn’t sleep. Can’t, I think. He wanders, thinks, hunts.”

Marc didn’t meet Neil’s eye as they stopped by his dark tent. “I can help. I have ideas, things I’ve noticed since I came in.” He paused, reluctant. “Should I give them to Kenn and keep proving I can follow the chain of command?”

Neil motioned Marc to follow as he ducked inside and flipped on the dome light. “Give it to Kenn if it’s small shit that you can’t believe he missed. Otherwise, always Adrian. Have a seat.”

The tent was a copy of their fearless leader’s, but Marc was glad to see jeans on the floor and papers scattered about. Adrian’s neat canvas bothered him, especially the lined-up change. *Who spends time doing that when money is no good now?* “Why not give them to you?”

Neil handed him a dripping beer from the cooler, with a paper towel. “Because I’m really not trying to climb those ranks. I can’t fill Kenn’s shoes. Adrian knows it. I suspect you could, though.”

Marc shook his head.

Neil waved it off. “You don’t want it right now. Our understanding came quicker. The things we loved the way you love Angie were gone, and he was exactly what we needed, always full of hope to balance our grief. Once he helps you find happiness, the need to repay him, to serve him, will overwhelm you the same as it did the rest of us.”

Marc shrugged. *Unlikely. The leader here is hinky. I don’t know how yet, but I’m sure he’s hiding something huge. I hope I don’t have to dig in and find out what it is...because I will.*

**4**

Kenn had ditched his pals and spent evening mess in his tent, breaking in the new punching bag he’d put up but hadn’t used yet. He didn’t bother with the gloves or tape, though he had both in his duffel bag. Kenn cast fast, furious shadows on the canvas walls as he let out the humiliation, anger, guilt.

*If only I hadn’t hit her!*

That’s why the Eagles were turning on him. He shouldn’t have corrected her physically, no matter how much she needed it. His old temperament fought with the new man he was becoming, driving his fists. When Kenn finally headed for the showers, his breathing was hard; he was dripping sweat. Kenn saw two new tents up on the female side, one of them across from where Marc’s had been placed.

Fresh rage churned in his gut. People would suspect she had done it because she was scared. *Are they right? Is she?* Then how could she keep resisting? She had avoided him for the two days she’d been here, but the whispers were still awful. Waves were sloshing over all sides of his rocking boat.

Kenn brushed off those who wanted to offer condolences or support, ignoring questions and hard stares. He went to the showers, stewing. He had five days before Angela confirmed what everyone was thinking. Five days to keep it all from blowing up.

How? What will it take to get her back under control?

*Nothing,* his mind insisted flatly. *She might not tell them, but in return, you’d have to let them become a couple.*

Kenn flinched, letting the cool water beat on him. He couldn’t do that.

His icy heart spoke up. *Lie? Tell her she’s free and try to win her back. Use her son. She owes you.* The voice was ruthless. *Release her, then beg her not to split up the family you have. Don’t say she owes you for keeping Charlie alive, but think it so she’ll hear it.*

Kenn’s mind kept talking; he began to feel better, putting the right words together. He could do that. He’d been playing roles all his life. While he wore her down, he would keep Marc busy with nasty chores designed to at least make him complain and become known as a whiner. Kenn hoped it would run Marc off, but deep down, he knew it wouldn’t. The only one who could get the bastard to leave was Adrian, and that wasn’t happening.

Kenn sighed, drying off. He would help with the level tests like he always did, then he’d spend a couple hours on schedules while waiting for Angela to hit the showers or bathrooms. He would be able to see both of those from a dim corner of the mess. She would expect him to be on duty again, like last night.

First, he would suck it up and do rounds, along with anything else he could think of to earn back points. Adrian was also a wild card, as well as an ace in this deck. He had to be careful not to make the boss think about giving his place to Neil or Marc. Both men were definite rivals now as far as Kenn was concerned. He was glad there would only be one of them around for the next two hours, but he was still dreading them all being together in Adrian’s tent later for the poker game he wasn’t sure he had been invited to. *Man, life sure changed fast for me.*

**5**

“This might get ugly. More people will support Kenn right now, but Adrian has the final say.” Neil felt he had to add another warning. He didn’t want Marc blindsided this time. “There is a chance he’ll side with Kenn.”

“Shouldn’t you ask him first?” The two men stood in the darkest shadows behind the row of semis that hid Adrian’s fort. Marc didn’t really want to be here. He was unable to keep from comparing all this tension to recent nights spent by a fire, alone with the only woman he’d ever loved. “We don’t have to keep doing this. I’ve been a loner all my life. Why should now be any different?”

Neil rounded on him. “Because of the war! Why else? Our country needs us.” Neil studied him. “Don’t you feel a sense of duty anymore? The one that kept you in the Marines for so long?”

Marc didn’t answer. He couldn’t lie and say he felt nothing.

“You stayed for the highs and the adventure, but mostly because you believed you were making a difference in the world, that you mattered.” Neil gestured. “You can have that here, but it’s better because Adrian is worthy of that kind of respect and loyalty.”

Marc said nothing, not wanting to argue with his new friend.

Neil sighed. “It comes down to how bad you want a chance with her.”

That got Marc’s full attention. “I don’t understand how swearing myself to someone I don’t know, or trust, will give me a chance with Angie.”

“Would it help to know that she has? Sworn to him, I mean. She’s already been…looking.”

Marc wanted to be surprised but he wasn’t. “All I see is an abusive man was given a place of authority here.”

Neil tried not to get mad. “That’s Kenn. Doubt him, like the rest of us, but never Adrian. He would give his life for anyone here. Kenn hid it. Adrian will take care of that, but in his own time and way.”

“I’ll try; I will, and I appreciate what you’re doing for me,” Marc conceded. “God knows I need it, but if she chooses him, I don’t know how long I’ll stay. You may be doing all this for nothing.”

Neil decided he’d played nice long enough. “You’d leave behind the love of your life and *your son*?”

Instead of the lie that sprang to his lips, Marc let the survivor inside handle it like any other hostile situation. “That means Adrian knows. Does Kenn?”

Neil was impressed by Marc’s reaction and pleased with himself for figuring it out. He hadn’t been sure. Kenn and Charlie did look alike. “Negative, and not one of us would ever tell him.”

Marc scowled. “Us?”

“Adrian’s circle. Kenn’s the only one who hasn’t put it together.”

Marc spent a moment considering. “The Marine I know would have suspected it by now. My bet is that he does, but he thinks it will tip the camp in my favor. He’s acting like he doesn’t, so it won’t come out.”

Neil stared. Hadn’t he often thought there might be devious things going on in Kenn’s mind? “You know him better… Does he have that much self-control? Shouldn’t he have at least confronted you or her about it?”

Marc now wondered if that had been the rage behind the slaps on the drive here. “Maybe he has. You should ask her, so we’ll both know.”

Neil repeated his earlier question. “Would you really leave?”

“Yes. I’d rather die than be here for that.”

Neil wasn’t sure he believed the man, but he wasn’t sure he didn’t either. “I’ll take my chances. In return for all my hard work, I’d ask that you not talk about anything you see tonight, and that you keep an open mind about what kind of future you want here. Two days is hardly enough time to know.”

“I agree, and thank you.” Marc smiled. “On my own, today would have been ugly.”

“It’s not over. Kenn will put up a fight the second he sees you, but Adrian won’t let him shoot you. Neither will I.”

Marc snorted. “You didn’t like Kenn on first sight, did you?”

“Nope. I know a problem when I smell one.” The level five Eagle waved a hand. “Welcome to Fort Haven.”

# Chapter Forty-Eight

**Pushing It**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**K**enn was enduring all the remarks by pretending Seth had won the shooting contest.

The ball of festering anger was mostly gone now that he had a plan of action. He didn’t expect Angela to give in quickly, not with all the support here, but he had things left to try. Kenn wasn’t sure if he could start over. However, it was significant that he was even considering it; his heart thumped in denial when both of his rivals came from the trees into the training area. The two men were laughing and talking as if they’d been friends for years instead of a day.

*Probably about me.* It was yet another slap in the face for Neil to bring him here. Kenn cautioned himself to be careful. Adrian was also here. He couldn’t lose control. He could put up a fight though, and he would. “He’s not allowed to be here.”

Every head swiveled as Neil and Marc stopped by the flickering bonfire.

Neil’s tone was full of open contempt. Here in the fort area, he didn’t have to hide his emotions. “Says who?”

Guards murmured in surprise at the direct challenge; three dozen men chose that moment to get a better view.

Kenn tossed his smoke into the fire. “The rules. He’s not one of us.”

Neil shrugged. “Yet.”

Kenn looked at Adrian.

Everyone except the trooper was surprised when Adrian shrugged.

“You don’t need me for this.”

His bored tone made Kenn flush.

Neil gestured. “The rule is no unauthorized personnel. Marc’s authorized.”

“By who? You?!” Kenn was furious.

“By Adrian. The rules he made before you came still exist. The contest winner gets the title, no toilet crew while he’s the champ, and he’s offered a place with the new rookies.” Neil’s voice sharpened. “Marc is going to be one of us, whether you want it or not.”

“I’ve never heard that rule.” Kenn’s voice was as cold as the wind, but inside, he was burning.

“We have the crews mostly covered now. Back then, we needed warm bodies on posts any way we could get them. Once they were shown the fort and evaluated, they were put to use. All of them are still Eagles. We don’t use some of the old rules very often, but we do still need good men. That hasn’t changed.” With no note of accusation in his tone, Neil’s expression still overflowed with it.

Kenn hated him, knowing he had lost again. “He hasn’t been evaluated.”

Neil blew out a frustrated breath at having to drive in his point. He enjoyed drilling people. He didn’t like being cruel. “He’s as good as Kyle and his team. You just don’t want anyone to know. Give him a test. He’ll pass.”

“Not right now.” Adrian admired Neil’s ambush. “We’re busy. Marc stays. Let’s get going.”

Kenn snapped his mouth shut on another complaint.

Every man waiting to be tested suddenly hoped they didn’t draw his name for the cage.

“Who has inside?”

Doug motioned at Adrian’s question, swollen nose starting to fade into deep shades of purple and yellow. “Me. Kyle insisted we trade.”

“Good. Pick your first sacrifices.”

The big man pointed at waiting rookies.

Marc stayed by Neil, taking a minute to do as the trooper had asked–gather information.

The tent behind them was gigantic, shut on three sides. The outside area was lit by lanterns and the bonfire, as was the smaller tent to their left. Marc saw efficient organization and no boredom or signs these men were being forced. There was only a strong determination to succeed that he recognized from green recruits on the base, and from himself. These men wanted to be here.

“There’s a reason we’re here.” Adrian’s words got immediate attention. “There’s a reason we’ve made it this far when so many have not. There’s a reason we were spared.” Aware that he would have Marc’s ear for the next thirty seconds, Adrian used the time as well as he could. “It wasn’t luck or coincidence, or even skill that brought you here. It was fate. We were chosen to save our country.” He met Marc’s eye before glancing at his men. “More of us are coming. We’re not complete, not even by half yet. Together we’ll be strong enough to start over, to keep America alive.”

Adrian paused, voice hardening. “Now, if that’s too much for you, or you don’t want to think about the future, or you just don’t care, then you shouldn’t be here. Doubts are normal, but they don’t belong in my army. When you’re done and you want out, it’s okay, with no fights or bad reputation. These are things I tell rookies during their first tests. You’ll hear it repeatedly as you pass through the levels because I need you to believe in it as much as I do or this won’t succeed.” Adrian gave Doug a gesture. “They’re all yours. Be gentle. It’s their first time.”

The other men laughed as ten nervous guards followed Doug into the privacy of the tent.

“I’m out here for a while; then we’ll go in.”

Marc nodded at Neil to show he’d heard, watching a large black hat get passed around the remaining males. Each man drew a slip of paper from it, followed by groans or grins.

Marc hung back as Neil joined Kyle and Kenn by the smaller tent that sported a number of banners, an American flag, and a simple name: *The Cage.*

“Trainers.” Adrian held out another black hat to Kenn, who drew a paper and passed the hat to Kyle. Neil also drew a slip.

“I have…number one.” Kenn growled for drama.

“I’ve got Kenn. Shit.”

Kenn snickered at Kevin. The rookie had just gone green.

“I’ve got Neil.” Seth was full of arrogance and unintentional disrespect. “You’ll take it easy on me ‘cause we’re buddies, right? You scratch mine and I’ll do yours?”

“Maybe, if you blow me.” Neil leered. “I only give special treatment to my bitch!”

Loud, mocking laughter echoed from the listening men. Neil never spoke that way in front of the camp.

Seth’s amusement faded, hearing the tone. Neil wasn’t kidding. “I thought we were friends.”

Neil took off his gun belt. “We are–the best–but here and now, that means shit. I’m what stands between you and level three status. I won’t just give it to you or anyone else.” Neil finished his warning as Kevin and Kenn entered the cage. “What we’re doing here matters.”

“I know that.” Seth tried to apologize. “I was just running off at the mouth.”

Neil’s frown didn’t change. “Yes, you were.” He left Seth off balance, unsure what to expect.

Marc saw Adrian’s glance of approval and understood that here in Fort Haven, it was all about the lessons.

Adrian held up the stopwatch. “This is simple. My dog tags are in a corner of the tent. Return them to me, and you pass. The limit is ten minutes.”

Kevin’s fight was almost an exact copy of Seth’s first test. Marc also felt that moment when the cab driver realized he wanted this bad enough to keep going despite the pain and the odds.

When Kevin’s bloody hand held up the metal tag, Adrian was there to take it.

Marc joined in the cheer, connected to them in spite of himself.

“Time?”

Kyle had the clipboard and stopwatch. He glanced at Adrian. “I forgot to hit the button. Have him do it again.”

Kenn spun back toward the cage.

Kevin’s face fell, making people laugh.

Kyle gave the real call. “Four minutes, fifteen seconds. No record.”

Adrian hadn’t expected one from Kevin. “Pass. Go to Doug. Next match.”

Neil and Seth entered the cage.

True to his word, Neil had no mercy on his friend.

Marc was impressed with Neil’s command of his body as he smoothly blocked, tripped, and kicked.

When Seth finally started to get mad, Adrian gave Neil a subtle signal.

Neil circled Seth. “Where’s our friendship now?”

Seth shrugged, dripping sweat as he kept moving to avoid the traps. “Rules are rules. I’ll follow ‘em.”

Neil crooked his middle finger. “Come on, then!”

Seth came in low, sidestepping at the last minute to avoid the trooper’s leg sweep. He landed two hard fists to Neil’s gut that forced the man to retreat.

Neil recovered fast and delivered a roundhouse kick that knocked Seth to his knees. “Do it again! Do it right!”

When Seth tried to, Neil got him in the shoulder with a knee.

Seth lunged.

Neil used Seth’s momentum to slam him to the ground. “Get up! Be an Eagle!”

Seth was on his feet a second later; his angry swing made Neil grunt.

Seth hesitated to hit his friend again.

Neil’s uppercut was brutal. It sent Seth back to the ground. “Never hesitate! Don’t you want this?!”

The cops were both bloody and drenched in sweat, but Neil didn’t even sound winded. *Third in command and definitely on that dangerous list,* Marc confirmed for his mental file. Neil was also a lot more than he appeared.

It took Seth almost the full ten minutes, though Marc was sure Neil could have held him longer. Everyone except Kenn was glad to see the two men sharing grins when it was over instead of harsh words.

“Pass. Go to Doug.” Adrian waved. “Kyle’s next. If you drew his number, hold it up and he’ll pick one of you. If you just came from inside, get a number out of the hat and get ready.”

Kyle indicated the larger of the two men who had his number, giving the stocky rookie a menacing stare.

Neil returned, bottle of water in hand. “This should be interesting. Kyle and Adrian suspect he’s gay. They want to expose it to the Eagles.”

Marc tensed. “By beating it out of him?”

Neil took a long drink as Seth ducked into the tent. “It’s not funny how some of the worst shit always seems to have a place, but here, it does. If you can’t fight, this is the wrong career choice. Better that he finds that out now.”

“It does sound like the same old shit.” Marc’s voice was low, telling Neil he hadn’t forgotten where they were, but his tone was offended.

“Try it from another angle; it might help you to understand. What happens in the future when we settle down? Do the problems go away or start up again?”

“It turns right back into what it was, but it’ll take time for that to happen.” Marc grunted. “There’s no need to handle it now.”

“Adrian’s vision of our new world does not include the problems of the past.” Neil pointed out the enormous difference. “He’s tackling *all* of them at the start, trying to eliminate the future threats to our survival. This is one of them.”

Marc could feel himself getting angry. “How did the gays cause the end of the world?” *The things these people tell themselves!*

“The same way the wars we were fighting did, the same way unchecked immigration and economic threats did. Smoke to blind us, it succeeded. No one knew what the government was doing for those years before it all fell down. We were too busy being part of the problem and killing each other over the scraps from their table. It was the same around the world. We let the war happen because our differences divided us.”

Adrian frowned at Neil’s limited understanding of the master plan on this issue. Kyle knew the truth. Eventually, both women and homosexuals would be a part of his army. There was only one way for either of those to happen–a representative had to step up and carry the heavy duty of being first. With the gays, Ray was their champion. Adrian already knew how this match would go or he wouldn’t have allowed it to happen yet. The females didn’t have a champion. None of them wanted to learn how to take a hit or shed blood.

Adrian moved toward the cage, giving Kyle a negative motion when the mobster would have enlightened Neil and Marc. Like with Angela’s gifts, homosexuals in his army had to be handled one step at a time. First, was exposure. After that, was reaction and possible recovery from lying about it in the first place. Then, the respect for not quitting would show up. If Ray got that far, more would come of it.

“But beating them? What comes next, banishment?” Marc was struggling to keep the conversation private. “How will that fix a future problem?”

Neil ignored the sarcasm. “It won’t fix it, but it will eliminate it from *this* group. And not by bad methods, either. Ray volunteered to be an Eagle. He wasn’t singled out, and if he honestly thinks he can be one of us, truth has to come first.”

“Why not just talk to him?”

“Because he already lied by pretending otherwise. He leers at women, says he has a thing for Becky. It’s gone too far for a simple conversation. He’s hiding.”

“And the camp agrees with Adrian handling it this way?”

“The camp doesn’t know we have homosexuals here!” Neil was horrified. “If they knew, they might kill them. Adrian wouldn’t be able to stop it. That was a part of the old world, and these people will turn into wolves at the sight of it.”

Marc let that sink in. Adrian was trying to protect them? *No*. Adrian was one of the wolves watching for the old world too. He didn’t want his camp to turn into a lynch mob and maybe lose leadership. “Why not just tell him to leave? Why go through all this?”

Neil let out a disappointed grunt. “You’re so quick on the pickup that I forgot you’re a rookie here. Look around, Marc. What does Adrian’s leadership scream, more than anything else?”

Marc wasn’t sure what to say.

Neil waited, certain he would get it. They all did.

Struggling, wanting to understand how they could all be okay with such horrid reasoning, Marc pushed by his anger to think about the Safe Haven he’d seen but hadn’t wanted to acknowledge. “Light…hope… He cares about them.”

“Not just about the ones already here, but about *all* life. You’ll see it in time.” Neil sighed. “Even those we turn away, he misses.”

It clicked for Marc. “He wants the gays to stay.”

“More than that. He hopes for their differences to be admitted to and faced.” Neil understood more than Adrian or Kyle thought he did, but Neil didn’t think it would ever happen, so he’d given Marc that view first. “They can be gay; they just can’t lie about it. Lying made the old world go round.” Neil signaled toward the cage, where Ray and Kyle were starting their match. “That one, however, might not go further no matter how good he does. He’s lied too many times. For anyone to be accepted in Adrian’s army, that’s the number one thing you never do to the boss. We can’t forgive it.”

Both of them were thinking of Kenn as they turned to watch the match.

**2**

Eight minutes later, Kyle hadn’t taken a single hit, and the rookie was on the ground, bleeding and gasping for air. The dog tags were still in the far corner.

“Get up!” Kyle pointed. “Get up or get out!”

Ray struggled to his feet, all pretenses gone with the pain and blood, as the trainers had known it would be. “I belong here too!”

“Prove it. Be a man!”

Ray came in too low, letting his anger at the insult drive him.

Kyle used it to throw him to the ground. He smirked in satisfaction when the rookie let out a cry that was feminine.

Marc saw Adrian’s signal. When Ray got up, swinging wildly, Kyle let the hits land. The football coach darted for the tags.

Metal in hand, Ray’s fists clenched when he realized he had to get by Kyle again to give them to Adrian.

“Don’t hesitate. I’m just a man.” Kyle was surprised the bleeding rookie hadn’t given up yet.

“Yeah, one who loathes me.”

Kyle shrugged. “All our enemies will hate you. Your belief in yourself has to overpower that fear. If you can’t control your need to hide or beg for mercy, you won’t survive here and neither will any of the others who think we don’t know about them.”

Ray started to lie again.

Kyle got angry. “Why don’t you leave? Take your friends with you!”

Ray’s glazed over as he advanced. “You keep them out of this!” He drove his head into Kyle’s gut, taking them both to the ground.

As the buzzer sounded, Adrian was there to take the tags the panting rookie held out.

They both stood; Kyle moved toward where Kenn stood.

Adrian stared. “Pass.”

Ray gawked at him in disbelief, breathing rough. Blood dripped from numerous cuts and small gashes. “What?”

“You made it into my army.” Adrian’s voice softened. “You’ll pay a higher price for it than my other men.”

Ray lifted his chin. “Because I’m gay.”

“No.” Adrian was proud of the man, but he didn’t let it show. “Because you’re not one of us yet.”

The rookie’s face fell inward, collapsing until he was almost on the edge of tears.

Marc swallowed a snide thought. *Everyone feels an urge to serve Adrian. Is it in the air? The food?*

“The war came and blew it all away. We’ve started over, but you’ve been lurking in the past, not sure which way to go.” Adrian gave Ray the rest of the truth. “Some people will never be okay with it; some people will never forgive you for hiding it. All I can promise is the chance to pave a path for others like yourself. You’ll work twice as hard as any man in my army, and you may still never get the peace and acceptance you long for. Be sure, Ray.”

Adrian’s gaze shifted to Kenn’s unreadable expression. “You can survive here while continuing the old ways. A lot of things that are discreet will be tolerated, but unless you change, you’ll never be an Eagle.”

Ray’s voice was icy. “You mean go straight.”

Adrian shook his head. “Change is different for every man in my army. The only wrong choice is lying about it. The truth always shows up at some point. Doug is waiting in the tent for you.” Adrian turned to the other men. “Next matchup in the cage is Neil. If you just came out, draw a number from the hat.”

**3**

An hour later, Marc and an exhausted Neil entered the big tent. The pungent smell of hay filled their noses.

Doug gestured. “We’ll all match for a few days.”

Neil laughed. “Yours is a better color.”

The two men gave Marc a pointed look.

He understood it was another way they would be able to help. Conversations over black eyes wouldn’t just be about him and Kenn.

“The small hay room is an improvising test. The men have a certain amount of time to make something from what’s there, usually a communication device.” Neil pointed things out as Doug went by. “The cubicles are the same, but each level goal is harder.”

“Do you use your own list of ideas or what Adrian and Kenn provide?” Marc watched Seth’s fingers fly over a nice 9mm that his blindfold kept him from seeing while he did it.

“Both. For Doug, who served, it’s also okay to invent his own.” Neil gave him a glance that said Marc would also use his own experience when he got this far. “The big hay room is memory, alertness, thinking. They may have to stare at doors, then use the clues on them to find someone or something. Another level might be asked to view things, then get hit with questions when they come out, like what color were his socks, which window had curtains, or which target had a grenade. The higher the level, the harder the questions. Each member of the team must pass six of seven parts. If two or more of them fail, none of them advance and they all repeat the course with the next group. Adrian’s goal is to have all the camp’s men in training by the time we settle somewhere for the winter.”

“And the women?”

“Eight ways to start a car with a dead battery. Now!”

They were both distracted by Doug ambushing a pair of guards who had thought they were done and drawn his attention with their high fives.

The two men stammered answers.

Neil pointed to a dark corner that wasn’t being used. “Let’s go over there so he doesn’t get us next for distracting them.”

Marc thought about repeating his question but realized he didn’t need to. After watching all of this, he knew the answer. There were no women here because this was man’s work. Few females would have the courage to try, let alone be strong enough to succeed.

*Angie does. Angie is*. Marc pushed away the thoughts. *She won’t want this…* Marc didn’t want to explore that any further. He wasn’t sure he could take it. “I’ve only counted six tests. What’s the seventh?”

“Adrian’s approval. You either have it or you don’t.”

Marc frowned, confused. “He didn’t give it to Ray, but Ray passed.”

“Ray earned it by the rules, but some things will not be accepted by these people yet. What the camp is against as a whole, I am too.” Adrian’s voice rang out as he and the last group of men came into the dark tent behind them. “Ray passed the tests, but the camp’s approval and mine go together.”

Marc nodded. They had his back, and he had theirs. God help those caught in between.

“Have you decided to accept the winner’s slot with my Eagles?”

“Of course.” Marc knew the right answers to give. “If you’ll have me.”

Adrian nodded. “I will, but I must ask. Why the change of heart?”

Marc was aware of Kenn’s furious visage in the group of thirteen Eagles behind Adrian. “I haven’t had one. I just think it’s a good way to spend my time. I like to stay busy.”

“Not enough.” Kenn sneered, stepping by him. “That’s not enough to get you your own team. They won’t follow you for that reason.”

Marc snorted, ready for the big confrontation if it had to happen now. “You’re the only one hoping for power and control. The rest of us just want to survive.”

There was a thick silence where most of the men expected a fight.

Kenn lifted a corner of the flap. “I’d never betray Adrian that way and he knows it. He’s my first priority. You’ll never be a true Eagle until you can say the same. Your loyalty is to a woman; that won’t be enough to earn you a place here.” Kenn stepped into the cool night air, voice a low mutter. “I’ll see to it.”

**4**

Angela was more than tired by the time Chris said they were done for the night. She had stayed for many reasons, but the biggest was his defense. The vet hadn’t given the impression he wanted to talk about it, which was good, because everyone else sure did. He didn’t want a thank you, so she’d given him her help instead. By 11pm, every animal had been watered, fed, bedded in clean areas, and they had finished repacking everything and put it all away.

“It’s late.” Angela used lotion on her chapped skin.

The vet blew out their light, then gave her an unexpected smile that revealed a handsome man. “Not for me. I’m usually here until 2am.”

“Hi. I’m Angie.” She held out a hand, feeling like she’d made a little progress. She was pleased when he didn’t hesitate to shake with her. He even added a heartfelt apology as the wind blew garbage from the forest around their boots.

“Yeah, I’m Chris. Sorry. I’m not sociable. It’s why I treat animals and not people.”

“You do all this once a week?”

He nodded.

She turned to go, Dog heeling smartly. “I’ll be here next week, as long as they don’t have me scheduled for something else.”

Chris stared as she and the wild, yet trained wolf vanished into the dark forest. She was smart, quiet, hardworking; he was already looking forward to the next time.

*Every single male here will want her.* The vet reluctantly included himself. Chris wasn’t worried about her getting into his mental doors now. His secrets were hidden deeper than she could go without him noticing.

**5**

Marc saw Angela come from the shower camper and slowed, but he didn’t go to her. Instead of making eye contact that wasn’t allowed, Marc counted how many men were staring, hoping she would respond. These were the proven men; they had a place here that Marc might never have if Kenn’s words were true. And hadn’t the silence afterward said they were?

Marc couldn’t help the rare moment of self-doubt. Why would Angie pick him over all these men? He no longer thought their time together would hold her while he earned a place. *Is there still a chance for us?*

As if she sensed him, Angela turned.

Angela was hurt when Marc turned away. He pretended he hadn’t seen her and ducked into his tent. She could feel him wanting to take it back, but he didn’t.

She got moving with a heavy heart. She’d loved Marc all her life, and while she knew he would fight for her freedom, she wasn’t sure if he’d fight for *her*.

Angela pushed it away, concentrating instead on everything she’d done today as she headed to the mess.

Male eyes followed, including Adrian’s from his dark tent. Her hair was past her cheeks in wet, shiny, black curls that a man longed to have wrapped in his fist as they made love. She was beautiful. When she went by, men noticed whether they intended to or not.

The sense of a job well done followed Angela, even when she recognized the lone man at a corner table of the dark, deserted mess. She ignored him as she walked toward the front, starting to feel the chill on her wet hair.

“She’s off duty; the boy covering the mess is asleep in the cabin.” Kenn took a chance. “I’ve got a thermos over here.”

Angela considered how bad she wanted the coffee.

“I can leave.”

His offer surprised her. She joined him at the table, comforted by the sound of guards walking by. She couldn’t see the moon, Marc, or Adrian, but she knew all three were there. Two of them were watching over her.

Angela sat on the opposite bench, at the far end. As Kenn unscrewed the lid, she studied him. He looked different from the Kenny she’d known before the war. Back then, his hair had been neat and trim, never a beard, and his fingernails had been pristine. He had worn designer fashions bought at the most expensive shops in the mall, and he’d always sported the latest athletic shoe. She’d hated the solid red pair. They looked like they were covered in blood and after a rough day at the hospital, it wasn’t something she’d needed to see every time she got into their closet.

The man who sat her coffee down bore little physical resemblance to that person. This new man wore dusty jeans, muddy boots, and a filthy jacket that had seen a lot of wear. He had a thin goatee; his jaw was covered in a few days of stubble, and dirt was under his nails–all things he used to pride himself on avoiding.

“Sugar?”

Angela shook her head. She saw his surprised expression. She started to tell him that she no longer needed to seek comfort in food, but thought better of it. He wouldn’t understand. The Kenny she had come to loathe was a lazy, cruel man who was only really happy when he was the center of attention. He hated kids and pets, had nothing good to say unless it benefited him somehow, and he had been a slob to live with. She’d picked up after him for a decade, but he had never once helped. He said it was woman’s work and he meant it. If the man across from her, pretending to read his papers, was what he appeared to be, then Kenn had changed and the slaps were…what? Twitches from the past?

This man was helpful, sought-after. When he’d said he did a little of everything, he hadn’t been lying. Angela was sore about how high up he was here, but not surprised by it. She just hoped he wasn’t after Adrian’s job. Those shoes were way too big for Kenn to fill.

Angela sighed. Safe Haven’s XO was calm, easygoing, patient. She was suddenly filled with cold resentment for the man. Why was Adrian worthy of that strength, but not her and her son? Kenn could stop himself from hurting some drunken camp member who’d taken a swing at him this morning, but he couldn’t keep from shoving her eight-year-old son into a wall for jumping on his bed. *For Adrian…but not for me.*

Angela shivered, recognizing the moment. She had made up her mind, and it had little to do with Marc. She would feel this way if she had come here alone. It wouldn’t go away, even if Kenn never mistreated either of them again. She hated him, and his being so different now made it crystal clear. She couldn’t forgive him, and she certainly couldn’t abide him touching her ever again. *It’s over.*

The door in her mind swung shut with a final thud that echoed. She felt the witch inside applauding her choice.

“You’re quiet.” Kenn had been trying to wait and let her speak first so he could get a feel for her mood, but he didn’t like the resolve he was reading in her eyes. *What’s going on in that pretty, brainless head of hers?*

“I’m thinking.” Angela glared. “I can’t make decisions if you’re talking.”

Her tone suggested bad news for his plans of reconciliation. When she said nothing else, just sipped her coffee, Kenn felt that ball of rage return. “What decisions?”

“A lot of things, though most of the votes have been counted on the big issues.”

Kenn’s face fell; sadness overwhelmed the anger for a moment. He was going to lose it all. It had been so good here, so *perfect*. “That’s it, then. You’ve picked him.”

The words were full of hurt. She chose to fight the guilt. Kenn couldn’t be allowed to spot a weakness like sympathy. “My choices are based on our past.”

“But things are different here. I’d never be like before.”

“It’s too late.”

Kenn was quiet for a long minute. He had known as soon as he recognized her show of force. Marc had always been better. “You want to be with him?”

Angela forced an angry tone to cover her fear. Marc wouldn’t let him hit her more than once, and neither would Adrian or his men. Kenn’s threats had all been bluffs. “Right now, I only know what I *don’t* want.”

Kenn flushed, controlling the need to slap her for the open defiance. “You don’t have to be such a bitch about it!”

“Why should I tiptoe?” Angela’s eyes were chips of ice. “You never cared for anyone’s feelings until now, until *Adrian*, and that stings for me!” She shoved herself away from the table.

Kenn let her go, wanting her body but hating her. He was changing; he was ashamed of most of his behavior toward her and the boy, but a bigger part of him still wanted to hurt her.

Kenn had always been skilled at giving people what they wanted. Before, it had always been: act one way and think another, but the war and his time with Adrian had left a mark. If not for Angela’s arrival, he wouldn’t be feeling like an outsider. *Why can’t she just be happy that I’ve changed? Why can’t she give me another chance? Why didn’t she just die?*

Angela kept walking. *Because Marc finally came for me.*

**6**

“I wasn’t sure if you’d let me come.” Becky was breathless.

Neil frowned, wishing she were older while longing for an hour alone with the hot little piece. His post was farthest from camp tonight; he had worried about her coming out here all day. They were surrounded by thick trees and almost total darkness, but alone? He was never sure, thanks to Adrian’s setup. “I shouldn’t have. This isn’t safe for either of us. There’s no other guard here.”

Becky came closer in the cool darkness, heart pounding. “That’s why I like it. We’re alone.”

Neil tried to fight the arousal when she swept his body in innocent desire. This was the furthest their flirting had gone so far. “Don’t tease me, Rebecca. I’m not one of the little boys you play with.”

“*Playing* is not what I had in mind.”

His body responded, but Neil scowled. “Tell me why we’re here.”

She blushed.

Neil realized she was working up the courage for something forbidden, but he didn’t stop her. As long as it was her doing the actual touching, his place would still be safe.

“I need to ask you something.”

Neil’s body responded again to the invitation in her voice. “Go ahead.”

Becky moved even closer, putting them inches apart. “Do you like me? ‘Cause I sure do you!”

Before he could speak, she leaned forward and pressed her soft lips to his.

Neil froze, aware of the rules even as his body strained to get to her.

The teenager felt his coolness after a few seconds. She stepped back, cheeks scarlet. “Sorry, guess I misread.”

Her muffled voice was thick with humiliation. Neil moved toward her even as he told himself he shouldn’t. He pulled her into his arms. “You didn’t misread.” He leaned down. “Can I kiss you?”

Her blush deepened as she nodded.

Neil placed a chaste kiss on her mouth... Her arms went around his neck. He held himself still with iron willpower. *God, it’s been a long time!*

He broke the embrace, tilting her chin up. “I am interested, but this is forbidden right now, and I won’t break Adrian’s rules again, not even for you.”

When he pushed her back, she let go. “But in October…”

Neil sighed, body hard. “Come fall, I’ll be one of the many tapping on your tent flap.”

Before she could swear that he was the only one she wanted, Neil held up a hand and put more space between them. “No promises from either of us. That’s a long way off and there’s still a lot to be done.”

“And I’m gonna help. You’ll see.” She beamed at him. “October, Neil. Then I expect a real kiss.”

Neil was thoughtful as she left. He wanted the flirty teenager, but there were other, more urgent things he desired.

“You know, there can be exceptions to my rules.”

Neil jumped. He turned to see Adrian coming from behind a nearby tree.

“She’s made an adult choice. If you want her now, you have my approval.”

A little embarrassed, and not about to tell the truth, Neil swept the thick, black hills around them. *Clear*. “She’s not ready.”

“She thinks she is.”

Neil pushed his hat further onto his head as the wind gusted sharply. “She’s fifteen. What does she know?”

“She knows you’re attracted to someone else. I imagine she saw the way all my army was gawking at Angela, and she wanted to stake some sort of claim on you.” Adrian lifted a brow. “Did it succeed? Are you marked?”

Neil blew out an awkward laugh, shrugging. “Not as much as Marc, but yeah, Becky’s got some of my attention.”

“Good. It’s a great match for her, a solid start to this side of being an adult. Tell me when you’re ready. I’ll set it up.”

Neil nodded, always grateful to have Adrian. He was the solution to so many of their problems. Their population was mostly male. To keep the men from fighting so much, the age of consent had been lowered to sixteen, but it went deeper than just hormones and control. They needed babies to keep their country going. Without new life, they were doomed.

“You spent the day with him.”

Neil was glad of the subject change. This was what the boss had come out here for. “Yeah, he should be in the shower right now. I told him I’d meet him at your tent for the game.”

Adrian already knew Neil and Marc were becoming friends, but he had to ask. “What’s the verdict?”

“I think Marc is one of those special few you asked me to look out for. He’s already starting to win people over.”

“While my right hand has spent the last two days pushing everyone away.” Adrian was aware of everything that had happened now, thanks to the nightly reports.

“If Kenn doesn’t back off, the camp might file a charge and vote for punishment.”

Adrian sighed. “He’ll come around. I hope.”

Neither man thought it would be easy.

“What about Rick?” Neil didn’t like the guy, though he hadn’t had much contact with him yet. *Something about him is even more off than with Kenn.*

Adrian scowled this time. “He’s out of quarantine, with a guard.”

“His schedule starts tomorrow?”

“Yes. Come morning, all the new people are on company time, though I’m sure that will come earlier for some than others. Kenn will be hot-to-trot for a while.”

“Did you see his face when we got in line for the shooting contest?” Neil smirked. “I thought he was going to choke.”

“Yes, I did.” There was no answering mirth from Adrian. He wasn’t the least bit amused. “Kenn didn’t want me to know how good Marc is. He also didn’t tell us that Marc was his team leader or that Angela was a doctor. What else is he hiding?”

# Chapter Forty-Nine

**Concealed Demons**

**A close up of a piece of paper

Description automatically generated**

Day 3

**6am**

**1**

**A**drian walked through the quiet camp at a fast pace, heartburn keeping him from feeling the chill in the wind. Leaves blew from twisted trees, but he didn’t notice.

Adrian stepped under the mess canopy and strode to the table where his best men were eating but not talking. The mood was tense over Marc’s victory last night and the silent but hard declarations of loyalty to the newcomer by so many in the chain of command. It was one of the things about to change. This would bring them together. Danger always worked that way.

“We need more water. The tankers are shut for testing.” Adrian had undivided attention as he sat in his place. “The dogs are acting funny, foggy. Someone may have tampered with them and our supplies. Hopefully, they only stole food or water, but we’re not taking chances.”

His full table was covered in opening notebooks and one stack of half-finished trays piling up in the center. They all wondered how much of what they’d just consumed might be contaminated.

“Morning and lunch are drawn the night before, so we’re okay for the moment, but dinner will have to come from the reserves. John’s testing those now.”

Everyone held in questions as Adrian lit a smoke, knowing he wasn’t done. The quiet watchfulness of his men drew attention from the half a dozen sleepy-eyed camp members around them. They began to spread the word. *There might be trouble.*

“Kenn found an untouched water tower last week. I had hoped to leave it for an emergency, but we need it now. It’s back toward our last known location of the slavers, but this has to happen. Use our highest security procedures. No one below level three goes.”

Kenn assumed the slavers would still be furious over their rescue of the Cheyenne survivors. “They’ll be waiting for us, maybe.”

Adrian knew. It’s why he had heartburn*.* “We’ll send our best men. You will stay. I need you here. We’ll push travel back too, instead of leaving tomorrow. One of us will change the schedules as we go.” Adrian spotted Rick getting into the mess line and stood. “Kenn has point. I’ll be around.”

Kenn kept his relief to himself as the other black clad men left the table without a word to him. Kenn was delighted that Marc’s new friends were leaving camp. *Maybe I can get some time alone with Angela and talk some sense into her.*

Kenn picked out a flash of long black hair coming through the fog. *Or whatever it takes to get through to her.*

**2**

Angela’s third day in Safe Haven dawned damp and foggy. The sun was a distant shadow clouded by the thinning layer of sky grit. She got into the coffee line, trying to view this as a new beginning despite her rough mood. She wondered if Samantha might be too as she spotted the thin blonde in the line, looking normal in her slacks and soft brown sweater.

Angela scanned the other people, hoping for any brief contact with Marc.

Heavy boots crunched next to her.

The people around her retreated a space to be out of the line of fire.

Angela sighed, mood falling. *Lovely.*

“I was looking for you.”

The whine grated on her nerves. Angela was glad to hear soft paws come up behind her. Like Marc, Dog always made her feel safer.

Kenn’s visage tightened when he noticed the wolf.

Again, Angela had only gotten a little sleep without Marc at her side. Her tone was sharp. “I wanted coffee.”

“I would have brought it to you.”

“Since when?” Angela lifted a challenging brow. *If he wants to start shit, I’ll help him.* The mood she’d woken in was ugly.

Kenn flushed. “I’ve changed. Can’t you just give me another chance?”

The conversations happening around them died suddenly. Everyone wanted to hear her response.

Angela’s thoughts stayed on her nightmares. “Not unless you can make me forget everything that’s happened. As long as my ghosts keep screaming, there won’t ever be forgiveness.”

Kenn spotted Adrian coming through the other side of the mess, frowning. Kenn choked back a threat and shoved a folder at her. “That’s your schedule. Follow it!”

Kenn stomped off.

People got out of his way, not wanting to draw his attention.

Angela sent a quick message to Charlie, warning him to also stay out of the angry Marine’s path, but he didn’t answer. She sighed unhappily, ignoring the frowning people around her. They thought she was just being a hardass, trying to get something she wanted…and she was. *My freedom*.

Angela pulled out the top two sheets and read the first note, this one handwritten by Kenn.

*I am sorry for the past. I know it’s hard to believe, but I do care for you. Please don’t tear apart the only family I’ve ever had. Here’s my truce: I release you from our deal. You’re free to go to him. But please don’t. I still want you.*

Angela didn’t believe it. Even if he had put love or need instead of care and want, she wouldn’t. After everything he had put her through, a note wasn’t enough to settle things between them. He was a fool if he thought it was. She crumbled the note and tossed it into a cold fire can that would be lit later.

As she walked with her mug to the food line, Angela skimmed the schedule for what she was supposed to do today… She was with the doctor. *Finally! Something I can do without being so careful and bored!* Angela glanced up as the three-dozen people around her went quiet. Angela stared with everyone else as tension thickened.

Samantha left her place in the front of the food line. She headed toward Rick, who was in the shorter coffee row. Samantha took a small envelope from her pocket. She didn’t meet Rick’s eye as she held out the Dear John letter. She made sure her voice carried to where Adrian was standing. “I’m sorry. It’s over.”

She walked away without another word.

Rick flushed at all the stares and whispers. He shoved the letter into his shirt pocket until he got his food and found an empty table. He was aware of Adrian studying him as he read her letter.

*Rick,*

*I’ve decided not to tell them you took advantage of me, or about the deal I believe you made with Cesar because I hope I’m wrong. This is a good place. You can make a new life here. We both can. I won’t ruin your chance unless you make me. Please leave me alone. You’re a part of the past I need to forget.*

Rick put the letter in his pocket, careful to appear sad but not angry for his audience.

When they saw he wasn’t going to blow up, the whispers switched back to the other hot story–Kenn and his cheating wife. It wasn’t as bad as Rick had feared anyway. He would do as Samantha asked, for a while. Then he would make her pay for breaking their deal as soon as she thought she was safe back among her own kind.

*Danger! Pay attention!* The voices whispered of grave peril. Angela stepped to the tailgate. She noticed a plump cook wearing a brown hat and dirty overalls. *Is the feeling coming from her or the jilted man sitting alone at the rear table?*

Angela gave the cook a smile, pushing gently. “Two plates, please. One is for the doctor.”

The woman frowned as if she didn’t understand.

Angela’s brow creased too as she picked up a sense of furious betrayal. “Two plates. My schedule says to get them from you.”

“Schedule?”

Angela held out the paper.

The cook’s expression lit up in triumph as she reached for it.

Angela immediately shoved it back into her pocket, scowling. “What evil are you hiding?”

Her hostile tone drew a lot of attention from those in line behind her.

Angela ignored the bystanders and the guards who were subtly moving closer. “How long have you been here?”

Maria hurried to get the plates, now wishing she had given the dark-haired slut what she asked for. Cesar would kill her for blowing her cover over something as petty as jealousy of the newcomer’s beauty.

The cook’s foreign mind was hard to read. Angela forced the witch down, aware of Adrian coming toward them. *I wonder if Charlie picked up anything from the pudgy cook.*

“Is there a problem, ladies?” Adrian stopped behind her, blocking some of the camp’s view. He didn’t want to interrupt, but these people weren’t ready to know what she could do. It would have to be careful and slow, but he needed this little edge. He would help her sharpen it.

Angela kept staring, searching. “No, not yet.”

Adrian took the covered plates the anxious cook held out. He stayed at Angela’s side as they left the too-quiet mess.

Angela gave the cook one last glare before she turned to him. “Beware of her or you’ll lose your highest team.” Angela couldn’t give him more details. *All I can see are the bodies.*

Adrian held his emotions in check, seeing how her eyes slowly lost their glassiness. *We’ll accomplish so much! First, I have to get her to trust me the rest of the way.* “Does it hurt to see into people?” He knew the answer, but it was an easy opening line that he’d used to calm people like her in his old job.

Angela was glad he wasn’t upset, and she was amused by the question. It wasn’t what she’d expected. “No. It’s like that gray area between sleep and awake, where you feel like stretching forever and a loud noise can make you cry.”

Adrian chuckled, handing her the plates. “You can use it when you want? Control it?”

Angela nodded, feeling strange and wonderful to be talking about it openly.

Adrian wanted to say more, but there were people walking all around them. “Will you come and talk with me about this tomorrow?”

Meaning he would want to talk about her gifts this time. Despite wanting to earn a place where she could use her abilities, Angela hesitated. In the wrong hands…

Adrian sent a tiny wave of alpha pull her way. “Give me a chance to show you I can be trusted with that too.”

Angela frowned as people stopped and stared openly at them. *Word travels fast here*.

Adrian refused to scowl. *Is she immune to my alpha draw?* If so, she would be the first person he’d ever met who was.

Angela let her schedule influence the choice. He had listed her as a doctor. This way, she would be using both of her talents. “I’ll talk. I won’t promise anything more.”

“Great, my tent after lunch mess.”

His excited eyes gave away his casual tone. Angela gestured. “Won’t it bother you to let me have free run of your camp?”

“No. Your heart is purer than mine.” He smiled at her, unable to hide his interest. “And just so you know, there’s no one here like you. You’re unique, *special*.”

Adrian delivered another brilliant smile. “Come on. Let me introduce you to the slave driver we call an MD.”

**3**

*Bang-bang-bang-bang!*

Samantha stopped. She was on her way to the gun class, but the sight of Eagles loading a truck in the parking area had drawn her attention. They weren’t using the slow, calm movements she was already coming to expect in Safe Haven. Their quick actions and worried glances said trouble was coming in some form.

Sam’s mind went straight to the slavers; she wandered toward the parking area. Unable to hear the guards, she tried to appear busy studying the dreary sky instead of the leaving crew.

Neil didn’t turn around to find out who was burning holes into his back. It could be anyone. None of the camp liked it when the shepherds were away, but this was a priority. They had to have water.

Neil motioned to his team he was ready to go, striding through the loading men.

Samantha’s gaze followed. She’d seen Neil around. She knew who he was and what position he held here. *He’s about to leave.* *Why does that bother me?*

Samantha didn’t like the immediate answer.

*I’m safer when he’s here.*

Neil turned around and caught her staring.

It was the last person he’d expected. The new woman had avoided contact with all the Eagles as far as Neil knew. He stared back, drawn… Her hair blew in the wind, giving him that flash of corn silk again.

Sam didn’t realize Neil had turned; she was too shocked by her discovery. What was it about the males here that made a woman want to be protected?

She snorted, turning toward the gun class she was late for. The war had changed everything.

Neil was now the one staring. What had she been thinking? It had been about him, he was sure of that. Curiosity awakened, Neil’s gaze followed her until she disappeared behind the bleachers of the gun class. *When I get home, maybe I’ll dig into that*.

Kevin glanced up as the other students turned to frown at the late arrival. Teaching the class today, he motioned toward the front. “We waited.”

Kevin had noticed her pause to watch the loading crew, but he didn’t call attention to it. Samantha was settling in, trying to figure out her place. That she had one, the rookie didn’t doubt. She and Angela wore the same expression of determination that his sister had gotten whenever she wanted something.

Kevin sighed. *Safe Haven is great.* *My sister would have liked it here.* “On your mark, shooter.”

Mind still on the man she could hear rolling away, Samantha drew and fired without her usual flash of Cheyenne Mountain. *I hope he isn’t gone long.*

**4**

*Something’s happening.*

Driving in from the south, the wind had begun to pick up; storm clouds rolled behind the grit. It cooled sweaty necks, but ripped papers from careless fingers. By midmorning it was coming at them in long, gusting swells that made everyone glad the dustier places were behind them.

The parking area was deserted, with only three guards on the cars since it wasn’t a travel day. Adrian nodded to each of them as he headed for the supply trucks. Despite approving of the stacks of packed and labeled boxes around the semi, Adrian found himself frowning. It was a struggle to smooth his expression as he climbed into the rear of the rig. The sounds of his flock were normal, but not everyone was here. Something was happening. *Was it wrong to send the water crew? Are my men in danger?*

Adrian tried to push it away. They had to have water, and he couldn’t have put Kenn in charge to go himself. Kenn’s one small chance at leadership had vanished with the appearance of Angela and her busted lip.

“We’re almost done with this one. Did you know you had a crate of grenades in here?”

Adrian shrugged distractedly as Marc rose from a stack of boxes on the mostly empty floor. “I wondered what the key went to. Kenn and Kyle do most of the pickups; they take anything they think we might need later. Hard telling what you may find in the other trucks.”

Marc lit a smoke. “I had it put in the new weapons only rig, along with the ammo we found.”

Adrian forced himself to pay attention. This mattered. He had to make sure Angela stayed and that meant finding Marc something to do while he prepared Angie and these people for what came next. “You’ve gotten a lot done.”

Marc shrugged. “I spent some time last night figuring out the quickest way.”

After being awakened by Kenn’s angry voice at the crack of dawn (*what a different, unwelcome start to a day!*), Marc had found four rookies waiting for him at the trucks. They’d made it clear he was in charge. Marc could have supervised, but he’d done as much as any of them.

Adrian pushed his gift out gently, wondering if Marc might also be immune to it. “Before or after Kenn took the shirt off your back?”

“After.” Marc smiled ruefully. “Now I understand why Angie turned into a card shark.”

It had been rough at moments, like when Kenn had first joined the poker game, but it hadn’t been as bad as he’d expected. Adrian had done an excellent job of controlling the situation.

Adrian used his boot to squish a spider with too many legs into the floor.

He ground it in a way that made Marc frown in recognition. Angela had the same reaction to mutations.

Adrian changed topics. “I understand why you have the wolf protecting her, but it’s not necessary. She’s safe here.”

Marc didn’t tell Adrian that Dog was guarding her on his own. He felt better knowing she had that extra protection.

“So, a day each?” Adrian kept trying to reach the stubborn man.

“A little less if I spend my free time on it, which I probably will.” Marc pointed. “I’m going to hang and then fill the baskets and shelves with what your people use most.”

“Our people… Great idea.”

Marc liked how that felt. He refused to let it show. “As for the stored items, you could–”

“We could,” Adrian corrected him patiently. “They’re your people now, too.”

“*We*…could limit access or have people sign out what they take and when. After certain hours, lock it up and set alarms that only a few people know how to remove.” Marc didn’t want to argue, but his glare said to ease up.

Adrian stopped pushing. “What kind of alarms?”

“Basic stuff. Like the discs you already use, but these will give the person a shock they won’t be able to hide because it will knock them out. I also thought a hidden video recorder wouldn’t be hard to hook up with the equipment you have here.”

“Absolutely. It’s lunch time. Let’s go eat and we’ll narrow down where to put it all.”

Marc swallowed the protest and followed Adrian from the truck. *So much for avoiding awkward situations.*

**5**

“John said you needed this ASAP.” Angela held out the envelope, eyes on her feet.

Two of the men glanced up from their potted meat sandwiches.

Marc wasn’t one of them. *Is she okay? Does she miss me anywhere near as much as I miss her?*

“Thanks.” Adrian gestured. “ Grab a tray and join us.”

“Sure.” Angela got into the short food line, positive Marc wouldn’t be at the table when she returned. The eyes on her weren’t as hostile anymore, but there was no friendship in those glances either. She stiffened her shoulders. *I have my son, and Marc when I’m ready for him. To hell with the rest of you!*

Adrian stiffened, catching Angela’s thought. He would have to do something about her bad mood. What would settle her down? He doubted she was the sewing class type. After months on the road, learning from Marc... *She probably needs a workout*.

“Are we good?” Marc dared Kenn to say his plan wouldn’t succeed.

Adrian understood Marc’s need for escape as the damp wind blew a sweet hint of vanilla around the table. “You got what you need?”

“Yeah.” Kenn hated the source but he loved the plan. With Marc’s setup, thievery would become a thing of the past in Safe Haven. Kenn changed the subject. “Are those the results from the dogs?”

“Yes. They tested positive for sedatives, but none of the water is missing or contaminated.” Adrian’s voice rumbled in displeasure. “Danny’s excuse is tight. We all saw him out cold by the fire.”

Marc stood up and adjusted his coat around his Colts. He would only stay at the table if Angie gave him a sign that he should.

There was silence.

He sighed unhappily. “I’ll catch you guys later.” He was gone quickly.

Adrian glanced at Kenn with hard eyes but he didn’t say anything as Angela took Marc’s seat, something that drew mutters from those in the crowded lunch mess. She’d sat by the boss every day she had been here. *Why?*

“They’ll be back for travel time?”

Kenn nodded, ignoring Angela and the big wolf that settled onto its haunches at her side. “Barring trouble, the water crew will be in around 8am, day after tomorrow.”

Adrian sipped on the fresh mug of coffee she’d brought for him. He noticed Angela hadn’t wasted her time bringing one for Marc. She’d known he would be gone.

“We’ll get back on the road as soon as they get in.” Adrian scanned the people around them. “You’ll do driving schedules?”

“Yeah. Seth went with them, so I told Doug to take charge of the new Eagles.”

Adrian studied the murky sky beyond their perimeter, worrying. “They’ll want him back when Kyle starts in on them. He’s every drill instructor I’ve ever known.”

They laughed and continued to discuss business.

Angela kept quiet as the drizzle began to fall, lonely and still feeling like an outsider despite sitting at the *in* table.

**6**

“You shouldn’t get so close. Odd things come out of high water now.”

Samantha jumped. Her defensive stance relaxed when she saw who it was. “Thanks.”

She scooted back a little as the wind blew her curls around. Bugs crawled near her feet as she went back to staring at the leafy trees. It was pleasant here but not seeing the bodies wasn’t enough. Even the smell of decaying animals was a reminder, a flash of hell, a tortured slap; she sucked in a breath, pushing her crimes away. *What else could I have done?*

“You okay?” Marc began filling two milk jugs of sludgy water for scrubbing the trucks. Marc wondered if Samantha might be feeling the same loneliness he was… *Only, she doesn’t have a friend high in the food chain, does she?*

Samantha stood, brushing dirt from her tan slacks. “I’m bored and a little uncomfortable around so many people all at once.”

Marc met the eyes of a small group of men moving by; a hard glare kept them going. He turned to Samantha. “Most of us spent some time alone, but I’m guessing you spent all of it that way. It’s hard to adjust.”

“Yes.” Sam sighed. “Will you tell him I need a job or something? I have way too much free time.”

Marc took a minute to write it in his Eagle notebook; this was his first entry. “Just give it some time, Sam. The feelings will ease.”

“Will they?”

Marc sighed. He stored his book in his coat and picked up the jugs. “I hope so. Otherwise, it might be what pushes me out of here.”

Sam watched him go, distracted for an instant from her own problems. Marc seemed as unhappy as she was to be back in the arms of society, but he didn’t have the weight of her burdens. She resumed her seat on the bank. He was worried over his love, his heart. *I care for all these people*. *That doesn’t make me better than him, just more of a threat.*

Samantha’s time alone had forced her to take hard looks at herself and her role in the war. She hadn’t pushed the button, but she hadn’t lifted a hand to stop those who had. Instead of using her gifts for a heartless government, she could have been saving the lives of her fellow countrymen. That need to atone, the one she now suspected Adrian of carrying, was heavy. She’d ended things with Rick, and made a couple friends among the women for her outspoken views. But that had also limited her companionship. She could be with the other females at the gun class or the mess right now, but even though Safe Haven held her kind…

Sam stopped herself. Two days wasn’t enough time, she knew that. It was just hard. Who among these recovering survivors would understand the choices she’d been forced to make?

Samantha swept the camp, spotting happy, relaxed faces. *Not them.*

She turned to scan the area behind her and found three guards standing together nearby. Each of them made eye contact with her, then moved back into the trees, vanishing.

Before she could form a question, a fourth Eagle stepped forward. He’d been so well hidden that she hadn’t noticed him.

Jeremy didn’t avoid the searching glance, her almost desperate need to connect. As an Eagle, he’d observed it enough times to know it for what it was, but he wasn’t sure he’d ever seen it so clearly. *She’s haunted. Maybe I can help her with that.*

Samantha felt his gaze digging in, searching her as she had him, but it wasn’t invasive. It was sympathetic, caring even.

The emotions were so foreign that Sam snapped her eyes back to the trees, heart thumping. *That one understands too much.*

It was a relief to glance over a few minutes later and not see him, though she thought she could still feel his stare. *Who is he?*

Unaware of how she’d been manipulated, Samantha stayed there, exploring the feel of his gaze on her. Thoughts of fleeing to her tent had been replaced by a human trait the Eagles were being taught to use. Curiosity had been distracting people for centuries. That hadn’t changed.

# Chapter Fifty

**That’s Why You’re here**

**A close up of a tree

Description automatically generated**

**1**

**A**ngela hesitated outside Adrian’s open tent flap, hating how it made her feel to have eyes on her constantly. Her words and clothes fit in, but she didn’t, and they knew it. It was in the wary, hesitant interactions. She wasn’t adjusting well. *I don’t know how long I’ll–*

“Should I come out there?”

Angela flushed. “No, sorry.”

She ducked into the scent of musky cologne, struck again by how neat Adrian always kept his tent. She wondered what it was about the aligned dimes, nickels and quarters that had bothered Marc so much. She’d caught a flash from him as he left Adrian’s table. He didn’t trust the blond man. The coins had something to do with that, but she wasn’t sure what.

Adrian knelt by the cooler as she examined his home. She could have been a model, even with the heavy bags under her eyes. “Have a seat.” He brought two tin cups and a red thermos to the table.

“Thanks. What are we drinking?”

He handed her a sweaty green can and a paper towel as he joined her. He had a small brown box in his other hand.

Angela took the pop eagerly. She hadn’t had cold Mountain Dew in over four months.

“It doesn’t have a name. Rum, rehydrated berries, bananas, sugar–stuff like that.”

People moved by in the cloudy afternoon, gawking at them through the open flap. Angela guessed he didn’t smoke with camp members…or maybe just not the women? Angela took a swig, enjoying the caffeine-riddled soda. It was her favorite.

“You’re off duty now?”

“Yes. John’s good. Nice. Anne is too.” Angela shifted as loud whispers about her and Marc floated through the flap. She adjusted her sweater to cover her unease. *Let them talk. What do I care?*

“They’ll appreciate the help.”

Angela hid a frown as people spotted Adrian rolling a joint and the whispers grew louder. *What do they care anyway? Just jealous they aren’t in here instead of me?* “He has me doing his notes right now, catching up on the issues here.”

Adrian smiled. “And making sure you know what you say you do, before he lets you near his patients?”

“Yes. He likes to throw trick questions.”

“He won’t test you long. A month from now, you’ll want the paperwork back again.”

Angela shrugged, wondering if she would be here then.

“I can tell you why you’re here.”

That got her full attention and a frown. “We’ve been through this.”

“I mean on the planet. Why you’re so different, and why you survived.”

Angela bit her tongue on the sarcastic remark that came to mind. Her mood was still rough.

“You would be welcome here anyway because of your medical skills, but there’s so much more you can do. You’re like me, and like the Eagles. You’re a Runner.”

“A runner?”

Adrian finished rolling while he explained. “Little kids are told not to judge on wealth or looks, that the inside is what matters, but they don’t understand and why should they? It’s confusing. They should be told there are three types of people they can model themselves after–those who Sit, those who Stand, and those who Run.”

The words carried a ring of powerful magic. Adrian let it linger. He hit the joint and passed it, noticing how careful she was not to touch him at all during the exchange.

“Sit, stand, or run?” Angela inhaled, mind working his riddle.

“Yes.” Adrian’s eyes darkened as he spoke. “Those who Sit are society’s burdens. They’re mostly uneducated and shiftless, with no ambition. They don’t give a damn about the greater good. They serve themselves, or worse, no one at all. They won’t even try to make it on their own. The old world took care of them at everyone else’s expense.”

He poured them both a cup of the reddish liquid from the thermos, impressed with the hit she drew into her lungs before passing the joint back. She was obviously a smoker. “Those who Stand are the workers. They fight hard for what they have, but few ever reach independence. They trudge back and forth their entire lives and keep the world turning just by showing up. These are the drivers, the servers, the doers.”

Angela could tell how much he believed in what he was saying. Her stomach tightened as he opened his mouth to continue, but she wasn’t sure why.

“Then, we have the Runners. The literal one in a million who survive whatever fate throws at them. Tolerating the world, and often unaware of how important their roles are, these are the tortured, the mocked, the exiled. They are feared, abused, persecuted, and they still push on. Runners uncover, discover, question, lead, create, challenge, and no matter the pressure or threat, there is a part of them that won’t fit in. It won’t allow them to conform or bend just because someone says to. This camp is full of Standers, thankfully, along with a sizable number of sitters, but there are also a dozen Runners here now, all gathered in the same place. The odds on so many one-in-a-million people all finding each other within four months of a war are astronomical.” Adrian delivered the rest of the speech he’d spent months waiting to give to someone like her. “*We* were born into this time and place to help our people, to save our country, our way of life. We have to get them to a place where they can Sit and Stand in safety. That’s why you’re different. That’s why you’re here.”

Angela was speechless, mind slamming it into place with a fit that was perfect. When it turned and fastened into an airtight seal, a wave of completeness rolled over her and sank in. All those years she’d hidden, questioned, been through hell, and Adrian had been able to solve that mystery in just three days.

Adrian actually felt the instant her loyalty shifted to include him and his dreams; a heavy weight slid from his overloaded shoulders. The one he needed most was here. She would take his place when the truth came out.

“What am I supposed to do?”

Adrian soaked up the sense of partnership that filled the tent. “Help me. There’s so much we need, I don’t know where to begin.”

Angela was sold. “I’ll give whatever you need.”

Adrian held out the smoking roach. “Always read the fine print. It’s a hard job, and our survival will eventually come down to blood. You learned that on your way here...”

Angela blanched, shaking her head at both his words and the pungent weed. “I won’t do that again. Ever.”

“You may not have to.” Adrian wanted to know what mistake Marc had made with her so it wouldn’t be repeated here, but he didn’t ask. “Killing is my job.”

She didn’t like that. Her voice was sharp. “And mine?”

“Look, listen. If it’s broken, show me how to fix it. If it’s coming, warn me in time to deal with it. Advise me. Be my Merlin, and together we’ll save our people.”

She stared at him for a long moment, breathing shallow.

Adrian felt the air thicken around them.

*And if we can give you none of what you ask for?*

Adrian spoke directly to her witch for the first time. “That’s an unfair question. I already know you can.”

*This is not a deal to be made lightly.* She paused. *There is always a price.* The tremor of greed was easy to hear.

Adrian didn’t care about the cost. “I’ll give them everything I have. As long as they survive, there’s no price I won’t pay.”

*Your secret!* *Tell me what you’ve hidden from your herd.*

Adrian froze as his father’s face slammed into his mind.

Angela’s gasp floated through the tent. His father was Robert Milton… *He was the terrorist!* *He destroyed the world!*

Adrian waited for her to call the others or at least yell, but there was only a heavy silence that he unwillingly broke. “When will you tell them?”

Angela stared back with a devotion that stunned him.

“Never. You’ve given me a terrible, powerful knowledge. I’ll guard it with my life, so it doesn’t take yours.”

Adrian allowed himself to breathe. “Kenn be damned. Your place with me is set.”

**2**

“She’s a whore, like Tonya! Anyone can have her!”

The boy’s voice was cruel. Angela quickened her pace. She had just left Adrian’s tent and caught a wave of ugliness she recognized.

*Thud!* “Don’t ever talk about my mom like that!”

Angela rounded the corner to discover her gentle son standing over a much larger teenager. The would-be bully was bleeding from his nose.

Angela stopped, watching. She had been filled with peace upon leaving Adrian’s tent, but that was gone now.

“You hear me?” Charlie leaned down and grabbed the older boy by the front of his shirt; he delivered a harsh shake that rattled the handsome boy and sent red drops flying. “You want me to hit you again?”

The bleeding teenager shook his head.

Charlie shoved Eric down as he let go. “Then keep your fucking gob shut!”

“What the hell’s going on here?!” Zack was furious at finding his son on the ground, bleeding.

Angela stepped around the corner, but she didn’t say anything yet. She wouldn’t interfere unless she had to.

“He hit me, dad!” Eric held up a hand with blood on it.

When Zack went for Charlie without asking why, Angela drew her gun. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Zack spun, startled.

Angela lifted a brow as his hand inched toward his own weapon. “You going to shoot me in front of all these witnesses? I understand why Kenn chose you.”

The lifelong woman-hater glared, aware of the wolf snarling at her side. “You better control your boy!”

Angela shrugged, eyes like flint as people stopped and stared. “Looks like he’s already got it under control. Maybe your boy should be careful about what he says.” She motioned toward her shocked son. “Come on, Charlie.”

Charlie’s face clouded over. “I don’t need your protection! I can take care of myself!”

To her surprise and embarrassment, the teenager had flipped on her. “Fine.” Angela holstered, aware of tense guards moving closer. She looked at Zack. “As you were. Maybe a good punch in the mouth *will* fix the problem.”

She left them all staring, heart breaking*. How can he treat me this way? I almost died coming for him. Doesn’t that matter at all?*

“He’s just a kid, honey. He doesn’t understand.”

Angela turned to see Marc walking a few feet behind her. “Are you following me?”

“No.” Marc was happy to be getting a second to talk, though. “Just heard the same thing you did.”

“And see?”

“Yeah, you two are definitely related.” He grinned. “Zack didn’t like having a woman point a gun at him.”

Angela didn’t respond to his attempt to distract her. This was hard on them both, worse than she’d expected. She moved away from Marc, knowing the more they were seen together, the harder things would be for him.

Marc let her go, aware of an Eagle trailing her. He didn’t agree with everything Adrian had going on here, but he did on that. Angie needed a guard right now. Not for her defense, but for the camp’s. Zack had no idea how much she had wanted to shoot first and ask questions later, but Marc had read it.

He strode toward the showers with an uneasy heart. Something was happening with her, another change, and he was too far away to be sure what it was or what it meant for their future.

**3**

Kenn was the man on point today, which gave him a great excuse to go wherever he wanted. He’d trailed Angela from a distance all day. Now he was as confused as he was angry. *She’s so different!*

The Angie he’d ruled for so long could never have bluffed an Eagle; she wouldn’t have thought about pulling a gun, let alone be able to do it with such menace. Kenn recognized it now that he had seen it from a distance. She would have pulled the trigger on both him and Zack. Judging from her reactions, she already had at some point.

His Angie had killed someone. That was partly responsible for his confusion. The respect he felt over that was new and unfamiliar. Kenn wasn’t sure what to do with such a foreign emotion when it came to his timid little woman. He also had a distracted feeling of pride when he thought about how well Charlie had handled himself. Kenn had called Zack when he saw the man’s sixteen-year-old son slam Charlie against the wall of the showers. Like Angela, he’d also felt the intent in Zach’s reaction, and that added another layer of confusion. *Now I’m feeling protective of her and Charlie? When did that happen?*

Kenn sent his relief on his way as the sun began to sink. He wasn’t done evaluating, sorting, planning. When he was, he would do something that would either get him banished or forgiven. He wasn’t sure yet which way he would go.

**4**

Angela stomped toward Adrian’s secret base, furious at Kenn for running his mouth and causing everything to be so much harder. *Will I be let in without Adrian as an escort?*

Only one way to know. Angela met the eye of the nearest guard. She gestured toward the training area, then lifted a brow.

She was surprised by the instant permission. *Did Adrian tell them I might come by?*

Maybe, but he wouldn’t want anyone else to know about it, she was suddenly sure of that. Angela headed for the defense area next to the training zone, feeling the cute guard’s confused eyes stay on her.

She found the hay ring empty. After a quick glance to be sure none of the camp was observing, she ducked behind a big tree. Angela then moved into the training area without being seen.

She heard the faint crackle of a radio and knew those inside had just been told she was coming. She recalled the vigilance Adrian had spoken of on her first day here.

*You do need a workout...*

Angela agreed with the witch. The skills Marc had taught her were basic, but she still needed to practice them. After three straight days of no use, she suddenly felt like she was starving for this. Being able to sneak up on Adrian’s army would be a good challenge for her nerves.

Angela looked back at the guard who had given her permission.

After a minute of consideration, and another to reassure himself that he had indeed heard her soft voice in his mind, Billy was positive Adrian would love the idea. Their leader had spoken to him last night about her…differences. The easygoing limo owner couldn’t wait to find out if she was worthy of the respect he had heard in Adrian’s voice.

Billy waved her in. He doubted she could infiltrate the base, but he hoped for it anyway, just so Adrian wouldn’t be disappointed.

Angela delivered a genuine grin and got moving.

Billy forgot how to breathe and almost passed out before he remembered how.

The training tent was full of alert male shadows. Angela chose a tall tree by the left side of the canvas, where the thick trunk was wrapped in strong elastic ties. She climbed it slowly to prevent the vinyl walls from vibrating. She had no doubt it was one of the things Adrian covered with his men, considering they spent most of their time under canvas.

The three guards who were able to see her were perimeter men. The level four Eagles were curious and doubtful. All of them had done something similar on their last test, but this was a woman trying to infiltrate.

Angela shimmied up the tree without alerting anyone.

It was a confirmation of Adrian’s words, and also a turn-on. Even when she made a big mistake, the guards kept rooting for her.

Angela used her knife to slit a tiny hole in the tent to peer through. *So far, so good.* The men were no longer working; they were all watching the doorway, waiting for her arrival with sweaty towels and curious faces. None of them winced like she did at a sudden loud static whine from too many radios being on in the same place.

“The Eagle who finds the spy is invited to sit at my table for evening chow.”

Adrian’s transmission on their private channel caused a flurry of activity as men grabbed their gear and rushed outside.

Angela used the witch to dim herself, not wanting it to be over yet. It was just an illusion though. She wondered who might be able to see her anyway.

Adrian’s voice in her head came a second later.

*They’ll spot your shadow.*

Angela frowned at her oversight, hearing the patrol they had formed coming around to her side of the tent. She’d forgotten about the sun. She wasn’t used to having to include it in her plans.

Angela slit a larger hole over the one she’d made and dove through just as the patrol rounded the corner. She rolled to her feet in the empty tent and slid her blade into her boot before smoothing her clothes back into place. As she moved toward the flap, Adrian’s happiness washed over her like water on burning feet, soothing her.

*Beautiful. That’s on the infiltration test. These guys don’t usually do that until around level four. Well done.*

Angela stepped to the open flap, letting that feeling of approval soak in. Regular doses of it would be good for her. *What are the chances Adrian will let a woman into his army?*

“So, who’s sitting at my table tonight?” Adrian grinned at the still-searching patrol as he joined them.

Angela emerged. “Me.”

The men turned in shock to find her by the flap.

“Again, some other time, just to be sure you’ve got it right?” Adrian’s voice dripped happiness.

“Absolutely!” Angela flashed a smile at the stunned guards around them. “Thank you. I needed this.”

Angela walked into the woods, going back the way she’d come so any camp members would see her emerge from where she’d disappeared. They weren’t supposed to know she’d been in the off-limits area.

The shock she left in her wake only lasted a brief time as Adrian began to speak.

When Kenn dropped by a few minutes later, hoping to find out what she’d been doing in the training area and why he hadn’t been called, he found them all strangely smug, even his boss. Like they knew something he didn’t. *What did Angie tell them…? Do for them?*

**5**

“Fate thinks hard on you.”

Angela’s words caused silence to fall among his joking men.

She met Adrian’s eye across the suddenly tense center table.

Dog rose to his feet, head cocked to the side as if he too had sensed it.

“Something comes.”

An instant later, the entire evening mess of one hundred went from loud and good humored to silent. The sound of feet running through the evening dimness was always bad news.

The fog parted to reveal Matt flying toward them. Startled people moved aside as the teenager found Adrian.

“There’s a call… Dad says to come quick!”

Adrian did. He would be pissed at Mitch for scaring everyone if this was a false alarm, but he already knew it wasn’t by the fear on Matt’s face. First contact with the enemy was about to be made.

Adrian didn’t feel the chill in the darkness as he moved to the communications truck.

Mitch started talking as soon as Adrian was close enough to hear. “It’s the slavers–said they have news about the group of men who left us today.”

The radio crackled. “I am tired of this waiting. Who speaks for you?”

Adrian instantly hated that voice.

Mitch saw Adrian and Kenn exchange a dangerous glance. He tossed an arm around Matt’s neck. “We’re on dinner break. If people ask, and they will, say it sounds like a bad joke. Adrian is handling it. Nothing else.”

Adrian nodded at him, climbing into the seat.

Kenn got in too; neither of them bothered to shut the doors. Many of the camp members carried scanners on their belts and a large number of guards had followed them from the mess.

“This is Eagle. Go ahead with your message.”

There was an amused chuckle. “Here’s my message, *gringo*. I have your men. To get them back, you will swear your allegiance to me and send out half your women and supplies. Tonight.”

“Get off this channel!” Adrian’s response was sharp, commanding. “I’m expecting a call.”

A stunned silence fell as Kenn and the rest of those listening worried over him handling it that way, but not Adrian. He knew a bluff when he heard one.

More laughter floated through the radio, backdropped by the roar of a camp that was clearly bigger than Safe Haven.

“Ahh, a hardass, but you care for them, I know. Send out the females first.”

Adrian made no reply, waiting, judging.

The radio lit up again, carrying an edge of frustration in the killer’s voice that muted the screams and voices bleeding through the transmission. “I will hurt them! I’ll cut them up and make you listen!”

Adrian keyed the mike. “Be careful, Cesar, or *your people* just might be the ones conquered. We’re not an easy target.”

“I’ll never back off!” The slaver was caught off guard at the open use of his name. “I will have the witch! You will not stop me when I come for her!”

The radio went dead.

Kenn turned expectantly. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing.”

“But what about our–”

“He doesn’t have them. They’re listening, though.”

Kenn’s eyes narrowed as a short Morse Code message lit up the other radios, telling them Kyle and Neil’s team were fine and almost to their destination. Kenn hadn’t known Adrian was doing private lessons with the Eagles too. *I thought I was involved in everything he has going on.* “How did you know?”

“Because they’re well-trained. They don’t give name and rank–they lie, the entire time, about everything. If that evil bastard had even one of our guys, he would be demanding we hand over the dozen Mexican royals we’re holding hostage, or the location of the fuel tankers we hid. But he didn’t.”

Kenn’s lips thinned. “Instead, he wants the witch. Angela.”

Adrian frowned. “Send her to my tent early. She either had contact with them on the way here, or someone in this camp is a traitor.”

Kenn nodded, wondering if his boss now wished Angela hadn’t come. The slavers had followed her. They were all in danger.

Adrian caught the thought. “She has every right to be here. I know you don’t like it, but these people need her. *I* need her. We can’t keep doing it all alone, but more than that, she’s as much the reason we’re here as anyone else in Safe Haven.”

“The slavers won’t stop until they get her.”

Adrian’s fury boiled over. “I’ll die first. You’d better get on board with that at least or just resign now!” Adrian turned toward his tense people. “Stay here until Mitch comes back. I’ll be singing to the herd.”

**6**

Rick blew out the flame on his lantern and laid down, heart thumping despite the simple chore he was about to perform. The security here was extreme and no one trusted him.

Rick eased out of his bedroll; he had been told to put his drafty tent where the bonfire would reflect his shadows. He was forced to crawl so the other tent shadows would cover his movements. He tensed each time footsteps crunched or voices rang out.

It only took a minute with his knife, two minutes with a spoon lifted from the mess, and another sixty seconds to place the plastic-wrapped beeper into the ground and cover it. He repaired the small hole in the tent floor with dark green tape, then pushed the dirt crumbs into a small pile under his bedroll. He’d buried two letters with the remote. One of them was his Dear John from Samantha. He’d also added his schedule with the next day’s travel route marked on it. Cesar would only have to hit the button on his locator to detect which bare spot had been his.

With the chore complete, Rick laid back down. He cleaned each grain of dirt from his nails while contemplating his next move. Cesar had told him there was another spy here. He would make contact soon and deliver a reminder of that deal so he would have help.

Rick patted the small dirt lump under him until it was flat. He and Cesar had used this simple method of communication before. By the time Adrian broke camp, the disturbed earth would be settled and unnoticeable unless someone was hunting for it. These precautions hadn’t been necessary in most of the groups he had helped the slaver conquer. Rick now had firm doubts about Cesar’s ability to emerge as the victor against Safe Haven. He had begun the usual campaign of fear though, drugging the dogs and forcing the leader here to react rashly. Every guard Cesar could pick off on a supply run would mean fewer men they had to face later. Next would be a fire that destroyed food supplies, but Rick was already sure that mental games weren’t going to crush the hope here. He had tried to make that clear in his letter. If Cesar lost, it would strengthen not only Safe Haven, but also every other town of survivors waiting to be attacked. They might all try to fight back. The human spirit was hard to predict sometimes, and Adrian knew how to handle his people. *Cesar isn’t nearly as good.*

**7**

“Cesar doesn’t believe us about the witch because he hasn’t seen her do anything.” Dillan rubbed at the unreachable ache in his wrist as he observed the well-protected camp through his scope. Safe Haven’s lights were a vivid beacon in the darkness.

Dean shrugged, busy working on items they needed. “It won’t matter. The leader down there called Cesar’s bluff; he didn’t run. Cesar wants him dead now. He won’t back off.”

Dillan looked at his brother in the cold darkness of the drafty house they were using for a blind. The dim moon above gave just enough light to work by. “Cesar may not be able to handle these people.”

“...Cesar’s got the tank by now.” Dean refused to admit he’d been thinking the same thing during his turn at the scope. “He’s on the way here with it. When he hits them, she’ll be unprotected in the chaos. We’ll get to her then.”

Dillan grunted. “When Cesar gets here, the people below will fight back. Rick’s usual tactics won’t work to rattle that blond leader. He’s too hard.”

“I know.” Dean set the dart he’d just finished onto the cluttered, dusty coffee table of the burnt home. “The usual plan would work if Cesar gave it time; he won’t with this group. We’ll hit her and the boy with these knockout darts during that fight, then take them to that cabin where we found the last group of slaves.”

“And if he wins? Cesar will come after us.”

Dean’s voice was cold. “Then we’ll use her against whoever shows up. The witch came across an entire country to claim her son. She’ll do whatever we want to keep him alive.”

“Agreed.” Dillan moved away from the dirty, glassless window. “Come morning, we’ll relocate?”

“Yes. And if we get the chance, we’ll take it before Cesar arrives. Keep searching for holes in their defenses. We only need them to make one mistake.”

# Chapter Fifty-One

**Pawns and Plans**

**A picture containing indoor, light, table

Description automatically generated**Day 4

**1**

**T**hough it was only seven in the morning and the damp fog was rolling, Angela still had to wait for the line of people at Adrian’s tent to finish their business before she could confirm why he had sent for her. Kenn had given nothing by words or thought, but she knew. The call from the slavers was all anyone wanted to talk about. *It was a mistake to stay here.*

Angela tried not to cringe every time someone said *witch* andlooked around. She knew the call was the reason for them being here. Nearly everyone was scared, hoping for reassurance. There were more people wearing guns today, and the line at the target range was already long though it was so early and so chilly. The sounds of gunfire rang out continuously.

Adrian was sitting at a folding table next to his tent, shielded by a green canopy.

After listening to the first three people–older, nervous women–ask about joining the gun class, Angela tuned them out, wondering if Adrian was going to make her leave. *Might be for the best.*

Angela picked up Adrian’s thought. She went to sit on the damp grass, content to wait though more people had joined the line. Some of those regarded her differently, more respectfully.

Angela listened, impressed with how Adrian handled them.

It was nearly 9am before they were alone.

Adrian waved her into the empty seat as the last camp member left. “Sorry.”

Angela shrugged, brushing at her damp jeans. “I didn’t mind.”

He looked at her.

Angela’s eyes dropped to the lifeless dirt at her feet. “I don’t know how they know. We saw almost no one on the way here.”

“*Almost* no one. I need you to tell me about all of them.”

Angela frowned in concentration, trying to tune out those walking by, whispering, staring. “There were people everywhere at first, but by the time I left Ohio in February, even the group living at the college had torn themselves apart. I had to…convince them to let me go. They discovered a lot, but there was six of them. When Marc came, their leader, Warren, ambushed him and died for it. Once we were on the road, I…”

Her face drained of color. Adrian hated the fear that came into her expression.

“I was stalked by brothers in Indiana, near Martinsville. I defended myself. They saw things. They would have gotten me if not for Marc. They said they’d follow, but they were both seriously wounded. I thought we’d lost them. I wouldn’t let him finish them off, but I knew better.” She stared at the fingers caressing her gun. “I was attacked again in Versailles. I…killed him. We saw no one else except for a Mountain couple we spent the night with in Nebraska. It has to be the twins.”

Adrian read between the lines; his respect for her doubled even as his worry grew. “Will you show me?”

Angela scowled. She didn’t want to experience it all again, but she had led them here. She had to give Adrian whatever he needed to make them go away. “Yes. We’ll have to touch. I’m not strong enough to do mental shows.”

His heart thumped. Adrian stood up. “Bring your chair.”

**2**

“It’s hurting her.”

Charlie looked up from the basket he was sorting. The sullen teenager wasn’t happy to be laboring alongside Marc, but Adrian had insisted. It had now been three hours of tense silence. “What’s hurting who?”

Marc kept working. “Your mom, when you won’t talk to her.”

Another tense silence echoed.

Marc gestured. “See, *this* I expect. Hate me, but give your mom a break. She went through hell to find you.”

Charlie had been thinking about it all morning, unable to drift off again after her nightmare had woken him, but he didn’t respond. What could he say to make this stranger understand he was trying to keep his mom alive by making her pick between them?

They labored in silence for a few more minutes. Charlie felt Marc wanting to talk, to explain. Charlie was glad when the man didn’t try. Kenn had said a lot of things about his mom, things his mom said weren’t true. Even at his age, Charlie knew who he could trust. He also knew how dangerous Kenn was. “Can I ask you something?”

Marc paused to light a smoke. *I need to repay Adrian somehow for this precious time.* “Shoot.”

“Is she telling the truth? You would have come back for us if you’d known?”

Marc’s gut clenched. “In a heartbeat. I used to fall asleep hoping to hear her calling for me.”

There was another long pause.

“I wish she had.”

Marc could have cried in that moment, one of the few times he’d ever felt such an emotion. “Me too, boy, me too, but she made the only choice she thought she had.”

“And we got Kenny.”

The bitter tone made Marc frown. “Yeah, some great joke, huh?”

Charlie nodded angrily, dropping the small box he’d been about to unpack.

Dog appeared in the wooded shadows around them.

A brief, intense moment of concentration between the wolf and teenager got Marc’s attention. Marc scanned to see who else might have noticed.

Only the guards. Their eyes were glued to Charlie, but not in surprise. They were concerned.

Marc wasn’t happy. *They all know. Which means Adrian does too. Kenn will be next. None of our secrets are safe.*

“I probably won’t be able to come back.” Charlie let out a sigh. “Sorry.”

The teenager was gone a second later, vanishing into the late morning shadows around them.

Marc kept working and worrying. Charlie was so much like Angie it was scary. Whoever the teen was about to confront had better know how to handle him.

**3**

“Where the hell have you been?”

Angela gave Kenn a cool glare, cheeks flushed at how many people were turning to stare. He’d snuck up on her while she was busy thinking about Adrian’s words of protecting her from the slavers. She hated it that she hadn’t been listening, but after the call last night, the witch had to be let out carefully. As a result, Kenn had startled her. Angela was surprised to discover her anger was stronger than the fear.

“Well?” Kenn had been searching for her for a while.

“With the doctor, and then Adrian, as you damn well know, so get off my ass!”

Kenn moved in front of her at the lie. He knew she hadn’t been with John–he’d been there twice already.

Angela shifted around him as the witnesses muttered. “Go away, Kenn. I’m not in the mood.”

The Marine ignored her order; he fell in step.

The guards scowled, fingers on radio buttons.

“Where are you going now?!” Kenn followed as she left the long bathroom line.

Angela let her rough mood have full control. “Wherever I want!”

Kenn stepped in front of her again, drawing attention as she flinched and went for her gun.

He reverted to whining. “I just wanna talk!”

She went around him again as the guards advanced. “Not now, Grunt!”

The tone of command coming from her mouth shocked Kenn, forcing him to obey. He watched her go with concern that was unusual. *She was already upset. What caused it?*

Kenn started to look to the nearest Eagle, like he would have done before she came, then stopped. They were against him now, surprised and angry that Adrian was letting him off without a punishment.

Kenn headed for the supply trucks instead.

**4**

Angela wandered for hours before lining up to wash for lunch mess. She’d lied to Kenn, but she wished she did have duty with the kind doctor. Yesterday hadn’t been enough of a workout to calm her, not with everything that was happening. She knew she should be glad for the free time before the guard shift tonight she’d volunteered for, but she needed a distraction from her fear. The twins were coming for her, and these people would be in the crossfire. *Unless I give myself up to spare them.*

Terror rose at that thought. She returned to her agitated roaming instead of eating. She wasn’t hardened enough yet. She wasn’t a trained killer, but when she turned herself over to the slavers, she would have to be. She’d told Adrian she wouldn’t ever take another life, but if the Mexicans came to Safe Haven, Charlie and Marc would be murdered.

Angela’s gut twisted again. Her mind went to the Eagles. Did Adrian welcome female fighters? Would she be allowed to try out? *Can I do it?* She had heard about the level tests, and the physical requirements that always drew blood. The fear was there, waiting to evolve into panic, but she considered it anyway.

Angela’s feet took her toward the off-limits area. She wouldn’t do anything like she had yesterday. The witch was locked up tight now, but she could watch them, right? Angela stopped abruptly. *Watch…*

*The twins are watching us!* That had been her feeling of danger on their first night here. They would have seen her reunion, her son. They wouldn’t take her without him, not with it being such an obvious method of control. *They know about Charlie!*

Panic erupted, fear ordering her to get her boy and run hard. She turned as if in a daze.

Concerned guards moved her way.

Adrian came from the shadowy doorway of his tent.

Kenn felt her distress and rotated toward it.

Angela only wanted Marc.

He was at her side before any of the others could reach her. “What is it?”

She sent him her thoughts in one horrifying picture of a gun being held to Charlie’s head by one twin, while the other ordered her to kill these people.

Angela found no surprise on Marc’s face. He’d already thought of it. “Will you take us north? We’ll go right now. Adrian won’t let Kenn stop us.”

“It won’t do any good, honey.” Marc’s tone was regretful. He’d considered it again after the slaver call, but the twins had followed them for a thousand miles and he’d only known because of a trim on his bumper. “They’re coming. We have to get ready.”

“But we could lose them–”

“No.”

Her fear cleared a bit at the hard tone; she read his thoughts.

*The brothers are too good, even for me*.

She caught a flash of the fire, of him finding a bullet mark. “They were there? They shot at us and we didn’t know?!”

“It’s what changed my mind about leaving you.”

She sucked in a breath. “I’m scared, Marc.”

“I know.”

“What are we going to do?”

Marc locked eyes with the man now standing behind her. “Trust Adrian to protect you both.”

Angela stiffened, but she spoke what was in her heart. “And when he can’t?”

Marc turned away, waving at Dog to stay with her. “I’ll do what I should have already. Hunt them down and end this!”

Angela spun to find Adrian, wanting to say so much that she didn’t know where to start.

Adrian knew. “I can. He won’t have to do that.”

She scanned the livestock area and found her son in a shoving match with Zack’s other son, Tommy.

Matt was lying on the ground nearby.

Angela swung back to Adrian in desperation as guards rushed to break them up. “I’d send him away with Marc and give myself up.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Adrian leaned in. “But will that succeed? Tell me!”

Magic slammed into them at his demand; the witch scanned the future for him.

Adrian’s heart pounded.

*It would keep them away for a while, but make peace, it will not.*

“Good!” Adrian grinned savagely. “I don’t want to make peace! I want them eliminated.”

Before Angela could respond, he gestured toward the fort. “Let’s go watch the Eagles train. We’ll both feel better.”

Angela went where he led, desperately hoping he could save them all.

They entered the training tent as the bell for evening mess rang; every head turned. All of the Eagles were surprised to find her here again.

Angela nodded to the guards she recognized, attention settling on the far corner, where three men were practicing a hostage rescue scenario.

She turned to Adrian, tone daring him to lie. “It’s for me, right?”

“Yes, in case we make a mistake. We’ll come for you.” His voice lowered so only she could hear. “*I’ll* come for you.”

Rather than protest as she might have done, Angela was grateful. Adrian meant it. If the twins somehow kidnapped her, he would be at Marc’s side for the rescue. “Can I help?”

Adrian felt fate take notice. Her asking was the first stage of their future starting. “Depends.”

“On what?”

He gestured. “They’re using live rounds.”

When the witch said she would cover it, Angela nodded. “I’m in. You want me to play myself, right?”

Adrian judged the reaction of his men. This would be a crucial test of their lessons. They weren’t as ready as he would have liked, but he bit his tongue before he could tell them to switch to blanks. He would wait a minute and observe how they reacted to using the real hostage in their lesson. Right before the actual shooting started, he would have them switch to training weapons.

Angela joined the three Eagles who had stopped to listen and were now frowning. “You want me to sit pretty or do what I really would if I were a hostage?”

Adrian was impressed by the question. “Being very still would be best for now. They’re already spooked.” He did wonder what she would have done.

“You got it.” Angela sent him a quick flash of being inside a shield of protected energy. She felt his immediate relief as she took her place in the center of the set.

Billy handed her earplugs. He had been the one to allow her into the training area yesterday. She felt a spark of interest for the ponytail-wearing blond. *Is he trouble?* “Be careful, will ya? If I get trimmed, the wolf will want to talk to whoever did it.”

Snorts and chuckles came at her words.

“I mean it.” Angela grinned. “No one wants to wake up with a wolf on their chest.”

Her use of laughter to break the tension drew more respect from Adrian. *She sounds ready for more.*

Angela felt safer surrounded by the Eagles. Her nerves began to settle as she sat in the center chair, though she was shocked to find herself here. She had gotten used to letting the witch guide her through the more challenging things in this new world, but being here right now was all her own doing. She smothered a wide grin at the feeling of freedom. She could never have done this before the war. “I’m set. Let’s roll.”

Adrian watched her handle the situation as if she’d been doing this all her life. He felt his plans shift. Adrian settled against the far wall of the warm canvas to let her prove herself.

The training exercise was short. Three guards faced three targets that were set to pop up randomly. The hostage was in the middle, with the bad guys using her as a shield.

Billy and Jeremy exchanged a long, tense glance.

When Billy bobbed his in agreement, Jeremy turned to Adrian. “Request permission to change the team?”

“Granted.”

Jeremy gestured at Doug, expression pained. “Doug out, Daryl in.”

The big man took it better than Angela thought he would. The other guards didn’t believe he was good enough. They were making the best choice for the mission.

Angela switched her attention to the three men getting ready to roll. The witch inside smothered her in layers of protection.

“Team one, set.”

“Targets, set.”

They looked at her.

She smiled sexily. “The innocent hostage, set.”

Instead of jokes, all hell broke out.

Not using suppressors, the deafening barrage froze Angela. Her eyes slammed shut. She didn’t move an inch as tiny missiles punched into targets.

Silence fell.

Angela opened her eyes to find the men staring at her in horror. Even Adrian was.

“What?” She glanced down, terrified she would discover blood.

A hot piece of metal sat in her lap.

Angela picked it up with fingers that didn’t tremble or flinch from the heat. “Who does this belong to?!”

The tone of command to her voice made Adrian’s inner Marine applaud.

When Jeremy held up a hand, she tossed him the piece of hot lead. “Do it again; get it right this time.”

Angela slid her earbuds back in and froze, waiting.

A second later, the men began resetting it for another run. They all assumed it would have been a trim, but it had been worse than that. If not for her shield, she would have been hit in the stomach.

Angela felt the witch’s pleasure when she didn’t bat an eyelash at the knowledge.

This time, a feeling of magic filled the air.

Adrian watched them roll the session again in surprise. They hadn’t looked to him for confirmation.

Angela kept her eyes open this time. Their careful, practiced movements were like a smooth play. When the bullets stopped flying, she repeated what Adrian had said to her yesterday. “Very nice. A couple more, to be sure you’ve got it right?”

There was no hesitation.

The other Eagles in the tent were stunned as the three men ran it a third time. Why wasn’t Adrian saying something? *She must have his approval.* It was the only thing that made sense. Men studied her to confirm it. What did the boss have planned for the black-haired beauty?

**5**

Angela stood up as they finished round five. She knew by the tension in the tent that something had shifted. When she frowned in concentration, her three would-be rescuers responded.

“You okay?”

“You hurt?”

Angela flushed as the thoughts in the tent slapped her. She waved off Adrian’s concern as she went by, heading for the open flap. “I’m hitting the showers.”

She left, ice shield back in place.

“I’d say she picked up on not being welcome here.” Adrian saw their regret at interfering with his plans, but it wasn’t enough. “*We* need her.”

That one word cleared things up for most of the Eagles. Whenever Adrian said *we*, it was a greater good issue; they had no reason to doubt him.

When Adrian strode into the darkness after her, he knew his wishes would be carried out. She had to stay. The men would help him with that now.

Adrian took a quick glance around. *Where is she?*

He caught a mental flash of the caution tape and frowned, moving. He recognized the spot, and it wasn’t in camp.

As he walked, Adrian was aware of being trailed by more than just his normal guards, but he didn’t send them away. This time, they needed to hear what was said.

Angela threw the rock as hard as she could. She was gratified to hear a loud *thunk!* as the stone hit the creek twenty yards away. When she felt Adrian join her, she didn’t turn.

“It won’t always be this way.”

She didn’t answer, determined not to let him see she was on the edge of crying. The thoughts from some of his army had been mean. She’d been slapped by a dose of reality. Good at it or not, this was a man’s world. It would be a hard fight to get accepted.

“Angie?”

“I’m okay.”

“It’s not safe out here. It hasn’t been reconned.”

She didn’t answer.

Adrian sighed. “I’m sorry. I thought they were ready for at least this much.”

Angela shrugged, listening to the soothing ripple of the water as it rushed by in the darkness. “Most of them are.”

“Will you tell me who isn’t?”

“No. It doesn’t matter. They’re right. I don’t belong. I’m…different.”

Adrian’s heart broke for her. His heart responded to the soft side she hadn’t shown yet. “Give me time. I’ll change that, my word.”

“There’s not much time left. Marc will leave soon.”

She didn’t say, *“And we’re going with him.”* but Adrian knew. He gave her a minute, letting her breathe. She didn’t want to go. He felt that clearly. She needed another, bigger reason to stay, and he had it. He changed the subject. “You were solid in there.”

“It was good for me.” Her tone grew bitter. “At least this was a situation I could get out of.”

Her thoughts were open, vulnerable. He caught a quick glimpse of her pulling a trigger and being splashed by gore. “What happened?”

Angela sighed, hating it that she hadn’t fully recovered yet. “He tried to rape me.”

Adrian swallowed anger. “Then he got what he deserved.”

“I think so too. It’s what lets me sleep, sometimes.”

“Killing isn’t always murder. Surely you know that?”

Angela took the smoke he offered. “I do, but it still eats away at me some nights.” She sighed restlessly. “This will probably be one of them.”

“You’re the strongest female to join us so far. You have the determination I’ve been hoping for.” Adrian let some of his plans out. “The women here need someone like you to help teach them, to *lead* them.”

Understanding came for her and for the trio of men listening from the shadows.

Adrian waited for a reaction, treading lightly. It had to be her idea, but he could set it up as he always did and let her fall into place on his right.

“You want me to train them... You want a female army too.”

*Damn, she’s quick!* He had purposefully avoided thinking it so she couldn’t pick it from his mind. “Yes.”

Angela was quiet for a long moment, considering. It would be something to lean on during the nights when the dreams insisted that she was stained forever. If she kept helping other people, it would be a small, steady payment on the debt she owed for taking a life. “What about the men here? This won’t go over well.”

Adrian chose his words for their audience, knowing they would be repeated. “It would if they understood how useful it can be to have a woman on the team. She’d have to be different though, and it would have to be all or nothing from her. It’s one of those things that can’t be asked for, but has to be earned to have meaning.”

Angela acknowledged the hints. When he turned toward the quieting camp, she let him go without asking questions. First, she had to decide if what she wanted would be possible with so many of her past demons here. Adrian’s request wasn’t a complete surprise. Why else had he shown her his army in the first place? But it would mean separating herself further from Marc, who was only here because he was hoping for another chance with her. If she told him she wanted to become an Eagle and help teach the women here to do the same, he would leave tomorrow. Marc would know it wasn’t possible for her to be his mate and a leader. She’d always be pulled between the two, but both of those things were all or nothing. Marc wouldn’t share.

Angela felt the wolf and the guards lingering, waiting for her, but instead of returning to her tent, she settled on the damp grass and began to sort through her mind. *What do I want now?*

Adrian was tempting her with a new life, with possibilities she hadn’t ever considered, and she was afraid her time alone with Marc hadn’t been enough to keep them together. He wanted a mate, a part of the past returned. She wanted that too, but she needed this second chance at a fulfilling life.

Angela laid back on the ground, staring at the sky as full darkness settled over the broken land. *Is there a way I can have them both, if only for a little while?*

**6**

“Maria.”

The cook flinched, bumping into the door of the dark supply truck. This side of the mess had no one in sight, not even a guard. It was pitch black except for her dim lantern.

“Who ees there?” She held up her light and sucked in a sharp breath at the shadow next to the rig. “Dio.”

Rick chuckled at the name, moving out of the shadows. “Sometimes.” He held the door open so she would have no choice but to go inside or draw attention. When she hesitated, he uttered three words.

“Cesar says hello.”

Rick clicked his tongue at her near panic to get inside. He shut the door behind them. “These people have a monthly meeting. You’ve known where they’d be, and yet, no word since he sent you here. Not a single call. Why is that?”

“I couldn’t. The radio is guarded!” Maria was trapped. Cesar was holding her sons, sparing them if she would infiltrate the Americans they had heard on the radio, and now, he’d sent this devil to what? Kill her? Scare her?

“Can we trust you, Maria? Or are you a convert too?”

His scorn drew a reaction, but not the timid one he had expected.

“If you are here, then you owe him too! Maybe we help each other, and both stay alive, yes?”

“That’s what Cesar said.” Rick moved closer, big body intimidating. “But understand this. I am loyal, and if I get caught, I won’t go down alone.” He slipped around her, reaching for the door handle. “I’ll be in touch. Soon.”

She paled. “Cesar is near?”

Rick stepped out into the cool night air. “Don’t wish for the devil if you owe him money you don’t have.” He glanced back pointedly. “Especially when you never intended to repay him.”

**7**

“It is late. You sleep now, ja?”

Angela ignored the woman, slipping on her boots. Hilda had been on her way back from the bathroom when she’d spotted Angela moving around inside her tent.

The den mother slid in front of her flap to keep her from exiting. “You sleep!”

Angela pointed. “You move. Now!”

Hilda considered, then shook her head of pink-and-green curlers. “He says keep the women healthy.” Her face softened. “You don’t sleep, don’t eat. Not good.”

Angela felt her anger fade, but not the sense of urgency that had woken her. “I’ll try harder. Later.”

Satisfied, Hilda moved.

Angela went out, pulling her sweater on. She knew Hilda cared about the females here. She was also sure something in the German’s past was driving her, but Angela didn’t push for answers right now. She darted between tents, sure she knew where Adrian was. She had to show him–

“Just tell me what’s going on. Why are you so determined to become my pal?”

Tonya’s voice was unmistakable, even without the usual fake accent. Angela made her way past the showers, avoiding the three men guarding their perimeter. The Eagles were too far away to hear the women, but Angela stored every word.

“Because he has secrets. Who was he?!”

“Not a clue. I know I’ve seen him before… A politician maybe?”

“I’ve already run through that list. He’s not on it.”

Angela tried to figure out who the other voice was as she crept by during the thick silence... *They’re talking about Adrian*. She felt her blood heat up with the urge to defend him.

“Maybe we could team up while he’s distracted by Barbie and her wolfman.”

Pleased, cruel laughter came from the other female. “I knew I read you right. Let’s grab some coffee at the mess and talk.”

*They’re plotting against Adrian!* Angela wanted to confront them, but she kept moving. This couldn’t wait.

She had little trouble sneaking around four rookie guards at the creek bank since she was inside the tape and they were watching for trouble from every other direction. As she rounded a bend lined in tall spruce trees, she caught sight of Adrian; she stopped abruptly. *He isn’t alone!*

Hot, searing jealousy burned a path down her throat. Angela pushed it away, cheeks flaming as she turned her back to them. She listened against her will.

“What?!”

“I’m sorry. I have to go.”

The sound of a soft kiss being pressed to a softer, younger cheek echoed under the rustle of bodies becoming untangled, clothing being adjusted.

“But we’re–”

Adrian left the anonymous female without an explanation.

As he stopped behind her, Angela could feel sexual tension running the length of him. He’d been on the edge. She caught another hot flash that sent a chill of surprised need into her gut. He’d been pretending it was her.

“Something’s wrong?”

Angela swallowed a nasty remark. “There’s something you should see.” She spun toward the caution tape.

The rookies on the area dropped hands to their guns at the noise from her no longer careful steps.

Adrian was impressed, pulse still racing. They hadn’t known she was here. He hadn’t either until her pain echoed through his heart.

Aware of the wolf paralleling them on the right, Adrian waved away the Eagles who tried to follow.

He wished he hadn’t when she didn’t stop for a mile. She moved with a surety and grace in the unknown forest. It sent his mind back to the fantasy that it had been her in his arms.

Adrian scanned for trouble. *Clear.* Then he scanned her, noting the way she’d learned to keep herself under tight control as they walked. *My fantasy wasn’t even close.*

“This way.” She led him to a steep cliff that overlooked the route Safe Haven had traveled to get here. “Use these. You’ll get better details.”

He stared through the night vision goggles she took from her belt, stifling a moan at the sweet hint of vanilla lingering on them. He stiffened when she leaned in, using a gentle finger to guide his sight.

Adrian felt the thrum of raw energy. He froze, understanding why she’d brought him here.

Angela turned her back to his, almost touching, hand resting on her gun as she protected him.

It gave him time to see everything that mattered.

Angela just enjoyed the moment. He was pleased by her actions, as well as this warning. It felt good and it was a balm to her fear.

After a long minute, she heard him light a smoke. She stayed alert, assuming he was choosing what to do.

“Hell of a fight down there.” Adrian studied the glow of a huge fire, the explosions. “Surprised we can’t hear it.”

Angela didn’t say she could. The cries of the dying had woken her. “They’re coming for me soon.”

She hadn’t meant to say it.

Adrian instinctively moved closer, unable to take her fear. “I’ll protect you.”

She didn’t answer, not sure if she could trust him.

Adrian put his arm around her shoulder and tugged her against his warmth. He didn’t say anything; he just held her. *Sometimes, that’s all a woman wants.*

Angela allowed it as they watched the flashes of light in the distance, the battle for survival going on there. She could feel him wanting to help and hurting because he couldn’t. “The witch says it’s not your destiny to save them all. Try to relax. Stress is bad for the heart.”

“Don’t I know it.” Adrian retreated a bit as the scent of sweet vanilla began to steal his thoughts. He gave her the goggles back. “Let’s go home.”

Angela noted Dog patrolling the darkness around them. It was also a comfort. “I overheard a conversation tonight. You need it word for word.” Before he could ask, she took his hand.

Adrian felt her response to the contact, her fear of it, and then he was in her head as she dealt with Hilda, then slipped past the showers.

When she let go, Adrian had to clamp his teeth shut to keep from protesting. He hoped she would take his silence for anger at Tonya and Cynthia. It had been a long day. His control wasn’t at its strongest.

“Will you punish them?”

“No.” Adrian snorted, leading the way. “They’ll never quit.”

Angela lifted a brow, marveling over using her gift like it was something that happened all the time. “Care to share?”

He shook his head. “You’ll get the full soon enough. These people love to gossip. Thank you.”

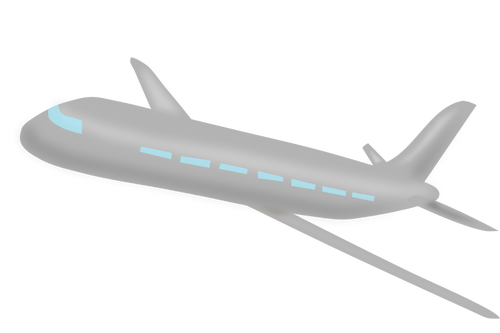
Angela shrugged. “It’s what I’m here for, right?”

Adrian thought of his dreams, of the goals now expanding further than he had ever hoped possible. He let longing fill his tone. “Among other things, if you ever want it.”

Full of confusion about these new, unwelcome feelings, Angela turned away before he could read her face.

# Chapter Fifty-Two

**Man Down**

****

Near Rapid City

**April 5th**

**1**

**A**drian was waiting at the QZ when the water crew pulled in. He knew by their faces they’d had a narrow escape. They had gotten the precious liquid, though. Adrian could tell by the way the tires on the tanker were pushing out from the weight. He was relieved at least one of their big problems was solved for a couple weeks.

Neil came to him at the tape. “They followed us from the state line, tried to surround us while we got the water. Rough count is sixty men. They have jeeps, trucks, machine guns. We didn’t engage, but we did put a timer on the tower so they couldn’t have the rest of it.” Neil removed his hat and wiped his brow. “Maybe we took out a few of them when it blew, but it’s not likely since they were watching us the whole time.”

Kyle joined them, wearing the same grim expression.

Adrian’s gut tightened. “How did you evade them?”

“Can’t attack what you can’t find.” Kyle signaled a duty guard over so he could get an update on the camp as soon as he finished giving Adrian the details from their run. “We cut through a storm drain and rolled up the mill creek for a few miles, like Kenn had us do after Cheyenne. They never saw us come out.”

Adrian was pleased but not relieved as the whining wind mocked him. *Something else happened*. “You eluded the enemy rather than fight a battle you wouldn’t have won; they got no water or hostages, and you brought back supplies and information. So why are my top men so upset?”

“Because another city’s burning, Boss.” Kyle’s voice was grim.” They’ve taken Casper. The smoke will be visible to everyone when we clear the trees.”

Adrian dug into the pockets of his jacket for a smoke, acting as if he hadn’t known. “So they have enough men to scout this camp, follow you, and still sack a city–all at the same time.”

Neil guessed at Adrian’s thought. “We can do it. We’re ready.”

Adrian saw Kyle clamp down on a protest. He knew that wasn’t true. So did Adrian. They were good, yes, but that good? Not yet. *I need another eight weeks.* “These people aren’t ready. If we did it now, we might as well keep going. We’d be starting yet another war we can’t be sure of finishing, and there will never be support here for that.” Adrian sighed. “For now, we’ll double the security, increase the number of levels we start each month, and get out of sight.”

Both guards heard the tone and knew Adrian was thinking of all the people who would die in their place. Neil was sure Adrian would change his mind.

Adrian wanted to, but that wasn’t the prudent choice for meeting his goals. “We need to make some real distance. Don’t hold anything back when people ask about your run.”

Neil frowned. “They’re going to keep following.”

Kyle added his agreement. “They’re not just scavengers.”

“This is your job, gentlemen.” Adrian gave his top men more trust. “Protect her quietly, though. The camp can’t find out yet, not like this. We have to buy her time to win them over.”

“How have things been here?” Kyle spotted Kenn getting everything ready to roll.

“Interesting.”

Adrian’s tone caught their attention. They followed his line of sight to Angela, who was sitting at his center table, laughing at something Doug had said.

“She’s one of us–an Eagle. I want you to encourage it; let her have the lead if possible. I need to know how strong she is.”

Both guards wondered the same thing, but neither was able to imagine the Eagles accepting a female.

Adrian knew. “I have it covered.” *I hope.*

“What about the slavers?” Neil was still eager to fight.

Adrian’s face tightened. “I’m working on it.”

Immediately feeling like he’d overstepped, Neil switched back to confidence in Adrian’s leadership. “His people won’t travel as hard as ours will when they find out Casper’s gone.”

Adrian was sure the guilt of not trying to save those people would visit his dreams. “He’ll send scouts to keep track of us, maybe even try to slow us down. We’ll have to clear before we roll.”

“My team will handle that personally.” Kyle’s shoulders straightened; his voice deepened. “We’ll take support, but only level Six Eagles will clear the road.”

Adrian nodded. Kyle had grown into his destiny faster than anyone else so far. “We leave in one hour. You two should talk to Billy and some of the others before we head out. Catch up on what’s been happening here. Talk to Kenn for your driving schedules, then adjust where needed.”

Neil frowned. “What about today’s route?”

Adrian turned away. “We’re not taking a road. We’re rolling right through these Black Hills.” Adrian spotted Marc and the wolf walking through the small crowds of packing people.

He signaled Marc over. “You have things for me?”

When Adrian wasted no time on small talk, Marc understood he was worried. He didn’t like it any more than the rest of the camp. “Yes. After the call, I finished the plan you asked for. It’s good.”

“How good?”

Marc kept his voice low, making sure even the Eagle guards didn’t hear him. “For us, the casualty rate is 3-4%. For them, 90%, but it’ll have to be set up perfect to get those results.”

The three pages went into his pocket. Adrian would read them while Kenn drove. He’d told Neil no about an attack right now, but they still had to start getting ready for it. The battle was inevitable. *When the time comes, I’ll kill every one of them or die trying.*

Angela paused on her way to the vehicle area, duffle bag over her shoulder. She rotated slowly, searching...

Jeremy moved into her line of sight so she would know who to give the warning to. He had already memorized that look of fear. He knew it wasn’t good news. Jeremy hadn’t freaked out about her gifts the way a few of the Eagles had when they’d been told. He also hadn’t needed Adrian’s words of caution. Jeremy was as trustworthy as they came.

Angela relaxed even as she frowned. “The shower camper. Personal drama.”

Jeremy headed that way. He wasn’t on duty right now, but Neil had asked him to watch out for Angela and he was. Neil had called a team meeting and confirmed most of the camp gossip. All of them were now doing it on their down time.

Jeremy saw Wade take over his patrol around the loading vehicles, around Angela. We have a great team. We’re not as good as Kyle’s yet, but we’re closer, more loyal. I don’t think anything can come between us.

Jeremy paid attention as he neared the camper. He started to go up the stairs. An angry voice echoed from behind the metal trailer.

“You can say that because you weren’t there!”

Jeremy eased around, using the closed supply truck for cover. He peered around.

Jeremy’s eyes narrowed. *That’s the new woman, Samantha.*

She was surrounded by a group of females; all of them looked ready to fight. Jeremy noticed Samantha wasn’t backing away. She didn’t give the impression she was scared either, just angry. Jeremy obeyed the instinct telling him to wait and see how she handled it.

The angry ringleader put a hand on her hip. “You didn’t almost die there!”

“I escaped after being raped, you snotty twit!” The truth rolled out of Samantha’s mouth in a harsh snarl. “And I still say we should fight back!”

Silence echoed for a moment; the other battered women scrutinized her in disbelief.

Samantha read their thoughts. She let out another rough sound of private misery and dangerous fury. “Call me a liar! I dare you.”

Jeremy knew two of the females lurking in the rear of the group were about to accept that challenge. “Is there a problem?!”

He sounded so much like Adrian that all of them flinched.

Samantha stared at the guard from the creek. She hadn’t run into him again since then. He was closer now, enough for her to discover the attraction he already held for her. Sam felt a blush spread over her cheeks in response. *Really?*

The ringleader retreated. “We were just getting to know her.”

The other former slaves also backed up and added support. They didn’t want to get in trouble.

“Yeah, we were just talking.”

“And she got mean!”

Jeremy didn’t buy the excuse. “Play nice. Or you could end up digging toilet holes with Kenn.”

An immediate flare of hatred flashed across their faces, but all of them nodded to acknowledge the warning.

Instead of thanking him, Samantha turned away. *I don’t need anyone to defend me. I’m learning to do it myself.*

Jeremy watched her go, expression thoughtful. *She needs a friend...*

The radio on his belt crackled, echoing the others throughout the camp. “We leave in five minutes, folks. Get in your assigned vehicle and get ready to roll.”

**2**

Angela blew out a restless sigh, braking as the semi in front of her came to an almost complete stop before shifting gears and crawling along again. They were driving through a wooded area with nothing but thin trees and brown weeds. While she applauded Adrian’s choice, it was frustrating and almost painful for her. They were going so slow that the ghosts of the places they were creeping by were coming to her in strong waves. They were full of death scenes and madness, but the desperation of the living was worse. Angela had to force herself not to reach out to them.

She wasn’t sure what to do. This door was usually shut to her. She planned to talk to Adrian about each thing like this that came up, but she couldn’t tell him over the radio right now. Charlie would hear and she couldn’t allow that yet. Charlie and Dog were riding with the vet; the teenager was giving her, and now everyone else, cold treatment after his day of hard labor for fighting. Something like this was exactly what he didn’t need to know how to do. It would put him at risk because he would use it without caution in his anger and people would discover the truth. That meant toughing it out.

The truck braked again.

Angela clamped down on a four-letter word. She took a fast look at each of the two men riding with her. Kenn’s initials on her schedule told her that he had been the one to put her in a vehicle with two older mining men. He hadn’t been happy when Neil and Kyle traded their places in sleep-n-bus bunks to those men. It had been a neat switch, with no time for her Marine to argue. Angela had been trying to place the chain of command since they’d arrived. After this morning, she now knew she was looking at third and fourth in command. So what were they doing here with her? Adrian’s orders? Marc’s cautions? Curiosity?

Angela tensed as a fresh swell of agony hit her. This one was a small group of starving kids; it was a struggle to keep her foot on the gas pedal. She didn’t want to pass them up. *I want to help!*

Kyle yawned from the backseat. “Are you okay?”

Angela’s eyes flew to his in the mirror. “Fine. Why?”

Kyle sat up, looking at her as Neil stirred restlessly in the reclined passenger seat. “Because we feel it, strongly.”

Angela cringed. She switched her vision to the truck that was finally moving faster. “Feel what?”

“Something is bothering you.” Neil frowned. “Spit it out so we can get some sleep.”

She flushed.

Kyle frowned at Neil. “He doesn’t mean it like that. Tell us what’s up. It’s why we’re with you.”

Both men stared at her expectantly.

Angela kept her eyes on the truck in front of them, not wanting to see their disbelief. “He’s passing up people and supplies, but I can’t tell him over the radio.”

Kyle hesitated, lifted a thick brow. “You can’t…send it to him?”

Angela struggled to breathe at the openness. She shook her head. “And since it’s my fault you’re all in danger–”

“They were already coming for us.” Kyle refused to let her carry that blame. “It’s not anyone’s fault. If we’re passing things you think Adrian wants or needs, tell us; we’ll handle it.”

Angela was stunned. *Where are the questions and snide remarks? The threats, the laughter?*  “College kids and fuel tankers.”

Neil immediately sat up and took the mike from its holder. “Three to Base, requesting leave to pull out for a short recon.”

Adrian’s voice over the radio was pleased. “In sight?”

Neil looked at Angela.

She shook her head, surprised they believed her, but also that she could go along.

“Negative.”

“Roger.” Adrian’s tenor wasn’t as confident now. “Cars six and eight will provide escort. Half hour check ins. Happy hunting.”

“Copy, out.” Neil hung up the mike as two jeeps fell out of the line ahead of them. “Let’s go. The fuel, not the people. Adrian will send a team back for them.”

Angela didn’t look at Marc as she passed him and the stinking livestock truck he’d been put behind. Would he follow their deal about protection, or would he stay with Charlie? She hoped he stayed here. *I want to do this on my own.*

“We’ll need you to tell us what you can.” Kyle checked gear in the kit at his feet.

When Neil gave his agreement, hands busy doing the same, Angela felt a large chunk of that outsider shell crack and fall off. Adrian knew how much she had to offer; she would start helping right now, by giving him something he wanted.

Angela didn’t see the derelict beef ranches and wheat fields around them as she drove confidently over roads she had never been on. She used her gift, trying to get the kids into position. *Move to the tankers. Help is coming.*

“Angie?”

Kyle’s voice was so much like Marc’s at that moment that she responded as if he were, forgetting her fear. “Five refugees, three women. One of them is pregnant, but I don’t think she knows. The fuel is at an airport near them.”

*Her voice doesn’t sound right.*

*She sounds odd.*

Neil and Kyle stored details to report later.

Angela got Kyle’s attention in the mirror, sure he would be more sympathetic. “They’re just kids. No threat. I want to help them.”

Kyle shrugged, willing enough.

Neil frowned. His orders were clear, and they came from more than one man–keep her unharmed at all costs. “No. We get the gasoline and let a team come back through later.”

Angela frowned. “They’ll run. The three of us won’t feel like such a threat. I’ll be able to talk to them.”

“What about the two jeeps of men behind us?” Kyle wondered if this would be the time Neil finally used his higher rank.

Angela shrugged. “Someone has to get the tankers.”

“No.” Neil didn’t like his judgement being questioned. “They’ll both be pissed that I put you in danger.”

Angela glared at Neil in tight annoyance that Kyle recognized from his months with Adrian. She would deliver a final blow next. The stories they’d been told hadn’t been exaggerations.

“Yes, your ass. Let’s talk about that, Neil.” She shot him a quick glare. “Will Adrian take a bigger chunk if we do it now and bring in more survivors, one of them carrying the next generation of Americans? Or if we don’t because I might break a nail and they’re gone when you come back, taken by the slavers?”

The silence was deafening.

Kyle regarded her with new respect, shocked that she understood what a powerful weapon that was.

Neil blew out a frustrated breath. The only thing Adrian wanted more than female survivors were pregnant survivors. He began unbuttoning his shirt. “At least put on my vest so they don’t think I’m a complete idiot. Pull over. We’ll wait outside.”

**3**

The Rapid City airport rose out of the gritty skyline like a dark omen. Nothing moved except glints off broken Christmas bulbs framing dark, dirty windows.

Angela felt the tension growing as the wind whined. The Eagle guards didn’t like it here at all.

They rolled over pieces of the twisted, rusting, airport gate; the row of fuel tankers were the first things they picked out, all the way in the rear.

“We’ll be checking airports from now on.” Neil shook his head. “I never even thought about it.”

Kyle nodded. “Yeah, makes sense. Have to have normal fuel for their trucks and things.”

The two men swept the shadows. When they were near the middle of the vast lot, Kyle held up a hand. “Stop here.”

Angela kept her foot on the brake as the two other jeeps flanked her. She tried hard to see what they did.

There were two long, empty, grassy runways, and a large, main terminal building with a lot of dark doorways. Three big, faded, red and white passenger planes were lined up near the fuel tankers like forgotten toys; numerous small outbuildings and vehicles littered the area, most damaged. There were also charred places on the weedy concrete and an overturned security car in front of the burnt frame of a city bus.

Angela saw the two Eagles exchange worried glances.

“We need more men.”

“But they’ll run awa–”

“We cannot secure an area this size with only eight Eagles.” Kyle’s voice was firm.

Neil handed him the mike, letting the guard do his job.

“Four to Base. We have six A3’s and need drivers, plus two full levels for security. Someone is on the way to meet you where we left.” .” Kyle motioned through the window.

The jeep to their right pulled away.

“Copy, Four. Cars seven, ten, fourteen, and twenty-one are on the way.”

Kyle felt better knowing Adrian had just sent a few extra men, but it didn’t help them yet.

Angela wasn’t sure what they were so worried about. Yes, there was a bad feeling here, but it was like the other places she’d been. Empty.

*Are you sure?* the witch questioned from her cell.

Angela frowned. No. After the call, she’d forced the witch back into her cage, scared of the camp finding out. Except when she was with Adrian, she hadn’t used the power at all until this drive.

Kyle was watching her expression in the mirror. “What is it?”

She concentrated, but got only darkness. The rustle of her jeans was loud as she shifted restlessly. “Something might not be right here.”

“What?”

Angela turned to look at the driver on their left. “Not sure yet.”

Seth, the driver of that vehicle, shut off his engine; Angela did the same.

The silence was thick as they waited, listening to the nothingness around them.

“The kids are here. I got them to come.” Angela removed her seatbelt. “Don’t let anyone shoot unless I do. The kids are not a danger.” She unsnapped her holster with a smooth movement.

The two men exchanged looks again, thinking of their conversations with the Eagles.

“I can’t wait.” Angela grunted. “They’re about to run. There’s too many of us.”

Kyle saw a single shadow near the planes as Angela opened her door.

“Stay here for a minute so she doesn’t take off. That’s our little mommy. Don’t get out unless you have to. I’ll be quick.” She slammed the door on their protests.

This was the Angela from the hospital, the one who couldn’t possibly have been chest bumped into a corner the night before. She had lived two lives before the war, but now, she was free to be herself. It gave her an unknowing swagger the hiding people recognized in longing. It was the stride of someone who wasn’t living in fear.

Both Eagles were relieved, and instantly jealous, when Seth got out and fell in on her right but wasn’t sent away.

Neil hit the button on his belt. “She never leaves our sight!”

Seth nodded at the order as the doors on both sides of Angela’s Blazer opened in case Neil and Kyle wanted to get out fast.

Angela stopped about twenty feet from the stairs of the first plane, but she didn’t stare up into what was sure to be an ugly scene.

Right behind her, Seth keyed the button on his belt so the other men could hear.

“Can we help you?”

The shadow flinched at her voice, but didn’t respond.

Angela stayed where she was. “We’re from Safe Haven. It’s an American refugee camp. You’ll be safe with us.”

The shadow snorted.

Angela took a step closer, denying Seth this time when he wanted to follow.

They were by rusting gates and an enormous field of waist high grasses where anything might be lurking; Seth’s tired eyes swung continuously.

“I can prove it.” Angela noticed the slender female had no skin showing from her dark, heavy clothing. “He did what I wanted, right? If they were bad, I’d be a slave.”

The girl shrugged. “It could be a trick. Slavers are smart.”

Her voice was nervous, hopeful, young. Angela pushed comfort again. “Safe Haven follows the old rules. You and your new family would be well cared for there.” Angela hoped she had chosen correctly as the whine in the wind increased.

“How did you know I’m not alone?!”

“Maybe I didn’t.” Angela’s voice became as cold. “You just told me.”

“You tricked me!”

Angela could feel the others nearby. The group was warmly dressed and blended well into the surroundings. This fragile chemistry student had done a decent job of teaching them to survive.

Angela switched to an authoritative voice, making the disbelief thick. “You speak for the group?” She hid her relief when the girl stopped her flight instinct, hand going to her hip instead.

“I resent that! I’ve done the best I could!”

“Then it’s time to get them out of here. Hand that burden over to our guardian. In return, you’ll work and follow the rules. We have two doctors and none of us are starving.” Angela gestured behind her. “They came from all over the country. We can also give you answers.”

The girl’s eyes lit up.

*That did it*. Angela read the interest clearly.

“You know about Nevada?”

“Doug does. He was trapped under a bridge there for almost a week.” Seth smiled at the girl, thinking for a woman who had only been with them a few days, Angela had picked up Adrian’s style fast. Seth had snorted at the things he’d heard while Safe Haven packed for travel, but now he was seeing it for himself.

The girl studied them mistrustfully. “You have a lot of people?”

“Yes; doctors, lawyers, farmers, soldiers, housewives. We follow a set schedule; we travel a lot. Most people pick their own jobs, but with your education, you would be helpful to our leader.”

“Yeah, in exchange for being allowed in?”

The girl missed the fact Angela knew she had been a student.

“You’re welcome even if you’re not useful at all.” Angela’s tone was just right–a little patronizing, a little insulting, and implying laziness.

“What a load. You’ll take our guns and be in control. No thanks!”

“We are not slavers!” Angela lowered her voice at the girl’s fear. “We help anyone we can, and we’ve risked a great deal to come get you. The rules are simple. Pull your own weight.”

“What’s the crime rate?”

Angela wasn’t expecting the question. “Uh, there’s been one thief since I came. That’s it. No rapes, no murders. It makes bad people think twice when the penalty is death.”

The girl nodded, wanting to believe.

Angela pushed harder as rain clouds rolled in behind the grit. “We’re American survivors who help our own, and you are that, honey. Come with us. We’ll return some of what was stolen from you.”

The girl glanced over her shoulder. “I think we should go with them.”

Shadows next to the plane moved, stood up.

Angela knew by the way the girl flinched that the Eagles behind her were rushing their way with weapons drawn.

“It’s okay. They’re just not sure about you, either.” Angela waved a hand.

Again, there were flashes of jealousy when the others stopped but Seth was allowed to stay.

The two males in the small group of strangers flanked the thin, younger girls who would have been called nerds before the war. Angela was suddenly sure the guys had been athletes, with all of them flying home from some kind of contest.

“They’re right to be worried.” The tallest teenager pulled his gloved hands from his pockets when Seth’s pointed gaze remained there. “We’re in danger.”

The others sent long, worried looks toward the dark main building.

Angela followed their line of sight, frowning. “There are people living there?”

“If you want to call them that.” The pregnant girl wrapped her arms around herself. “Radiation victims. They landed like that not long after our pilot stole a fuel tanker and left us here. They don’t come out unless we make noise.”

Angela winced. “We need to get the gas and go. Now.”

Seth checked his watch, then signaled to Neil, who held up one finger.

“Ten minutes for the support,” Seth translated.

“The slavers are coming this way. They’ve taken Casper.” Angela pushed her calming gift over the nervous kids. “We are offering you a home. In ten minutes, we’re driving those fuel tankers out of here; we’re not coming back.”

The girl shook her head, ignoring the mutters of her group. “You can’t get the gas. It’s half the reason we haven’t left yet. When you get near the trucks, the radiation victims attack. It’s as if they’re guarding it. Every time we’ve tried, we’ve lost people.”

Seth picked out things around the tankers that made his stomach churn. *Three boots, stains, and...is that a skirt by the landing gear?* Seth nodded. This was exactly what it felt like–another place of death they needed to get away from.

“We’ll handle it.” Angela soothed them all automatically. “Why don’t you kids go wait in my Blazer? There’s probably going to be some gunfire.”

The small group of students moved toward her vehicle and the waiting Eagles. They stayed together as they reached the guards, exchanging nervous greetings.

Angela joined Neil and Kyle, ignoring the coldness they gave Seth. “How does Adrian handle radiation victims?”

Neither man wanted to answer her question because they expected her to have a doctor’s outraged response.

“Sorry if I stole your thunder, but they were going to run.” Angela tried to get them past it. “You heard everything. I suggest fire. It will prevent further contamination. Got any masks?”

The kids frowned, leery again at her emotionless words.

Angela went to them, using only the truth this time. “We can’t save them, and we can’t leave them to hurt someone else. It’s our duty to do something because we can.” She continued to sing to them as she got them into the Blazer.

The three Eagles exchanged glances.

“She’s a natural. Like us.” Seth stared. “Marc’s right to want her so bad. She won’t just be someone’s woman. She’ll be some lucky man’s other half.”

*Marc’s?* Kyle frowned. He wasn’t sure the man was that good. “Adrian knew she would be. That’s why we have code Raven already. Adrian knew she was like us the second he saw her.”

“No.” Seth met Kyle’s eyes. “She’s like Adrian.”

Kyle grunted in understanding, remembering the sandstorm. “Kenn’s going to shit.”

Neil didn’t echo their mirth. “He’s going to mess it up for her if he can.”

“Yep.” Seth sighed. “Come on. Let’s have a gander. Maybe we won’t need our guns. Be nice not to do it up close this time.”

Kyle followed.

Neil stayed, thinking of the last few mercy missions. They had been messy, ugly; the memories lingered.

The men were back a minute later, resigned. They met the others at the front of Angela’s Blazer, aware of her still talking to the kids, keeping them under control like Adrian would have.

“We’ll do the whole building. She has three full cans, and Seth has two. That’s enough to create a barrier, then we’ll run a tanker in. Bullets after that if any of them make it out.” Kyle looked at Angela, who was listening through her open window. “You should go meet the other men. They’ll be your escort.”

Angela settled into the driver’s seat, not sure if she had missed something important that might explain the warning bells suddenly blaring in her head. She didn’t want to leave, but the Eagles were waiting for her to go.

Angela rolled to the gates, stopping just out of sight. *What did I–?*

“Get down!”

Marc’s order over the radio made Angela duck.

A dart plunged through her window and stuck into the seat instead of her neck.

Angela hit the gas pedal, throwing the kids back in their seats as she sped for the safety of camp.

*Marc!* Her fingers fumbled for the mike as bullets slammed into the door of the Blazer.

She jerked to the other side of the two-lane road, putting up the windows to protect the screaming kids. *“Help! Sniper!”*

The call went over both mental and CB waves. Every man she had a connection with felt it, including those who were too far away to assist.

More bullets ricocheted off the ground in front of them.

Angela jerked the wheel; she dropped the mike as the Blazer’s tires lifted.

Angela turned them in a sharp motion and was relieved to feel rubber slam back into the earth. Before she could get out of the sniper’s range, a faded green army jeep appeared on the narrow road ahead of her.

She slammed her foot against the brake, throwing them all forward as the jeep rolled closer, cutting off her escape. The grinning madman behind the wheel was sickeningly familiar.

*Marc!* Angela slammed the vehicle into reverse, aware of her CB blaring with panicked male voices. *Marc!*

*Get to Neil!*

Angela followed Marc’s order; she flew backwards into the ravaged airport, leaving a cloud of dust.

The Eagles coming to her rescue scattered as the sniper switched targets.

The guards tried to return fire.

Angela slid to a stop in the middle of them. Dillan’s jeep was coming fast and so were the slugs; the Eagles used her armor-plated Blazer as a shield.

Angela searched hard. *Where are you?*

*Tell the boy about me–the good me who wanted to be his father.*

Her heart sank as she picked up Marc’s thought and understood what it meant. “No!”

Her scream drew attention. The men followed her line of sight to a muddy Blazer coming toward them from a nearby access road. The vehicle picked up speed, flying at the lunatic who hadn’t seen him yet. *I Love you, Angie. I never stopped.*

*No, Marc!*

Marc swerved out of the decaying trees.

The Eagles saw a rare glint of sun flash off his dog tag, bright enough to hurt. Marc’s Blazer lunged onto the cracked airport street as the army jeep reached the road.

Before Dillan had a chance to react, Marc slammed into the driver door.

Flames and heavy smoke billowed into the air from the collision.

“Noooo!” Angela flew toward the wreck, unmindful of the bullets now punching into the debris covered ground around her boots. “Marc!”

# Chapter Fifty-Three

**Close**

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**1**

**A**ngela and Neil were there to catch Marc as he stumbled out of the half crushed Blazer; the Eagles hurried over to make sure Dillan wasn’t a threat anymore.

“He’s dead. Jeep’s a total loss.”

Their extra men rolled into view as Kyle’s words gave them their answer.

The bullets stopped as suddenly as they’d started, leaving only the sounds of burning, crackling wreckage.

Doug pulled up next to Neil. Before he could speak, Neil pointed at Angela. “Code Raven.”

Doug obediently looked at Angela. “Where do you want me, Lass?”

Angela was too busy to recognize the moment. “There’s a sniper.” She helped Marc unzip his jacket so she could assess the damage. “Take care of the kids in my Blazer.”

Doug waited for the next vehicle to go around so he could pull over and climb out.

Marc leaned against Neil, glassy-eyed and subdued as he tried to recover.

On guard duty now, Seth saw a glint of light. “Get her down!”

Marc automatically swung Angela around as the shot echoed; he jerked, grunting.

Marc fell against her as the Eagles returned fire, creating a line of vests between them and the sniper.

“Marc!” Shoving his long coat out of the way, her hands plunged under his shirt, expecting the worst. Angela exclaimed in relief when she felt dry cloth. “You wore the vest!”

Marc tensed against her as his lungs throbbed with sharp, heavy pain from the wreck. “Eagles are…required to.” He wiped the tears from her dark lashes, smiling when the pain in his chest increased. “Anything for you…”

Fresh tears spilled over her cheeks as she gathered energy to try what had failed on her premature son. “I can help! Hang on!”

Marc’s breathing became labored. “Not this…time.” His eyes glazed fully with coming death. “Always love you!”

Angela held out her hands.

Those around her saw a deep blue glow run along her fingers.

*This can be done once without payment. You would continue?*

The Eagles only heard her answer.

“Yes! Quickly!”

Doors in her mind opened. Power exploded from her outstretched fingers.

The Eagles watched in stunned silence as thousands of tiny, bright colored orbs flew from her like shooting water. They hit Marc’s chest and sank into him, covering his body in a constantly changing flash of synchronized red, blue, and purple light.

Those witnessing it were torn between watching his injuries disappear and the fierce concentration shining from Angela’s face. She was the magic Adrian had been searching for!

When her shoulders went from tense to tired, Kyle got the new men up to speed about the airport threat, but he didn’t look away from the miracle happening behind the line of vested Eagles. “Top two up high, next five low. Go!”

His team set up the ordered guard.

Angela stumbled as the magic swarmed back in.

Neil was there to steady her. He drew in a breath. Her skin felt as if it was frying, but there was no sweat. When she trembled under his fingers, the need to comfort her, to hold her, was nearly overwhelming.

Neil retreated instead. *That isn’t in my job description.*

Marc gasped, sucking air into a lung that hadn’t had any a moment before. He coughed, doubling over.

Angela felt weariness sinking into her. *I did it!* *I... used my gifts in front of strangers!* Fear returned.

When Marc rose and steered her toward a truck, she didn’t protest.

Marc opened the door, glaring at the driver, Billy. “Take her...to Adrian.” He was still trying to refill the lung; it hurt. “Don’t stop…for *anything*.”

Angela got in without looking at any of them. Her heart throbbed when Marc shut the door. Now he knew what a freak she really was and so did the Eagles. The small moments since they’d met didn’t equal this. She knew Marc would stand by her. That’s why he’d put her in here, to be safe from the others, but did he need to? Would Adrian’s men be able to accept how different she was, or would they drive her–

“Recon team, check in!”

Angela jumped at the radio call. She waited to find out how the men with Marc sounded during the report.

Billy gestured.

Angela understood. Everyone else was out of earshot. He wanted her to answer the call.

“Recon team, check in now!”

Angela picked up the mike with a feeling of authority she wasn’t sure she wanted. Being careful with her words came naturally as she hit the button. “We had a…delay run into us. We’re okay now. Hang on for one of the guys.”

“Do you need more men?”

Angela heard his real question clearly. *Should I come? Do you need me?*

Angela watched the guards, including a limping Marc, pick up gas cans and head for the main terminal. Angela was relieved. They were still going to get the fuel tankers and eliminate the victims who were taking shelter here. The Eagles didn’t appear to be treating Marc differently. “No. They’re about to blow this place, literally.”

“Copy on the noise coming. You found survivors?”

“Yes. I’m sure they could use a healthy meal and a hot shower. What’s for lunch?” Angela wasn’t sure where that had come from, but she knew instantly it was the right way to help him calm the listening camp members and the new kids.

She felt Billy’s satisfaction and realized he’d had her answer the call to calm all of them, including her. *He’s smart.*

“Ham and cheese sandwiches, applesauce, chips. The entire team is 5-by?”

She knew that one. “Roger.”

Doug pulled in behind them, driving the Blazer of nervous college kids.

“Copy. Hurry home.”

“You know it.” Angela hung up, knowing she’d impressed Billy. Better than that, she felt more like herself. The short words from Adrian had told her he would handle whatever had happened.

Angela looked at Billy. “You help train rookies.”

Billy snickered, hitting the gas. “You are as smart as the rumors say. Nice.”

Angela settled back into the seat, suddenly exhausted. “Home, please. You drive.”

**2**

Dark eyes glinting with hatred watched the jeeps and fuel trucks roll out of sight. Dean was hurt beyond words. *My brother is dead!*

It was the first emotional pain he had ever felt. Even physical wounds were viewed with apathy (at least they had been until the witch taught him fear), and Dean was unprepared for how awful it was. The sense of loneliness, of complete failure, was undeniable.

Dean was stunned by the tears that fell. He would bury his brother, and then he would make that bitch suffer! *If I can’t get to her on my own, I’ll take over the slaver camp and attack them.*

Vengeance was on the way. It might take a week or a month, but it burned with a red-hot fury that nothing would calm.

**3**

The guards were unable to keep from talking about what they had witnessed; the story flew through Safe Haven despite the mandatory quarantine. Small, worried whispers of magic began circulating.

Adrian headed for the taped QZ shortly after they stopped for a lunchtime meal break. The gossip lacked details and would be forgotten without fresh fodder, but Adrian was curious about the reactions of Angela and the Eagles. The panic in her voice had run through him with horror that he would never forget. Would she now back out of the ideas he’d planted? The life he foresaw for these refugees was no picnic anyway, but as an Eagle, she would face dangers like this regularly.

He spotted her at the center table with the rest of his chain of command. Marc on her right in his crisscrossed gun belts. That man looked like he’d taken the worst of it.

The wolf appeared for an inspection and a quick rub of confirmation. From there, Dog went to Angela and curled up at her feet, letting her gentle fingers stroke his soft fur.

The big animal was bonded with Marc. Losing him might have sent Dog back out into the wild. He was grateful to the woman and her witch for saving his master. She would be well protected, and so would their pup.

Adrian let his gift reach out.

Angela mentally rushed to greet him. *The girl in the parka leads their group. She doesn’t know she’s pregnant.*

Adrian scanned the new people. They were putting away the food and talking with the Eagles around them. They were thin, strong, young. Smart too, he realized, seeing mended glasses, walkie talkies, loaded weapons, and extra ammo staying in reach. They were survivors.

*And my men?*

Adrian recognized the satisfaction on their faces, the kind that only came from winning a battle. He relaxed, looking forward to the unabridged version the camp would never get.

Surprising only the kids, Adrian went to them first, eager to welcome the first new people Angela had risked her life to help.

It only took a few minutes to realize the kids were already won over. Adrian sat with them, pushing more food toward the girl in the parka as he stored every word of their vivid story. When he began to speak of quiet loyalty, of helping, they hung on every word.

Angela felt exposed. Both sides of the caution tape lining the camp were full of eating, staring people, but Marc had almost died for her. She wouldn’t hurt him by moving away. She worried over it though, knowing Kenn would see and be sure there was more than friendship between them.

*He already knows. I’ll handle it.*

Adrian sounded pleased. Angela was glad he wasn’t upset that she’d risked so many of his men for so few people. She sent him an apology anyway. *I’m sorry. I just couldn’t leave them behind.*

Adrian turned to her in silent communication that made Marc’s shoulders tense.

*Please don’t feel that way. Each life is without price to me. I want them all. You won’t be punished. The need to help them is what makes you one of mine.* Adrian looked at Marc. *Same with him. He just can’t accept it yet.*

Angela frowned. *I’ll work on that.*

*Me too. When they find out he saved your life today, so will the camp.*

*What about the Eagles?*

Adrian didn’t answer. That road would be longer and harder.

Hoping to calm things down on that front, Angela looked at Kyle and then Neil. “I’m sorry for putting you guys in a hard spot, and I’m sorry Marc’s so pissed at you.”

Marc let out a sigh, understanding she wanted him to let it go. “I’m cooling off, but yeah, they fucked up. Adrian wouldn’t have let you go back alone.”

Adrian slid onto the seat across from them. “No, I wouldn’t have, but I’ve served all my life. I’ve learned the tricks. Now they know better. It won’t happen twice.”

Marc’s response came fast. “Because you’ll train them better or because she won’t be in the line of fire?”

Angela listened to find out if she was as free as Adrian claimed.

“She’s to have full rein among my army, though I prefer only the higher levels know it for now. As her protector, I expect you to teach them not to make these mistakes. Who better for that job than the man who brought her over a thousand miles through hell?”

Marc’s heart fell. There was no way she’d turn that down. Stupid, Angela was not. “Kenn won’t let this happen without a fight.” Marc could feel Angela’s growing annoyance with the conversation, but he didn’t stop. “You have that covered?”

Adrian gestured toward the college kids. “It’s already begun. He can’t stop it. He can only interfere. You’ll have twenty-four hours to act openly, while you’re in quarantine.”

When Marc said nothing, Adrian pushed. “Would you deny others like them the chance at a new life?”

Marc scoffed in scorn at the trap. “I care about her! She’s going to keep putting herself in danger. I’d have that stopped!”

Angela’s protests were ignored by both men; she inhaled a calming breath as they continued.

“I won’t hold her back or tell her no on the things she wants to try here. Neither will my men, unless they have to.”

Marc understood the promises he wanted weren’t coming. “Don’t get her killed, Adrian or the men she’s bonding with might turn on you.”

His warning drew scowls from the Eagles, but Adrian held out his hand. “If I lose her, I’ll resign, and the people here will vote in a new guardian. I wouldn’t be worthy of leadership.”

Marc relaxed the tiniest bit. “You believe in all this that much?”

“It’s everything I am.”

Marc shook with him, sighing. “If I only have a day, I’ll need some boundaries.”

Adrian smiled ruefully. “So do I. We’ll talk, then you and the Eagles will draw up plans. We’ll do switches where we need them. She’s never to be alone.”

“I hope you two are done!” Angela stood up with a deep frown. She was angry enough to fight.

Marc doubted Adrian had adequate leverage to get her to agree. They had both forgotten to account for her reaction, but things were happening fast.

“I have defenses. I’m not some helpless pup you guys picked up on the side of the road!”

Both men thought of magic. They hadn’t mentioned it and they wouldn’t, not in front of so many witnesses. They didn’t need to add fuel to that fire.

“I never said you were.” Marc drew her anger away from Adrian without realizing it.

Angela’s lips tightened into a dangerous line. “Our deal stands!”

Some of the listening Eagles exchanged looks. A deal? There wasn’t love between them, but an arrangement?

“Not above your safety.” Marc squared his shoulders. “If you mean to do big things here, and I can already see that you do, then you’ll accept the protections we come up with…”

They all felt the ultimatum coming. Adrian respected Marc even more for continuing when her eyes narrowed and her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

“…or I’m leaving. Tonight.”

There was a shocked silence as tension crackled.

It was broken by Dog’s low whine.

Angela didn’t try to hide how much it hurt. “You mean that?”

Marc refused to budge. “I do. Next time, the bullet will get through, or I won’t be close enough to save you. I can’t take that.”

The words surprised her, hurt her again.

None of them, Angela included, knew if he was bluffing.

“You’d leave me?”

“Yes.”

“Then I agree!” She sneered. “I need to piss and dunk my head in some cool water before I explode. Should I pick a guard?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Marc and Adrian spoke at the same time. Both males saw flames shoot through her eyes.

Angela chose Seth by giving him a tilt of the jaw and a questioning brow that both Marc and Adrian felt deep in their gut. It said, “*I need an ally and no one else will do*.”

Seth saw Adrian’s expression was harder than he was used to; he tensed at the curt nod, but he didn’t hesitate to follow Angela from the little mess. He would have accepted her invitation without Adrian’s words of giving her free rein. Her pull was strong, though not all sexual. Seth hoped she wasn’t planning on going against Adrian. There could be real trouble if she did that.

Some of Angela’s anger calmed. “He has my support, but I will always fight for my freedom.”

Seth took careful stock of their surroundings, aware of Marc gesturing the wolf after them.

*Paranoid about her safety.* Seth wondered how long Marc would be able to stand watching from the sidelines while she built a life in Safe Haven. It was already clear to Seth what Angela would become, and he couldn’t wait to help her achieve it. “Complete freedom doesn’t exist. It’s a myth, and I think you already know that.”

Seth received silence. He kept coaxing, drawing on that spark of kinship he knew she felt too. “You’re special, and in danger because of it. Adrian will give you as much freedom as he can.”

His blunt words dulled some more of her anger. Seth saw fear take its place.

“You’re all so eager for me to give him what he wants now, but when it gets someone good killed, maybe him, will you still want me then? Because these things always come due in death–he’s right about that.”

“America surviving is what matters, Angie. Any of us would give his life to make that dream come true, including Adrian. He needs you. He knew you were coming, and he hoped you would be strong enough to stand for the women, and you are! Don’t let what might happen, or will happen if you already know, get in the way. The lives we’ll save, change, are worth the price. *Adrian’s* worth it.” Using a part of himself not employed since before the war, Seth pinned her with a sexy grin, oozing charm. Seth was ruggedly handsome at the worst of times, but when he flashed those dimples, he was lethal to the camp’s women and he knew it. “His Eagles need you too, Angie. Together, we’ll keep him alive.”

Angela sighed wearily, leaning down to stroke the wolf so his charm wouldn’t work on her. She would agree and follow like the rest of them, but she had to be careful. For the new life she was creating to succeed, she had to keep Marc around while she put the pieces in place. *If he leaves, I will too, and that may kill all of us.*

**4**

“Was it the slavers?”

Kyle shrugged, watching both sides of the mess clear out. Set up in the middle of the road, the emptiness was making him uneasy, especially after the airport trouble. “It could have been a part of their group, the tail we’ve had, maybe. It felt like a two-minute plan, and they had no support.”

Adrian wasn’t relieved. Two spies had recognized a mistake and tried to take advantage of it. Just because one of them had died in the attempt didn’t mean it was over, however. In fact, it had probably added more fuel to the fire.

Kyle took out his notebook. Under pressure, their leader was at his best.

“All training and testing will be done indoors for a while. Start rescue lessons for every level. Double the sentries at night and use the disks at one hundred feet instead of fifty. Seamstresses need to be in my tent an hour after evening chow; gather all the steel plates and green material you can find. Put it in the rear of my rig and have Miller stashed there. He’ll know what to do.” Adrian paused to light a smoke. Kyle already knew to cover the man’s absence. Adrian couldn’t let his camp know he was worried enough to have steel plated canopies created, but it still had to be done. “Mention we have openings in the defensive driving and hand-to-hand classes; offer vests. Use the reserves if you need to, but go out of your way to keep them calm. Tell them it was random, not related to the group moving up 25.”

Kyle had no problem omitting that part of the story. He’d seen panic in New York before the war. It was usually as deadly as the crisis that had caused it.

“I’d like one of you to stay near her at all times, out of sight.”

“We already sorted out a rough schedule for the next two days. There’s four of us. Seth wouldn’t back off.”

Adrian was glad his people were loading up without any obvious signs of being scared, but he didn’t care for the way some of the Eagles were staring at Angela. None of this would be easy. “He’s like her in some ways, I think, running on a level closer. Maybe he’ll catch something we miss. Just make the lower levels believe it was a random attack. Some men saw her alone with the kids and thought they were helpless.”

“I’m sorry for it.”

Adrian answered with none of the coldness Kyle felt he had earned.

“I don’t hold it against you. We will make mistakes. Hopefully, no more like this one. High level security meeting an hour after camp is settled for the night. I want all team leaders present; bring Marc.”

Kyle kept his voice low. “She’d search for you.”

Adrian didn’t pretend not to understand. When he’d told Kyle he trusted him completely, Adrian hadn’t lied. “These people can’t find out too fast, or we’ll lose them all, including her. It’s code Raven.” Adrian met Kyle’s eyes. “You have a better idea now what that means?”

“She’s going to be one of us.” Kyle finally let his awe out. He’d been holding it for this moment. “She was great. Fell right into it like you thought she would, Boss. You’ll get the full in my report, but I’m sold.” Meaning all the details the college kids wouldn’t have noticed, as well as Kyle’s thoughts on what training Angela would need to start with.

Relieved, Adrian thought of the Arkansas dreams that had haunted him last night. “She’ll recognize your loyalty, too. She’ll need it.”

Kyle didn’t really doubt Adrian’s words or Angela’s honor, but questioning both was required now, especially after discovering Kenn’s abusive nature. “We can trust her like we do you? She won’t use it to her advantage?”

“No. She’s almost accepted this as her home, her new family. For the first time in her life, she is valued. She’ll protect that security, this camp, by any means we allow. I intend to give her few limits.” Adrian’s voice deepened in warning. “And Kyle, she’s on the edge with all these new tensions and people. That may make her a little dangerous. Don’t be the one to insist on the changes if you can help it. Marc is the only one who can handle her heat.”

**5**

“You keep up that fake smile, your mouth might crack.”

Kenn turned from glaring at the little mess to see Tonya leaning in the open driver door, big tits almost spilling from her lowcut red dress. *Doesn’t she have any other clothes?* “What do you want?”

His curt tone sent a mean sneer across her pretty lips. “I thought you could use some company now that your woman’s gone and joined Adrian’s super-troopers.”

Kenn’s unshaven face set into hard lines. “She got lucky and found some people. So what? She’s not an Eagle.”

“Then why was she at the center table?” Tonya let snark come into her tone. “Well, maybe we were low on seats. I do wonder why she was the one to check in for the recon team, though. Bet they were all too busy. But why is she wearing a vest? Hmm… I can’t answer that one.”

Kenn made his voice sound normal despite the dread in his gut. He’d heard rumors, but he hadn’t talked to anyone yet. Obviously, Tonya had. “Adrian covers that.”

Tonya laughed cruelly, hawk-like profile turning toward Adrian’s rig. “Yes, he does, and you’re on the outside now. She’s already done more for his dreams than you.”

“What are you running your mouth about?!”

Very aware of his abusive notions, Tonya took the smirk out of her tone, but her words couldn’t be buffered. “I’m talking about a lot of things. You didn’t tell Adrian she’s…different, or that Marc was your boss before the war. You didn’t tell him about your heavy hands either, but it’s more than all that now. She left you...for Adrian.”

Kenn was getting hotter as Tonya talked, slamming awful truths into place.

Tonya didn’t stop. She needed him pissed for her plans to succeed. It would take guts to eliminate Adrian. “She’ll be the first female Eagle, the one who draws the others in. He’ll probably give Marc your place just to keep her happy.”

“And where does she rank?” Kenn wasn’t successful in blocking the tremor from his voice this time. “If she’s so important, what’s her place?”

“She doesn’t have one.” Tonya softened her tone, taking pity. Kenn may have broad shoulders and a strong back, but this would be a hard blow. “Your woman will be above the chain of command, an advisor of sorts. Though in time, she might not even answer to Adrian.”

“How do you know all this?!”

Tonya revealed an edge of shrewdness the rest of the people, including Adrian, would have been shocked to witness. “I don’t. I’m the dumbass, remember?” She turned away. “The dumbass who doesn’t play his games, and yet still gets to stay and be safe.”

“You’re wrong!”

Tonya delivered a scornful tone that said everyone had underestimated her. “How many times have you heard him say he could use a little magic, Kenny? Now, he has it. You and the Eagles are nothing compared to that.”

Tonya left him with those unsettling thoughts.

**6**

Adrian climbed into the seat of his truck; the tension was thick, unavoidable. He didn’t try. “I’m offering them both a place in my army. They’ll be below you in the chain of command, above everyone else.”

“You’re only giving it to him because of her.” Kenn’s protest was rare.

“He’s one of us. If you didn’t know them from before, you’d be impressed. He threw himself between strangers and death.” Adrian tried to avoid the rest.

Kenn knew without being told. “Would he have done it if she hadn’t been in danger?”

“Does it matter?” Adrian shot back. “He saved several lives, not just hers. He helped complete a mission and eliminated a potential future threat, something you, yourself, are adamant about. If you didn’t know them, you’d agree.”

Kenn let the truth slide out. “But…I do know them, and I can understand why you want her, but he’s just here to...” Kenn sighed. “It’s an insult to me and it should be to you too. He’s using your dream to stay close to her.”

“Like you did, when you first got here?”

Kenn flushed.

Adrian laid it out. “You can’t keep them from getting close. Any fool can see it’s too late for that. As for the dream, how or why we join up doesn’t matter.”

Kenn said nothing.

Adrian grew angry at the silence. “Hardly anyone here has a good past, but we all came to believe in the dream. Unless you still don’t?”

“No, I like living on the edge all the time.” Kenn snorted. “Of course, I believe. It’s our future, our duty to try.”

“Yes. Angela and Marc are a part of our future. I need you to cooperate with them, with *me*.”

Kenn wanted his rightful place back more than anything. The desire to be everything Adrian needed hadn’t vanished with Angela’s appearance. “I’ll handle it. The camp comes first, right?”

Haunted pain flashed across Adrian’s face. “Yes. Above all else, and I do mean all. You’re not the only one making sacrifices.”

Despite his warning, Adrian couldn’t have been happier with how things had gone. *I can do a lot more now.* These survivors didn’t know their destinies yet, but he would help them see the light.

Adrian picked up the mike, held it out. “Start the count off. I want the Borderlands before our next three-day break.”

“You’re the boss.”

Adrian nodded. *Until we reach Arkansas. Then, it will be someone else’s headache and heartache. But between then and now, I’m going to teach these people to survive.*

Adrian caught sight of Angela walking by with both Marc and Dog on her heels. *And she’s the reason I’ll succeed. Without her, I might as well turn us all over to the government. We haven’t heard from them in a while, but I know they’re still there. Thanks to Angela’s gifts, we won’t have to surrender. Now, Safe Haven is a super power.*

**End of Book One**

What would you like to do now?

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## Deleted Scenes

December 21st

**1**

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

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

“Where do I give the speech?” Carter had discovered a love of talking to his people.

Ben Seiling, Deputy Chief of Staff, gestured to the radio the president used for the weekly addresses. “It’s not safe in public. The rioting started an hour ago in most places. It’s spreading faster than we can keep up.”

“No cameras? Press?”

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

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

Ben’s curt nod confirmed it, but the sheer number of Secret Service Agents filling the halls of the West Wing, entering his Oval Office, drove it in. As he had the thought, three more uniformed men came in from the doors that led to the Rose Garden, expressions shouting excitement and a touch of fear that wasn’t comforting.

“The agents will take you and your family out as soon as you’re finished here. The Vice President and Joint Chiefs will be in the air shortly, headed for the Essex Compound.”

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

**Betrayal is the Foundation of America!**

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

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

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

“Not anymore.”

“Exactly.”

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

Carter hadn’t quite believed it when he’d first been informed of the file known only as *DOC*, but it hadn’t taken him long to understand how much the world would change if the public suspected the massive secret that had been kept all these years. The days of government rule would be...

“Mr. President, please.”

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

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

Only slightly reassured, the President skimmed what might be his last address, worry burning. “You’ll activate the sirens?”

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

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

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

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

“What about vitals? Evacuations?”

Ben sighed in frustration, knowing the President would have his report before he did anything. Carter could be pushed, but it had to be gently. “The internet is locked down; only our senior military have the codes needed to access it. As for EVACs, those on the lists are 35% recovered at this point. Ahead of schedule.”

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

“We have reports of massive abandonment of posts already. Media stations in France and China are on it. Daycares, schools, hospitals, radar and traffic towers, police stations, utility plants–they’re already starting to shut down. Citizens will have nothing to depend on, no way to survive after the first few months.” The deputy’s voice lowered. “The draft convoys started out half an hour ago. Waves of refugees have been spotted hitting towns ahead of the trucks. Some of those places are attempting barricades. We’ve covered it. *Our* men will follow orders.”

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

“Carter.”

It was the first time the deputy had ever called him by his first name. Doing it here, in this hallowed place, was such a transgression of protocol that it got Carter’s full attention. This was the strategy smarter men than himself had agreed upon, and after, when it was time to come out of hiding, he would still be in charge. The US Presidency was not allowed to change hands during a time of war, unless there was a death. “We’re using the rest of our arsenal? Retaliating, even though we caused it?”

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

Carter’s finger pushed the button, not asking how that was possible without his approval. He’d learned a lot about leadership in the last few years and one of the biggest lessons was that you didn’t ask questions unless you could take the answers. Stomach churning, he began the emergency address to the nation.

As he finished, he was jerked out of the seat at a motion from Ben. The President stopped struggling as the agents rushed him outside where panic was roaring from the streets.

“Warning! Incoming!”

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

The agents literally threw him onto the chopper.

President Carter Heins huddled with his wife and twin boys as Marine One quickly rose into the air. As it ascended, the blades were assaulted with rocks, shoes, briefcases, and cell phones from doomed citizens.

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

Blood splattered; bodies fell.

Marine One reached an altitude that cut off Carter’s view of the ground.

“Daddy! Fire in the clouds!”

The explosion was blinding. Carter kissed his wife’s teary lips as the shock wave caught up to them.

There were no survivors.

**2**

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

Former President Robert Milton slid the disk into the main computer with a sneer of contempt that few would have recognized from his time in office. Once exalted, he was now reduced to message-boy for the current administration. He had volunteered for this part of revealing the centuries-old lie.

Clearly trying to hurry, the traitor looked over his shoulder repeatedly while typing in codes. He placed his hand on the scanner; the lights in the room flashed to deep red.

Stepping over a body, he took a marker from the desk and wrote on the wall before the screen faded to black.

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

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

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

These two clips only circulated for a few minutes before the stations airing them went to static or shots of the warheads arriving, but it was enough. Most people understood there hadn’t been a terrorist attack: the government had caused it. America, and the world, had been betrayed.

**Deleted Scene #2**

**December 21st, 2012**

Granite Mountains Complex

Press Secretary Pat Michaels sat in the rear of the large, crowded room embedded in a dank maze of tunnels half a mile under the secret military base. The compound was under attack by terrified citizens demanding the protection they knew the Essex could, but would not, provide.

This bottom level limestone command center was thick with smoke and brass; some of them had been in on the original testing of these weapons. Pat hoped his own punishment wouldn’t be as harsh as theirs. After all, they’d known firsthand what a horrible thing had been created. It was so powerful, so unstoppable, that the America above them was about to be destroyed. A new, hostile land would take its place.

The slyest of defenders since Nixon’s well used man, Pat was now useless, forgotten in the chaos. He wasn’t even sure if he was allowed to be here. His family had been in New Jersey. Someone had been with him when he got the news. They’d brought him along when they evacuated from the Las Vegas convention hall, though he couldn’t remember who it had been. *Amanda! The kids! How will I go on? How will anyone?*

Panic was rampant. Officers barked orders, flunkies scrambled to get information, papers floated through the humid air, phones rang nonstop. Thanks to an EMP and a lucky shot from a disgruntled citizen with a grenade launcher, the Vice President was dead. The Speaker of the House was now the legal recipient of the highest seat in the land, but she wasn’t here. Neither was the new Secretary of State. No one knew where they’d been evacuated to, or if they were even alive. Those jobs were no longer in demand, and the result was chaos. That would change later, if they survived the coming missile.

This complex had been built in the 90s. It was untested and less than one hundred miles from what was about to be a direct hit. Pat shuddered. *We might feel it.*

Lurking near the wall of air vents and panels, the press secretary broke into a light sweat as one of the remaining clocks on the cold, sterile walls around him slid under the five-minute mark.

Washington, New York, and most of the east coast had been destroyed. Of the seven warheads the long-denied Star Wars program hadn’t been able to remove, three were going to find US targets, and maybe the two others they had lost radar on. Their own missiles had decimated countries around the globe. Now, America would pay the price.

The huge, multipicture screen in the front of the crowded room changed when the next clock hit four minutes, flashing to a satellite view of the incoming missile careening toward the Sunshine State.

Why, in God’s name, had the former president done this? *This is just a bad dream.* If not, millions more were going to die in…

03:45

03:44

03:43

The computer switched to full alert; alarms all over the vast compound warned of the impending arrival. Pat’s stomach churned as the ceiling lights flickered to a hazy red.

America was in the same state as this room, thanks to the convoys of soldiers taking all males, ages 10-60. The soldiers had been told to get a full truck of warm bodies any way they had to. Gunfire was filling town after town. They had reports of it in nearly every major population center across the country.

02:50

02:49

02:48

Would mankind survive? Had they really blown themselves up? *How much of this am I responsible for?* Millions of lives were already gone… So many cultures and their histories!

01:20

01:19

01:18

Pat cringed from a braying siren in the front of the loud, crowded, tactical room. They’d destroyed the world. Was that the red stain on his hands that refused to wash off?

00:40

00:39

00:38

*When was my last orgasm?* He was too scared to recall what it had felt like or what the intern’s name had been. *Greg? Gary?*

00:25

00:24

00:23

*When was my last confession?* Pat struggled to remember. *Did I mean it? Is it too late?*

00:15

00:14

00:13

He shut his eyes and began the comforting litany from his seat on the couch, unable to make himself get on his knees even though the hour of judgment had come. “Please forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

00:02

00:01

00:00

*I did it for my country...*

**Deleted Scene #3**

Adrian once again roamed the sea of tents, unable to sleep. He was satisfied with the job Kenn had done, but he hated the aftermath. The land around them was now totally devoid of life, instead of isolated. It was foreign–like what the surface of Mars might be like. Even the smells had changed. The rot was still here, along with a hint of salty smoke, but the strongest was a thick, stomach-tightening mildew he didn’t need John to tell him was from all the dead. The sandstorm had scraped away tiny bits of decaying flesh that were then flung about in the storm. It wasn’t comforting.

“Did anyone see you?”

A man’s voice murmured nearby, one he knew well. Adrian found shadows by a dusty supply truck. It was 1am. The camp was supposed to be sleeping right now.

“No. Let me in.”

The woman’s voice was also familiar. Adrian wondered if the guards had noticed them. Probably not, but they would if Kenn wasn’t careful. It didn’t bother Adrian, but the camp wouldn’t like it.

Adrian smirked. *Hell, maybe Kenn can straighten her out a little and put her to use.* *Tonya has to have a skill that doesn’t involve her knees or her back.*

**Deleted Scene #4**

Marc finished with the radio while Lenore led Angela through a dark, blanket lined room where five adult women and three kids were sharing a very large bed.

Lenore held open a rear hall door; she saw Angela’s expression. “They sleep together for warmth now that their mens are gone and the snow comes so unexpected.”

Angela recognized the betrayed tone. “The draft?”

“Aye. Yours too?”

Angela’s voice was just haunted. “My son. I’m on my way to get him back.”

The giantess lifted a surprised brow. “Just the two of you?”

“Yes. No one will keep me from my blood.”

Respect laced the woman’s answer. “My prayers will be with ya. Not that God listens any more now than he did before.”

Angela smiled her thanks, tensing as the wide bed, lit by a candle in each corner, came into view. She hid it and shut the door in relief. *A few minutes alone at last!*

## Eagle Teams

**Level Six**

Kyle, Chris, Daryl, Billy, Shawn, Morgan, Theo, Crone, Denny

**Level Five**

Neil, Jeremy, Daniel, Greg, Wade, Ben, Steven, Jim, Jake

**Level Three**

Zack, Lee, Allan, Frank, Donald, Ozzie, Brandon, Pete, Simon

**Level Three**

Seth, Jeff, Rusty, Jack, Ryan, Bruce, Tommy, Joey, Robert

**Level One**

Kevin, Ray, Alex, Dexter, Logan, Scott, Francis, Whitney, Josh

**Rookies**

A number of camp members are under consideration.

## Book Two

**Adrian’s Eagles**

**1**

**T**he light had begun to fade as the caravan made camp in the middle of 34, out of sight of Sturgis, SD. With a darkened skyline to cast distant shadows, it was another rare place Adrian had found for them. The only signs of the war were ones he couldn’t hide, like mold growing up weakening trunks and bodies of mauled pigs. The Eagles would get those out of sight and people would avoid the trees. Adapting had become a part of life for the refugees of 2012.

The center fire and cans pushed back the blackness as the perimeter was taped and secured. A full team of rested men took up posts over their surroundings, along with a dozen camp members. Then the entire area became a flurry of activity in the sharp wind. Men moved gear and equipment from trucks; women and kids ran for bathroom campers as soon as they were open. Dogs yipped and yapped in anticipation of their after-mess feeding. Safe Haven came alive with harsh noises and chaotic movements that were now part of a rehearsed script. They’d done it many times.

Angela exited the Blazer that Neil and Kyle had already flown from almost before it was stopped. She found Seth waiting nearby. “Guess you’re the first wave?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Seth threw her a charming smile. His freckles were vivid in the dusky emerald light.

Angie snorted as she slung her duffle bag over one shoulder. “All right, Sir Eagle, here’s my plan. First, I need a shower. After that, I’d like to be fed and smoked, then sleep for a week. That okay?”

Seth gave her half a graceful wave. “Your wish is our command.”

Angela’s light laughter mingled into the rest of the setup noises, delivering a tiny wave of peace that those closest responded to with a lifted mood despite the wearying lifestyle.

Kenn had point during setup, which meant continuous helping and supervising until the infrastructure was in place and people were settled. He did it with his usual thoroughness, but Tonya’s words echoed in his mind as he labored.

*Joined Adrian’s super-troopers.*

*In time, she may not even answer to him.*

Kenn wanted to go to the quarantine zone, but by the time camp was up, mess was called. Being at the boss’s center table was something he tried not to miss. During, Adrian had asked detailed questions of the dirty steelworkers he’d invited to eat with them. Kenn had stored the knowledge the Miller family was doing something quiet for the boss. Normally, he would have dug into that a bit, but right then, all he’d wanted was to go find out what was going on with Angela. He needed to know if she’d really used her power in front of the Eagles.

*What does it mean to me if she did? Will I defend her? Help them drive her out? If I do that, I lose my place with Adrian.*

Kenn suffered through the meal, smile plastered on as tales continued to spread. If she and Marc were both allowed in Adrian’s army, he was beat. The bond men formed from training and fighting was fierce. Add that to the spark the couple already shared, and he really wouldn’t be able to keep them apart. Adrian was right about that.

Kenn now suspected his boss had known Angela was an Eagle as soon as he saw her. Adrian recognized power and talent in many forms. There was no way he would let it go to waste. Angela would be a part of Safe Haven–the real one the camp people avoided.

*What does that leave?* *If I can’t reach her, I have to handle it from the other side. I have to tank Marc, or everyone will see how good he is.. And risk my place anyway to accomplish it.*

Subdued, Kenn continued to stew.

Those around him continued to notice.

**2**

“The movie party is a distraction, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” Kyle was surprised to be around a woman who was so quick on the pickup. He was also unhappy to be the one telling her the changes she had to make. He had waited until she ate, hoping she would be more receptive to their plan. “It makes them feel safe and gives us time to accomplish things without having to answer their questions.”

Angela inhaled and put the blunt back into circulation. It was one of many traveling the companionably crowded little mess. She got the feeling the Eagles didn’t share all the stashes they found on runs.

Kyle kept going. “There are some things we need you to do, like change your clothes.”

Angela blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Until we put more miles between us and them, we’re requesting that you dress like an Eagle. You’ll be harder to pick out. Get changed.” Kyle revealed a black duffle bag and set it on the table. *We’ll all miss the sight of her bare skin under those thin tank tops.*

Angela studied the tanned man. “You would, huh? ASAP?”

Kyle didn’t meet her eyes. “Yes. With your hair up, from a distance, you’ll look like one of us.”

Angela opened her mouth to protest.

Marc slid onto the bench next to Kyle. “That’s nothing. Wait for it.”

Dog laid down at his feet.

When her eyes narrowed, Kyle heard Adrian’s words again. *Marc is the only one who can stand her heat.*

“What else?”

Kyle’s lips thinned. “We want you to stay out of sight until John clears you. We’re putting up one big tent. You’ll be in it with us.”

Thunder filled her expression at Kyle’s words. “You mean during the day, right? At night, I’ll be in my own tent.”

Mindful of the warning he’d received, Kyle gave control to Marc with a subtle gesture.

“No, Angie. You can’t even have an area partitioned off because any sniper worth his salt will know you’re there. We’ll all be in bedrolls and keep our vests on.” Marc cut her off before she could protest. “It’s just a couple days and then you can go on like before. We need time to put some things into place.”

Angela scowled. “What things?”

Kyle jumped back in, not wanting Marc to be burned too badly. “Bulletproof canopies over the areas you use and later, a 3-plate-thick steel roof for the entire camp.”

Angela raised a brow, feeling guilty. “That’s a lot of work. You sure I’m worth it?”

“Yes.”

“Aye.”

“Absolutely.”

It was an echo from the men at her table and from the other Eagles listening to the conversation. She blushed, heart warmed, but the anger was still there. “Then I agree, but someone else will have to drive for me tomorrow. There’s no way I’ll be able to sleep in a tent full of men, no way.”

Kyle glanced at Marc. “We’ve got it covered.”

“If you say so.” Angela lit a smoke. “What else is on the list about me?”

Kyle hesitated, not expecting the question. “Camp stuff.”

Marc wasn’t the only one who noticed she didn’t protest when Seth slid onto the seat next to her, gently bumping shoulders.

“You’re putting us in a rough spot.” Seth stole one of her fries. “We don’t know how much Adrian wants revealed to you.”

Her puckered brow remained, but she didn’t give the impression she minded the scold or the playful greeting. Jealousy went around the table at their fast friendship, hitting Marc harder this time. He knew he had nothing to worry about, but the openness their friendship could be had, hurt. His own moments with her would be stolen, brief. Neil said this was a perfect foundation, but Neil wasn’t the one with this *need* burning in his guts.

“So, let me get this straight. You think I’m gonna accept these new chains, knowing they’ll last more than a couple days, and I’m not even allowed to ask questions and get honest answers?” Angela snorted at the silence. That was exactly what they expected. *You guys don’t know me yet,* *but you will*. “How do you plan to explain those changes? If the camp finds out about me, I’ll have to run.”

“We lie.”

Doug’s calm words drew her surprised attention to the table behind them. “What?”

Doug was still purple and yellow from Marc’s single hit. “We lie. We’ll tell them it’s for the camp’s protection.”

Not certain she believed that would succeed, Angela shrugged. “Anything else I should know?”

“He wants you checked out on the gun class.” Kyle waved it off. “But we’ll do that in the morning after you’ve calmed down and gotten some sleep.”

“Oh, hell.” Marc dropped his head, groaning.

“Are you kidding me?” Angela blew out a frustrated snort, hand sliding to the Python on her hip. “Pick a target. Better yet, let *me* pick one.”

“What did I say?” Kyle glanced around in confusion.

“Let’s go.” Angela’s fingers flew over the .357, checking it with a familiarity the men knew only came from being comfortable with the weapon.

“Now?” Kyle still didn’t understand what he’d done wrong. “Won’t it bother you?”

Her eyes were cool blue flames in the dimness as she sharply flicked the cylinder shut. “I either can or I can’t, right?”

“But, now?”

“Yes.” Angela spoke slowly, tone biting. “Putting holes in something sounds good.”

Chuckles and snickers came from the Eagles.

Kyle raised a bushy brow at Marc. “What level?”

Marc was always awed by her strength. He had expected this to intimidate her, but here she was, mad instead. “At least level three, but she’s hot. Right now, she’ll hit whatever she aims at. Make it a challenge for her nerves too.”

Angela was suddenly flooded with memories of him doing that on the way here, bitter pain brewing in her heart. She missed those nights alone with him.

“What kind of challenge?” Kyle didn’t think he could treat her like the men.

“She’s just a girl.” Marc leered. “Any level man should be able to beat her.”

Angela’s fury rose to another level.

Kyle pushed the button on his mike before she could unleash the four letter words he felt coming. “Four to Eagle. We’re doing the test...now.”

“Level Two.” Adrian added to the anger he could feel radiating from her as he keyed the mike. “But first, explain the consequences for failure and let her withdraw if she wants to.”

“Son of a bitch!”

Angela’s voice was clear over the radio, causing a myriad of chuckles and frowns.

“Copy.” Kyle let go of the mike.

“Pick a damn target!” Angela holstered with cool, icy movements.

“I’ll get the rollouts.” Seth stood, eager to see the action. She didn’t sound like she was bluffing.

Seth didn’t make eye contact with Neil, who now had point, or with Kenn when he spotted him lurking in the shadows outside the QZ. That black clad Marine could probably hear at least half of what was being said, but Adrian’s right-hand would have to suck it up.

Kyle scanned the benches. “Who’s the best shooter among the level two’s?”

Alex raised his hand. “Yo.”

Kyle waved him over. “This is a test, Eagle. You will win.”

The bald math teacher from Montana acknowledged the order. He didn’t glance at Angela as they waited for the opposite side of the small mess to be cleared.

Kyle nudged the duffle bag toward her. “As far as the camp knows, you’re sleeping in the medical tent with the new girls.”

He was relieved when she took the bag with an annoyed movement.

Angela went to the stairs leading into the cooking area of the mess truck instead of leaving the canopy to go to the quarantine zone bathroom.

Maria came out a few seconds later, moving fast.

The Eagles shook their heads in admiration and amusement. Angela definitely wasn’t a coward. That was something they respected. Her animosity toward Maria wasn’t questioned. Men might enjoy the show, but they wanted no part of the catfight.

**3**

A small group of camp members waited at the caution tape. Those who had heard *her* and understood the first female was taking a level test–Tonya, Hilda, Cynthia, and Becky–were in the front. The rear included Eagles who had heard the stories but hadn’t gotten to go along for the rescue.

Kenn casually joined those rear men. Unwilling to miss Angela’s first test, he stood stiffly with the others and tried to hide his worry. If she failed, he was safe. If she did well, everything he had built here might fall.

Angela’s emotions were boiling. The horror-filled day and new restrictions had her feeling as if she was on fire. She stood where they told her, nodded when they said something, and waited impatiently for the release she needed. She cared little for their words of having to give up her gun if she failed. After all the time alone with no rules, it was suddenly too much. She couldn’t wait to fight back in the only way she was allowed. *Calm down and get some sleep, my ass!*

Marc noted the furious heat lurking under her cool gaze, and knew she was about to do some of the best shooting he’d seen from her. When she got into the groove, things rolled.

“All right, let’s do this.” Kyle set a box of ammo on the table. “We’ll give the lady a few warmup shots. As a level two, Alex doesn’t need it.”

“Neither do I!” Not waiting for them to give her a clear line of fire, Angela’s hand felt like it belonged to someone else as she drew and shot from the hip.

Men froze in training positions, apprehensive as she aimed and fired, slid to the right, fired, fired.

Counting off six shots, Angela deftly reloaded on the move, using the speed loader positioned on the left side of her belt where it could be grabbed by her free hand. With a practiced precision all the men approved of, she snapped the cylinder of the Python shut with a flick of her wrist and fired off the last two shots.

“Bulls-eyes in all 8 targets!”

“Damn.”

“Wow!”

The Eagles were shocked.

Angela’s furious rage melted into cool anger as her fingers reloaded the two expended rounds, then topped off the speed loader.

The males noticed her automatic reload as well.

“She shoots like Adrian. You see that hip action?”

“And with a gun too big for her hand!”

The level men cheered again.

Kenn tried to appear proud as people slapped him on the arm, but his stomach twisted. It came as no surprise she was so good, though Marc had only had weeks with her. Hadn’t he known it would be this way all along? *It’s part of why I didn’t want her here.* Now everyone would know it all came down to male insecurities and pride. *To hell with Marc! Angela is the real threat to my place.*

Kyle shook his head, smiling. “Shoulda known. That’s a pass and then some.”

Angela didn’t return his grin. “Move ‘em back.” She saw his jaw tighten at her tone. “Providing Alex can match?”

Kyle looked at Marc.

Marc snickered at the mobster’s helpless expression. “I didn’t challenge her. I know better. A higher level shooter maybe?”

Alex cleared his throat. “I’m a level two Eagle, but I’m a level six shooter.”

The teacher turned and fired, matching her quickness with grace.

“Bulls-eyes in all 8 targets! Matched!”

The men cheered again at Neil’s call.

Angela refused Alex’s apology. “Don’t be. It’s all or nothing with me too and I’m not a sore loser.” She beamed. “I am a sore winner though. I plan to rub it in.”

It was a loud, tension-relieving hour for most of them. Angela and Alex matched each other shot for shot until she finally missed at 100 feet. It also had a good effect on the camp. The normal noises gave proof to the tale of today’s chaos being a random attack on an easy target.

Most people on both sides of the caution tape enjoyed the competition, but others worried. Their fears ranged from isolation and betrayal, to the future and how to prepare for it. They were all wise to be concerned. It was almost fate’s turn to flip a card.

**4**

“Don’t like the movie?”

Angela hadn’t heard Adrian’s approach. She tensed, hand dropping to her gun despite the two guards hanging back to give her space, and Dog pacing a perimeter. She was sitting in the middle of a moldy picnic table, smoking a joint. She stared at Adrian for a long moment. Was he here to scold her for leaving the QZ? *I’m really not in the mood.*

When he only stared back, she finally shrugged. “Not really. That one bothers me.” She offered him the smoldering weed.

Adrian hit it hard as he sat down next to her. It was closer than either of her men would like, she was certain. The sky above them was black, with no stars or moon visible. It was depressing. The dying leaves rustled with the breeze in a sad howl of mourning. Angela shivered. *Our enemies are closer now. Their hatred is too clear!*

Adrian followed her thoughts as much as he could with his weak mental gifts. “Is it because they burn the witch at the end?”

She didn’t pretend ignorance. “Yes.”

Neither did Adrian. “That’s why I picked it. That scene will bother the hell outta my men and make them determined to keep it from happening here.”

Angela was too tired to be upset. “Is there anything you leave to chance?”

Adrian blew out a steady stream of smoke. “Not if I can help it, and you shouldn’t either. There’s too much at stake.” He scanned her, noting Kenn’s ring hanging from the thin gold chain around her neck. The Marine was using it as proof that she was his wife. “You going to watch the next movie?”

“What is it? Witches of Eastwick? Harry Potter?”

Adrian’s tone deepened. “Excalibur.”

Angela broke the connection, feeling the hunger, the witch inside, stir. “What’s the camp viewing?”

“Bruce Almighty, then Independence Day.”

She chuckled, able to recognize the usefulness of both films, but also the irony.

The wind dropped suddenly. They could almost make out the words of those in the big tent before it gusted and they were alone again. It came to her then, what he needed, but couldn’t openly ask her for yet. She felt no reason to delay him discovering her other gifts. She had basically brought a man back from the brink of death. If that didn’t freak him out, nothing would.

Adrian felt the change in the slender woman next to him. He stayed still as the soft hum of electricity filled the air. Her breathing was shallow, a bit faster than normal. Adrian stored the details as cool wind brushed her hair against his arm and filled his nose with vanilla.

“They will come in the darkest hour of the wake.” Her words carried to the guards. “They hate you. They will behead your men while you watch.”

“What should I do?” Adrian was ready to grab his notebook.

“You’ll know when the time comes.” Her eyes flew open in the darkness.

His pulse sped up as the witch studied him.

Angela was helpless to control the actions of the hunger inside when the witch surged forward. “You have great secrets, but there is more support for honesty than you’ve given them credit for. Tell the truth now, before it all comes out.”The witch spoke to him directly, dripping need*.* “I’d protect you.”

Angela tried to pull the witch in, but it continued to remain in front.

“Or find you a new herd to care for…”

The lust rolled off her in waves. A hundred times stronger than in the training tent with Seth. Adrian froze, too aware of her as a woman to turn away. He had time to notice she wasn’t wearing a bra under her tank top, unable to keep his eyes from dipping, and then those red orbs locked onto his. A current of need ran the length of him as her nostrils flared; the woman inside scented him.

*Sweat, fresh cut straw, and underneath, man*. The witch ignored Angela’s protests as she inched forward.

Adrian stared, drowning in her glowing depths. He knew he had to stop this. A single word would help her regain control, but he couldn’t wait to taste her, to claim her.

The witch slipped into his mind. *I’m hungry.*

It was something Angela would never have said. The spell broke. He became immune to the lust. “I feel her fighting. She’s not willing.”

The witch sent erotic images through his mind. “She wants this as much as you do. She fears a bond with a man she can never have.”

Adrian opened his mouth.

Angela fought to get through. *Think!*

The witch flinched.

Adrian froze as flames shot up around them.

“I will have this!” The witch leaned in.

It cleared the final layer of haze for Adrian. “No.”

The witch and her fire faded.

Angela slid onto her knees, winded and mortified at her lack of control. She had never been around her own kind before and Adrian was definitely that.

When he would have helped her up, she flinched. “I’m fine!”

Adrian guided her to her feet anyway, making her look at him in the process. “Is this you?”

Angela snorted at the serious question. “No, it’s the Sandman.”

Adrian kept full eye contact and hands on her skin. “Take what you need. I give it willingly.” His words had an instant effect, as he’d known they would.

Thunder crashed as she drew energy from him, followed by the angry waves of a salty ocean, and then it was just them, the dead night, and two very curious Eagles.

Angela’s voice trembled with renewed energy. “I’ll show you something beautiful as a reward for your strength.”

Adrian felt her cool, soft presence in his mind, so unlike the feverish heat of the witch. He struggled to control his thoughts, to keep her out of his desires.

“This is what I see.” She blew into her cupped hand.

Her sweet breath rushed into his lungs. A map of their country appeared in his mind, black as death.

*Gone!* There were only charred outlines of apocalyptic landscapes…but as the brilliant sun sank, thousands of tiny lights appeared, scattered across the states.

“Campfires.” Adrian blinked as the vision panned out and even more flickers appeared in the darkness.

“My people!” He struggled to memorize their locations. “I’ll never get them all!”

“We’re not meant to.”

The map vanished at Angela’s words.

Adrian kept his eyes shut, able to see it in his mind.

Angela resettled on the table, letting him work. In the distance, lightning flashed violently.

Adrian was in heaven and hell at the same time. *So many!* *How do I know the ones I remember are the right ones?*

Angela exhaled. “Fate controls that, not you.”

Finished with his mental imaging, Adrian joined her on the table, frowning. “You use a lot of energy to do these things.”

“Yes, and to keep the witch in line.” Angela was mortified. “I’m sorry.”

Adrian was thrilled. “It’s the energy she wants?”

Angela frowned. “Yes, but it creates a bond and I think you already knew that.”

“But having it confirmed makes the choice easier. It can be done in dreams?”

She sensed where he was going. “Yes. Don’t you worry about keeping things under control?”

Adrian shrugged. “Good leadership is control. Let her have their dreams. You’ll be in some of them anyway. Pretend you don’t know. With her satisfied, you’ll be in charge and your gifts will grow.”

Angela regarded him coolly. “If I let her loose, your men won’t be good enough. She’ll go straight to the top.”

Adrian felt need rise back up to lash him with stinging flares. “I won’t turn her away twice.”

Angela shrugged, but he understood she was against that as lightning flashed again, illuminating her features. “What about time alone with Marc? I can make some arrangements.”

She brightened at the offer before going dim again. “No. I’m fine without it. I always have been.”

“You’re doing more now.” Adrian motioned toward camp, sure the electrical storm would make the herd uneasy. He was glad when she followed. “Let her out at night. It’s just a dream.”

“Maybe.” Angela wasn’t sure she was strong enough to keep the witch in line tonight anyway. The entity inside liked it here and Adrian had given her free rein.

[Book Two](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-2.html)

**[A picture containing player, person, stage, ball

Description automatically generated](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-2.html)**

**Adrian’s Eagles**

## Contact the Author

**Facebook:**

<https://www.facebook.com/authorangelawhite/>

**Email:**

[cloudninepublications@yahoo.com](mailto:cloudninepublications@yahoo.com)

**Website:**

<http://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/>