



ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #2

ADRIAN'S
EAGLES

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Adrian's Eagles
by
Angela White

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Author: Angela White

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Table of Contents

[Pick A Target](#)
[Hook, Line, And Sinker](#)
[Barbie](#)
[We Are 5-By](#)
[Island Drama](#)
[Troopers And Trackers](#)
[I Liked It](#)
[Fists At Dawn](#)
[Camp Meeting](#)
[Liquid Steel](#)
[The Madness Spreads](#)
[That's A Pass](#)
[We Pick Ourselves](#)
[Welcome To My Army](#)
[Rookie Lessons](#)
[Snap, Rumble, And Wait](#)
[Let Freedom Ring](#)
[Best Served Cold](#)
[Hard Lessons](#)
[Tropical Heat](#)
[Scene One](#)
[Playing With Fire](#)
[Twice Taken](#)
[I Challenge You](#)
[Leveled Playing](#)
[The Killing Fields](#)
[Following Orders](#)
[Timing Is Everything](#)

I Want Her
X Marks The Spot
Adrift In Hell
Third Time's A Charm
Hands On A Clock
All Hells' Day
All Hells' Night
One Of Them
Rockin' Rough
Ghosts
Close

Our Hero

Blond and blue,
He stands at attention.
It's easy to mention,
He's beautiful.

He would give his life
Without being asked,
And though his emotions are masked
We feel his love.

A gun on his lean hip
That has seen too many days of action,
At home and among the foreign factions
Who loathe his courage.

He is our hero.
A ruthless fighter
To stand beside Her,
And guard the path.

Leader of the people;
Marine
And every other combat team:
We salute you!

Take care
So far from home,

And keep in mind while you roam...
America will always be your home.

Chapter One

Pick A Target

1

The light had begun to fade as the caravan made camp in the middle of 34, out of sight of Sturgis, SD. With a darkened skyline to cast distant shadows, it was another 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 corner 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 well-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.

Kenn had point during setup, which meant continuously 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 in which 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.

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 anyway. The power inside liked it here and Adrian had given her free rein.

Chapter Two

Hook, Line, And Sinker

Near Union Center, South Dakota
April 6th

1

“Do not kill him.”

Cesar’s guerrillas had the lone man surrounded before his gold convertible was fully stopped.

Dean’s harsh face dared one of them to make the mistake of touching him. He had come to talk, but like a wounded animal, he would kill right now with little provocation. There was no doubt these men had heard everything over the CB, but if not, the waves of energy from the witch would have been impossible to miss. The slaver now had his proof of their words.

Cesar considered these things too as he strode toward the black man who’d been sitting in the center of the muddy, abandoned site when they pulled in. It was Safe Haven’s latest area. Cesar didn’t like it that the twin knew him well enough to predict where he would show up.

The guerrilla leader had been certain both brothers were dead. From the look of the grieving man in the cold camp, he guessed only one of them

had survived the encounter. *It serves them right for trying to take her alone.*

Why would Dean come? Vengeance for his brother? To take over his men and attack? Cesar did not intend to kill the brother if he could avoid it. After viewing and hearing Safe Haven's protectors, he now wanted every deadly hand he could get. There was no doubt Dean was that and more.

Still, Dean had to know who was in charge. "You should have called uz. We could have taken her from a group that size." Dean's face was a mask of hatred that Cesar was careful to ignore for the moment. Business came first. There would be time for lessons later.

"We had an opening and took it. They weren't away from the others long enough for you to get there."

José glared at the disrespect, moving closer to his cousin.

Cesar shrugged, stretching tiredly. "The only thing that matters is what you planned to do once you had her."

Dean glowered up from his seat on the muddy ground, not feeling the sting of the cold wind as it swept over them. "Get our share of the pie."

Cesar frowned, unfamiliar with the saying.

The twin blew out a sigh of contempt. "Her first orders would have been to destroy that camp. Yours was next if you came for her."

José drew his pistol and stepped forward, but Cesar laughed and waved his second in command away. “Yo hermano was the balls, si?”

Dean grunted. “Always.”

“Now, maybe you are both the balls and the brains.” Cesar extended a hand that Dean took warily, letting the slaver help him up. “Come. Let us share a whore in your brother’s honor. Then, I will tell you about the team I sent to get a tank. We will meet Safe Haven in the middle.”

2

Dawn was still an hour away when Angela sat up in a fast jerk, unaware of men flinching back at the movement. Her nightmare had drawn them. They listened, worried.

“It’s coming.”

Marc was the one they turned to.

He understood their hesitation when she peered at him with eyes that held no trace of Angela, only her witch.

“He has to talk to the weather woman. She dreams of it too. *Beware.*”

Marc shifted restlessly as the wind gusted, shaking the tent. If Angie said something was coming, it was.

“It’s just the nightmares, right?” Seth’s mind flashed to the beautiful sorceress who had danced through his. “We all have them now.”

“Not always. Sometimes, it’s more.” Marc turned to Angela. “Is it the slavers?”

“No.” Her haze cleared a bit. “He has to talk to Samantha—today.”

Neil and Kyle exchanged glances, both thinking of the man who had come in with Samantha. Rick was being watched.

“How long?” Marc was prepared to run for Adrian if it was an emergency, but Angela would go with him.

Angela wiped sleep from her eyes. “A week? Maybe less.”

The men around them relaxed, some of them lying back down.

“We’ll tell him.” Marc stayed close to her. “You want some hot chocolate?”

“Yes.” Angela flushed at being the center of attention. “Who’s my shadow?”

Behind her, Neil grunted. “That would be me.”

She surveyed his narrow profile. “You had any sleep yet?”

Neil shrugged. “The same as you.”

Angela put on her boots with cold fingers. “I’ll come back here and lie down in a few.”

Neil stood, adjusting his gun belt. “No need to if you’d rather not. I run light.”

“That works for me.” Angela stood, scanning to make sure she had everything.

Kyle and Marc had made a 6x6 area for her, enclosed by a foot-high stack of bedrolls and kits that appeared to be only gear in a neat pile from the

outsides of the canvas. With Marc at her back, she'd had little trouble falling asleep, but Angela was definitely done letting the witch dream walk, and she was more than ready to be out of this testosterone-filled tent. She stretched, unable to stop a small moan of pleasure.

Men's lids flew open at the sound.

Marc assumed it was a copy of the one they'd just heard in dreams. He recognized the gut-twisting flare of need in the looks; he knew it well.

Angela stiffened at the thoughts, the dreamy images rushing toward her. She strapped on her gun and exited the tent, with Neil and Marc on her heels.

The QZ was layered in thin fog and Eagles. Dog was roaming, and there were no less than fifteen Eagles in sight. Each one confirmed her safety, escort, and her shadow, before nodding politely as they went by.

"Doesn't he think this is a bit much?" It wouldn't help these men accept her as one of them if she needed to be babysat.

Marc didn't tell her that he and Neil were responsible. Until the extra protections were in place, she would have help within reach at all times. It was how he'd handled witnesses he had been sent into foreign lands to recover, and it was a plan he intended to use here. Besides the slavers, there was a grieving twin out there and he may not come in force. Dean might sneak in and slit her throat while she slept or firebomb her tent if he knew which one it was.

“You can’t stop it, Marc. They’re coming. I have to be ready.” Angela spotted specks of crimson in his goatee that he’d missed when he washed up, but she didn’t mention it.

Marc was positive their idea of *ready* was drastically different. Angie grew a reckless streak when she was upset, always had. More than once, he’d had to refuse a dangerous request when they were kids...and then she’d waited for him to leave and done it. *Alone*, he remembered, trying not to flinch. *I’ll have to be careful not to push her into anything.*

Neil hung back as they ducked under the awning of the little mess, fog curling around their boots. They were the only ones at the small eating area.

Angela chose a dim corner while Marc got their mugs.

The larger camp was still silent, with only quiet Eagles moving. Angela rubbed at her face, yawning. She wasn’t used to a first shift schedule.

Marc smiled. “This’ll help.”

She let Marc set the mug down and pull his hand away before reaching for it.

“Chocolate caffeine.” She sipped it, forcing herself to not wake too fast, but to enjoy the time with Marc instead. “How do you feel?”

Marc’s lips grinned, but he didn’t. He sat down, adjusting his matching Colts. “Sore, like after a mission.”

She chuckled. “Sounds like another promotion is in order.”

“That’s your honor.” He couldn’t hide his anger or his awe. “What you did! Thank you.”

Angela smiled. “Anything for you.”

Magic sparked between them.

Neil distracted a pair of Kyle’s Eagles who were coming in for coffee.

Angela noticed the trooper running block. “Neil’s a good friend to have here, I’ve heard.”

“Sure could have been a lot worse without him.” Marc liked Neil, but he hadn’t come here to make friends. It wasn’t a priority.

Angela wanted to say more, like how grateful and how mad she was about what Marc had done for her, but she didn’t. He already knew.

“Did you calm down and get some sleep?”

“Yes.” She snorted, enjoying his musky scent. “Thanks.”

They shared a grin. It held for a long moment where Marc fought to keep from sliding his hand over hers. He settled for letting his eyes say all the things his mouth wasn’t allowed to.

“We’ve been through a lot, *Wolfman*.” she smiled as the caffeine brought alertness.

“Hasn’t changed much here, has it, *that New Woman*?”

Angela chuckled, loving the way he always kept up with her, kept her laughing. “Nope. We’ll avoid bridges and airports now.”

It wasn’t much. Five minutes without Kenn and the camp scrutinizing their every expression, but it was a flash to the trip here for them, sharp and

sweet. Their slow starts and finishes to the day were something they'd both grown to love and now missed.

"You did pretty good last night. How does it feel to be the first female here officially allowed to carry a gun?"

Angela felt a sharp prick pierce her good mood, sensing the searching caution in his words. *Why can't he leave it alone?* "Going through it like an Eagle was great. Wow, Alex is fast!"

Aware of her tension, Marc still didn't change his plans or censor his words. "You'll be that good someday."

There was a sense of being patronized. Angela cast out a line, hoping not to snag anything, but needing to know. "Adrian will be opening Eagle tryouts for rookie levels soon...for women."

Marc's attention snapped up from her delicate wrists. "Tryouts?" When she nodded, showing the V in her chin, his heart thumped painfully. "You're thinking about it?"

She nodded again.

He was aware of those shrewd baby-blues evaluating his reaction. Swallowing his first three responses, Marc sipped his chocolate and thought. When he finally spoke, it was with care. "It's rough, the way they do things here. You might want to try a few private lessons with Doug or Kyle first, to be sure."

It was a perfectly reasonable answer. Then his mouth opened again. "And I honestly don't know if

you can do what they do, honey. You're awful small compared to them."

Neil groaned at the thoughtless words.

Angela's demeanor frosted over. That cute chin became a set line.

Damn it! Why couldn't I stop there?

It was an identical wish for both of them.

"It's been a long time since you've said that to me, Marc."

He refused to take it back. "And I wouldn't now, if I wasn't worried about you getting hurt."

Angela pushed away her anger as best she could. "I'm not afraid to get hurt if it means earning something I want. I never have been."

"I know that, better than most people." Marc relented, holding up a hand. "It's your choice, Angie, as always."

"Yes, it is." She stood as Neil came toward them and Kyle's team filled the small tent.

Smothering disappointment, she'd hoped Marc might actually support her, Angela let none of it lace her tone. "Looks like there's hours yet before the camp will be ready to travel. Let's do our normal drill."

Marc started to tell her it wasn't safe for her to be out in the open.

Neil overruled him before Marc could make the mistake of forbidding it. "I'll have us set up in five minutes. Everyone hates missing sets while we're in the QZ."

Satisfied she would be safe, Marc did a fast sweep of the molding trees and bold ants littering their view. “We? It’s your first time in quarantine, right?”

Neil smiled sheepishly. “So I’ve heard.”

All three of them were laughing as they exited the little mess.

From the edge of the tattered caution tape, Adrian saw them and thought they seemed out of place with the apocalyptic landscape to backdrop their happiness. The brackish sky was a dim, depressing canopy that dripped indifferently over everything.

“Hey, Boss.” Kyle came to him, an extra mug in hand. “All quiet now.”

Adrian accepted the mug. “Now?”

Kyle glanced around to verify there was no one else in hearing distance. “She had a nightmare. Said you need to talk to the new woman, Samantha.”

Adrian frowned. “She say anything else?”

“Something’s coming within the week.” Kyle’s voice dropped. “You think Samantha’s special too?”

“The odds just went up on that bet.” Adrian turned toward the larger camp, taking the hot coffee. “Bring her by while I’m breaking down my canvas and we’ll find out.”

“Yes.” Angela blew out an annoyed sigh. “And stop warning me. It’s like training with someone’s nervous grandmother.”

The Eagles laughed, eager noises carrying on the wind.

Flushing a bit, Seth lunged with a leg sweep.

Angela jumped and returned it.

Seth tripped; he hit the ground in surprise.

“Never underestimate your opponent!” Doug moved between them. “Who’s next?”

They’d been at it for half an hour despite her passing the self-defense part in the first few minutes. She’d insisted on more.

“Me.” Marc stepped forward. His tone was hard to read, but his eyes said he’d hated watching her wrestle with these men. “You guys are too easy on her.”

There were scoffs from the four disheveled rookies she’d cleared, but the senior Eagles watched, evaluating. She was already better than some of their rookies. If Marc had gotten her to another level, this might tell them where to place her in training when Adrian openly declared her an Eagle. That he would, his top men had little doubt, though it had only been a few days. When Adrian wanted something, he got it, and female members of the guard were high on his list. He’d just been waiting to put his faith in the right one.

“Don’t hurt yourself, now.” Marc’s challenge came from their mornings spent this way.

Angela’s face stretched into a grin.

Lower level men exchanged disapproving looks at her lack of seriousness, but again, the top Eagles wondered. The determination behind that smile said she was anything but distracted.

It was fierce from the beginning. Marc did what none of them had been willing to do. He tackled her.

Prepared, and glad to be back on his training terms, Angela locked her ankles and used the momentum from their fall to roll him over and off.

Marc pushed to his feet, hair mussed as he stalked her. Contentment melted his angry face back into her best friend.

Angela crouched low. "Say it. Say it!"

Marc sighed. "I've missed this."

Her grin widened. "Even the pain, Grunt?"

He barked a laugh. "Especially that!"

"Then, let's get to it." Before he could rush her again, Angela lunged upward to deliver a harsh hit to his shoulder that he absorbed as he wrapped his arms around her upper body to trap her in a tight hug.

Angela dropped to her knees and twisted her elbow into his side. Able to slip free, she ducked his swipe for her braid and kicked out, shoving him away from her.

Angela flashed to her feet, eagerness spilling out. "More, Marc, more!"

It was a blast from their past. It lit up his heart. "Whatever you want, Baby-cakes."

In her happiness, Angela didn't get set for his lunge. The shock of being on the ground under a man sent fear rushing into her mind, freezing her.

"Lock those ankles!"

Angela steeled her panic, calming, then Marc had his hands full keeping her on the ground as she punched, twisted, elbowed.

As they struggled, there was only the sound of their harsh breathing and the mutters of Eagles who all wore deep scowls at seeing a woman on the ground under a man they didn't trust.

As they rolled over again, Marc still coming out on top, Seth stepped forward to break it up.

"Leave them." Adrian had come from the caution tape with quiet steps.

It eased his men to have him present, even as their frowns grew.

"Still want more?"

Angela had freed herself and was staying low as Marc circled her, rapidly closing the space.

She didn't answer his taunt.

He eased closer. "Very good. You remember the next lesson?"

She swallowed. "Trade-off."

"That too much?"

Angela shook her head as Marc came forward aggressively.

This time, even Neil went to stop it.

Only Adrian stepping forward halted the rush to help her. He stopped as soon as the men did though, enrapt by the battling warrior woman of his dreams.

Angela swung, connecting with his open palm.
Marc returned the motion.

Angela had her feet braced and didn't budge as her hand absorbed the hit. She threw the next punch with a quick twist at the end. Angela could feel his surprise that she'd remembered the single five-minute lesson.

The blow made him sway to the right; she waited for his hit, gaze locked firmly on his.

Marc knew what she wanted, what Adrian also wanted. Angie wanted the Eagles to know she could do this. Adrian wanted the same. He was unable to resist the pull from them both.

Fine. Marc grunted at the hope as she read his thoughts. *At least with me, she won't be hurt.* "Level two."

Angela swung at the words, following a right with a left.

Marc stood pat so he wasn't pushed off balance.

His turn now, he stomped toward her with a raised hand.

The fear froze her again. *He's so big!*

Unsure and very aware of his duty, Adrian stepped forward as Marc's slap neared her face.

Angela cupped her hands into one fist and slammed it into Marc's unprotected jaw.

Expecting it, Marc grunted at the impact, but kept coming.

She flashed out with a punch to his kidneys that sent him to his knees at the unexpectedness.

Adrian motioned the Eagles back, but he stayed close as Marc lunged for her legs and got a boot in the shoulder that sent him rolling and then back onto his feet.

“Switch.”

Angela’s grin stretched her lips into a fierce snarl as she attacked.

Now mostly confident they’d done this enough to keep her from getting hurt, Adrian watched the reactions of his men. He tried not to wonder how many of Marc’s hits had landed when she’d first begun to learn these moves.

Angela swung from the hip, letting her anger out a bit.

Marc’s duck was quick. He jumped from her leg sweep and managed to avoid her left hook, but the right caught him squarely on the forehead. He hit the ground.

Angela rushed to him, not thinking about anything but him falling from the mangled Blazer. *What am I doing?* “Marc?”

Marc’s body was shaking. His laughing snort shot out. “I’m fine. I just finished thinking you wanted me on my ass and then here I am.”

Angela chuckled, offering a hand up that he took and kept for a second.

“Nice switch. That enough or you want some more?” He challenged her as if he’d won, drawing a grin. The sparks between them were thick.

“That’ll do, Marc.” Her amused sigh was full of long-suffering patience. She exited the circle with

his chuckle in her ears and a lighter heart. Marc didn't want her to be an Eagle, but he did want her to be happy. If this was what it took, he would give it to her.

“Let's have a lesson.”

Adrian's words caught Angela's attention. She lingered nearby, hoping she'd be allowed to observe. Sweat rolled down her spine; she shivered as a cold gust of wind gave her a chill.

Adrian led them toward the rear of the long tent that Neil had indeed directed them to less than five minutes after they left the little mess.

“Open matchups.”

All the Eagles grinned at Adrian's call, stripping off their gear.

When Angela stayed near the door, Adrian gestured toward her. “Eagle four has lead. Rookie session during, Eagle three.”

For reasons she soon understood, their spirits went up another notch.

Neil motioned her forward. “You should have a front row seat for this.”

Angela went willingly, happy to be allowed to watch, but she was aware of Marc's good mood fading as he fell in on her left. She also noticed a few of the Eagles giving her strange looks, but their thoughts weren't open in her distraction.

“What was the first thing you learned in my self-defense class?”

Adrian's voice was full of a command that he hadn't used with Angela yet. The sound of it was mesmerizing, drawing her closer.

"To duck!" the Eagles answered in unison.

"And the second?"

"To hit back!"

Adrian gestured to the empty space in the center of the tent. "The basics. Square off and show me."

Angela observed in fascination as the men chose each other and started brawling. Except it wasn't a chaotic fight with wild swings and reckless moves. It was a choreographed play of punches and ducks that made the men doing it come across as puppets on a stage, their strings being wielded by a master.

"That's the first set you'd learn if you were an Eagle." Neil wondered if she knew how privileged she was to be seeing this.

Angela was mesmerized. Not a single swing was out of place, with no missteps that sent them into each other or to the floor. "This is the basics?"

"It isn't so smooth in the beginning. It gets this way over time and repetition."

She wasn't sure why Neil was telling her these things, but she understood the root of Marc's disapproving grunt on her left.

Adrian spun a finger. "Level one."

Now the hits landed into open palms, much the way she and Marc had done, but these punches were hard and fast. It made the men move from the force being used.

The slap of skin meeting skin rang through the tent. Neil waited for the right moment to speak, surprised to find he could read Angela as easily as he did the male rookies. “By the end of this level, your arm muscles are so sore you feel like you can’t move and the bruises on your palms last for weeks.”

Angela remembered her small taste of that when Marc had finally agreed to give her the training she wanted. He’d pulled most of his hits, she knew that, but she’d made him stay at it until she ached, just to make up for his easy touch.

Adrian switched them. “Level two.”

The first punch took Seth to his knees. Angela stiffened her lips into a line to hide the fear that bubbled up. This is what she needed to see, what she had to know.

Seth wiped blood from his mouth, slinging the scarlet drops as he returned fire.

Marc had refused to do more than trade hits with her open palmed. *Would I be able to take that?* If not, she’d never be an Eagle.

“Three.” Adrian led them up the levels, giving the men the release and nerve steadying workout that they needed. He studied Angela as the fighting got harder. She needed to know what she was walking into.

“Camp rules say when you bleed, you’re out.” Neil couldn’t help the longing in his tone. “As an Eagle, there’s no crying off. Blood is part of what we do.”

Angela could hear Neil wishing he was part of the lesson instead of standing here with her. She kept quiet, hoping he'd understand he didn't have to miss the fun to explain things to her.

To teach you, the witch corrected, awake and scenting the odors of strength and pain. *You're the rookie he's instructing.*

Adrian called the next switch. "Level six."

Angela winced as Daryl smacked into the ground near her feet, but his wink and grin told her he wasn't unhappy. When he delivered a brutal kick to his opponent, his roar was full of life.

"They all love this." She was surprised.

"Enough to follow his orders no matter what they are."

Angela heard Neil's warning, and the tone that said she wasn't strong enough to do this. She raised her chin. Just because she was scared of something didn't mean she couldn't do it, especially when there was so much at stake. *When the slavers come for me, when Dean comes, I have to be able to hold them off long enough to kill their leader.* Then Adrian and his men would be able to go in and wipe out the rest.

"You okay?"

Marc's voice brought her back to the lesson. She gave a nod, frowning as she realized the men were all cleaning up. She'd missed the end.

"We have another half hour. Anyone feel like a challenge?" Adrian stepped into the center of the tent, removing his 9mm.

The excited reaction of the men was nothing to the thumping in her heart as Adrian stripped his shirt. She surveyed the tattoos, recognizing some as Marine and others she suspected went much deeper into the underside of the military. They stretched over his back and arms in beautiful, exotic detail.

Eagles moved his way. Adrian's stance said he wanted it as much as they did. Angela sighed. *What is it with men and fighting?*

"They won't hurt him." Neil could feel her stress. "Now them, well, that's another story."

"Let's thin things out a bit." Adrian gestured. "No one below level three."

There were good-natured groans and movements that left half a dozen men in the ring with Safe Haven's nearly naked leader. When they all rushed him, Angela tensed, drawing a disdainful thought from the other man at her side.

She knows they won't hit him, right?

Thud!

Marc's lids narrowed as Adrian took a sharp hit on the jaw and fired a blow that sent the offender to his knees.

Thud!

Another punch landed on Adrian. A second Eagle hit the floor an instant later.

Damn, he's fast. Marc was surprised. He had known Adrian was lethal. It was in his body language, but Marc hadn't expected the 40-something-year-old to be so quick.

Angela observed with her hands balled into fists to keep her emotions from showing. The witch was whispering, muttering of wasted energy, but Angela could feel their need for this. Adrian was giving them a release from the tension of being perfect all the time in front of the camp.

And showing you what to expect, the witch cautioned, fading. Pay attention if this is what your future holds. You'll have need of it.

Another man went down. Adrian took out the last two in one extremely fast leg sweep that made the Eagle next to Angela whimper.

"He's been practicing." Neil forgot his duty as the desire to join in flooded him. Matchup with Adrian was an incredible rush.

"Anyone else?"

Unable to stop himself, Neil lifted a hand. "Permission to trade off?"

Adrian's eyes narrowed. "Okay."

Neil motioned Seth over to cover his duty as he moved toward the blond.

Adrian looked at Neil. "Level ten."

Neil froze for a brief second before starting to strip his hat and Beretta. "You got it."

Each Eagle there suddenly didn't envy Neil the personal time. They recognized the punishment. Level ten was only for tests and even then, few men passed.

Adrian didn't hide his displeasure. "Let's roll."

Chapter Three

Barbie

1

Angela had never witnessed anything so brutal. The hits were intended to inflict pain as well as injury. It was a vivid demonstration of the power in a human body that made her cheer along with the rest of them.

Adrian didn't pull his punches. Neil needed a reminder of how fragile his place was.

Neil hit the ground hard and rose. He adjusted his strategy and attacked, only to be driven back with a brutal hit to the shoulder that sent him back to his knees. For every swing he got in, Adrian's fist was there to make him pay double.

"Get him, Neil!"

"Come on, man!"

With Marc also cheering next to her, Angela was caught up in the rush. She let the witch free in a burst of uncensored pleasure. *We like it here!*

Energy exploded, sending a gust of heat drenched air through the tent in a resounding blast that echoed off the canvas walls and bounced. It hit men with an unexpected flare of need that sank deep and vanished, leaving them all a bit confused as to what had happened.

Angela wanted to slip out, sorry she'd lost control, but then they would know she was responsible. She turned to Marc with a casual tone instead. "I'll be adding that one to the journal. Remember the heat flash we felt in Indiana?"

Marc's words were just as careful. "That one lasted longer."

She shrugged, aware of the men listening. "Things are different now."

There were mutters of agreement as the two men in the center shared a look that said they were done.

Adrian collected his gun belts and shirt. "We leave in an hour. Is everything set on this side?"

He barely sounds winded. Angela watched Adrian use the shirt to wipe his bloody face. His jaw was already swelling, skin bruising. She realized Kenn and Marc having shiners wasn't a big deal here. The camp had to be used to seeing their men this way.

"All set, Boss." Kyle gave the update.

Adrian handed out the next punishment he'd settled on. "Good. Neil has point until midnight."

Neil stiffened, recognizing another reprimand, but he didn't say anything as Adrian left the tent. Point man was a great duty during camp times. On travel days, it was hell.

"What did you do?" Kyle hadn't been in the training tent for the matchups.

Neil spoke without thinking. "I wasn't paying attention to the lesson he wanted me to give to the Barbie."

Silence fell.

Angela ducked her head, cheeks blazing red.

Most of the men expected tears or a tirade.

How does that feel? The witch stared at Angela through the mental cage bars. *There's more of the same waiting if you choose this path.*

Angela lifted her chin. "Don't blame me for your slacking off. When he gives me a job, I'll follow orders, no matter what they are." She spun from the tent as voices rose behind her.

Angela stopped when she saw Adrian waiting just outside the flap.

Adrian stared back "You handled that well. It would have been better if you'd hit him for the insult."

Inside the tent, Neil cringed.

"I'm not that good yet, but I want to be." Angela gave Dog a comforting rub when he appeared at her heel.

Adrian locked eyes with her. "Will you give everything you are? They do."

"Yes. I want to be an Eagle in your army."

Marc froze.

Everyone else waited, almost holding their breath.

"I'll get back to you on that." Adrian couldn't clear her too quick, but they both knew what his answer was.

“I’ll be here.” Angela walked away, chin up and mood rough.

Behind her, Eagles started coming out of the tent.

Angela went to the bathroom to clean up and get herself under control. She also needed alone time to think. Adrian had given her a clear view of what she was in for and she’d asked anyway. *Am I insane?*

Marc trailed her.

“He woulda said no if he thought she couldn’t do it.”

Marc didn’t answer Kyle. That wasn’t the problem. He’d known Angie when she was that young girl playing with fire and delighting in what she learned from the burns. In time, she would be able to hold her own with most survivors, man or woman. *Then, why is my gut all twisted?* Because these men would be training her? That they would get his Angie time?

Marc grimaced. If that was the only reason, she had every right to be upset with him. Not that it mattered now. A no from Adrian would have shut it down, but instead, she had his support. The leader hadn’t said yes, but Marc knew clever tactics when he saw them. That whole show had been about getting her in, drawing her closer, and it had succeeded. The biggest part of his issue with that was how willing Angie was to turn her future over to Safe Haven’s leader. *She’s only known him for a few days!*

Marc was sure whatever she was getting from Adrian's thoughts must be the reason, but it still bothered him. He was glad when she just spent the next hour sitting on the hood of her Blazer.

Busy writing in her journal, Angela didn't notice her vehicle had been parked in the center of three trucks, blocking it from even the best sniper, but she was aware of how many guards lingered near her, taking turns staring.

2

"Kyle said you want me?"

Adrian and the rest of the large camp were taking down their tents or packing. Samantha wished she were as good. It had taken her half an hour to dismantle her own.

Adrian smiled at her. "I'll be right with you."

Instead of waiting, Samantha started on the last side of his large tent. *I need the practice.*

"Thanks. How'd you sleep?"

It was a normal question that shouldn't have made her twitch, but it did. Adrian frowned. "Why are you hiding?"

"Hiding?" She scowled. "I'm not hiding."

He gestured. "You don't have a single friend here. You don't eat meals in the mess. There's something keeping you from the true shelter of this camp and I want to know what it is."

She flushed. "You know all. You tell me."

His tone sharpened. “Okay, I will. You think you’re different than anyone else here.”

Samantha snorted, flashing to the man in the compound, the man she’d killed. “I am different.”

“You’re special, Samantha, but not more so than everyone.” His voice lowered. “Angie said I should talk to you.”

Samantha crossed her arms over her chest, not letting his waves of persuasion distract her. “Speaking of special, I don’t know her. I didn’t even think she remembered my name.” Blank blue eyes waited for his response.

It pleased Adrian that she was using one of his favorite tactics against him. Women were always harder to handle than men, but they were also more likely to be gifted. “We are not adversaries, Samantha. You’ve been hurt enough since the war to know that.”

She flushed again under the scolding tone. “It’s good here, really. *You’re* good.”

“So are you, Samantha, but as long as you cast that outsider image, these people won’t pull you in where you can relax and belong.”

Samantha’s expression didn’t change.

Her control impressed him. Like Angela, this one was a fighter who didn’t know her worth, but he hated how censored she was. *Where are the real emotions, the fire?* He sent a stronger wave. “You have to give them a chance.”

“How do I do that when every conversation goes bad?” Samantha was referring to the argument

she'd gotten into yesterday with a small group of women who didn't like her opinion on taking a stand against the slavers. Their town had been attacked by Cesar, who was let through the barricade by a traitor who had left buried messages. The refugees were terrified. Samantha, who had been face-to-face with the Mexicans and escaped, hadn't been able to stop herself from saying they should have banded together to kill the evil men. One of the Eagles, Jeremy, had broken it up before it had progressed to blows.

"By being useful and honest. I don't expect blind loyalty, and from some people, it wouldn't mean as much anyway, but I have to have the truth." He lowered his voice. "What's coming for us?"

She only stiffened for an instant, and again, it was impressive.

"The final blow from God? How should I know?" Samantha's tone held deep sarcasm. She expected a threat or at least a warning in response.

Adrian only waited with a raised brow.

Samantha's shoulders slumped. She wanted to tell him, but then she would have to leave. "I don't know what you're—"

"Don't lie to me!" The bark was mild, but it still drew attention because of her flinch.

Adrian glared. "Say you'd rather not tell me, or you don't trust me yet, or even tell me to go to hell and walk but lies are *not* allowed."

“You won’t believe it.” Samantha’s face was covered in the fear that she was about to be alone again in this hard new world.

He shrugged. “Try me. You might be surprised.”

She studied the packing camp for a long moment, feeling much the same as Angela had when she’d made her choice to tell him about Danny being the thief. When she spoke, her voice held the first true emotion of her arrival—terror. “Might as well tell you, I guess. These people can’t hurt me as much as the war did.” Samantha drew on her courage. “I don’t always track a storm in the ways I told you. Sometimes, I see things...things that happen.”

“Like what?”

There was no doubt in his voice. The surprise of that let her answer openly, unlike the conversation in his tent, where she’d been careful to imply that she used computer data for her predictions. “Weather. Dangerous weather is coming.”

Adrian chose a few questions, hoping it didn’t spook her. “What was it in your dream?”

“Rain. Water was everywhere.”

“When?”

“In the next week...” Her voice cracked. “You believe me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Samantha shrugged.

“In the old world, you were mocked and scorned, and then feared when you were right. They

turned you into a necessary evil. You're certain the same will happen here."

"You lie to me now!" She pointed at him. "Tell me it won't!"

"I can't. Everything is balanced on the edge." He indicated the camp that was now climbing into waiting vehicles. "These people need you, even though they don't know it yet. Help me keep them alive."

"I don't want to be in charge of anything, or responsible for anyone." Samantha honestly didn't. "I know that's selfish, but I can't. I'm not worthy."

Adrian let that go for now. "Just tell me when something's coming, so I can prepare for it."

Samantha had been expecting worse. She let out a tired breath. "I think I can do that."

"And in return?" He needed to be sure of her ethics.

"That was the old world." She regarded him coolly. "I don't want to be a prize rat anymore."

Adrian smiled, pleased. "Tell me what you do long for, Samantha. Maybe I can give it to you."

Horrible pain slapped her. "Can you give me back my dignity?"

Adrian pushed his magic over her. "Most of it, yes. You'll earn the rest, and then you'll be able to forgive yourself for surviving when so many others didn't."

"How did you—"

"Angela."

Samantha frowned. “She knows a lot about me for someone I’ve never had a real conversation with.”

Adrian chose his words with caution, hoping this would bring the two women together. “You’re not the only one here who is special, Sam.”

She let that sink in, realizing things had just changed for her again. *Angie is like me...and she’s already on Adrian’s payroll.* “What else would you want me to do, besides the warnings?” She was leery but hope lurked.

“Ride with me and we’ll talk.” Adrian was careful not to show too much excitement. “Later, that’s up to you.”

“Okay.”

Nearby, Neil watched Samantha climb into Adrian’s rig, almost gawking. *Her ass has that shape I like...*

His team XO, Jeremy, took notice. Samantha was cute, and she shared Neil’s feeling on taking out the slavers. Maybe some match making was needed.

3

“This is Safe Haven mobile refugee camp. Is anyone out there? Hello? Can *anyone* hear me?”

Mitch’s cheerful voice rang through the radios as the camp pulled out five minutes later with everyone accounted for. Adrian was always afraid they’d be short people.

Samantha sat in his rig, uncomfortable. She knew what Adrian wanted, and she wanted to give it, but there were rules to deals like this and he knew it.

“I need to know when it’s coming, Sam. I have to have time to get ready.”

She was glad he’d come straight at it this time. “I can’t tell you the exact moment. I know it’s within a week, but probably less. I’m listening.”

Adrian felt frustration rising and forced it down. Beginnings were always hard, and he wasn’t prepared for this conversation any more than she was. Keeping that in mind, he softened his tone. “Where should we be when it comes? Where would *you* take us?”

Her unease grew. “We need a basement area that’s underground and out of sight. Sometimes, storms...zero in.”

He matched that to his own long held theory of nature being against them. “On things like heat or people?”

“Happiness. The big ones are envious of peace and happiness. It’s a calm state they achieve only when they die.” Samantha wasn’t quite able to believe it was her mouth spilling these long-held theories.

Adrian took a minute to decide if he could accept storms as living things with not only intelligence, but also emotions, and found it easier than expected. How many times had he heard stories of survivors swearing the funnel cloud had

come down just for them? “I’ll get you a list of places like that near us. You’ll circle the ones we’d be safest at. I’ll have Kenn give you a sheet each week.”

“I’d rather not know which ones you pick, if that’s okay.” Samantha shifted pressure off the healing cigar burn on her hip as Adrian took them over the rough road.

“Why not?”

“I... I’m still keeping track of Rick, even though you said I don’t have to. It might get people hurt if he catches me.” Sam looked through the window to avoid his eyes. “I don’t want any essential information in my head.”

Adrian’s anger grew with his certainty that Rick was a wolf in sheep’s clothing, but the sights through his window confirmed his choice to wait and collect proof. Everything they were passing was burned, charred. A battle had taken place here, one of thousands still happening across their broken country. Most of his people wouldn’t last long on their own. If he spooked them by killing Rick and they ran, it would be a slaughter.

“Why haven’t you thrown him out?”

Adrian had already been asked that too many times by his top men. He gave her the rehearsed answer they’d all received. “If there’s a rabid dog on your farm, you can track him. You have an idea where he’ll attack. If you put him outside the fence, he’s hurting others, and sooner or later he’ll find a way to slip back in and rip your throat out.”

Samantha drew in a deep breath. “What if you put a bullet in its head?”

“Are you sure enough to pull the trigger yourself?” Adrian demanded, surprised.

That stopped her next words.

Adrian scanned her pale profile. “Personally, I think you’re right, but until he makes a mistake, I can’t remove him and letting him loose out there is like condoning murder. At least in here, he’s following the rules, and that alone is a better alternative than to have him hurting other people.”

“That’s why these people follow you.” Samantha’s good opinion of Adrian went up. “They know you give a damn about everyone.”

Adrian’s heart twisted with his secrets. “I’m giving that and a lot more.”

4

“It’s time. Switch to channel seven.” Kyle consulted his glossy notebook, getting settled in the rear as they followed Marc’s new black truck out of the parking area. They were seventh in a line of ninety.

“From where we left off last night.” Kyle gestured at Neil. “A first instinct is to use the hostage for protection. Don’t give the enemy that opportunity. Engage the enemy when he is as far from the hostage as possible. Never direct attention to the hostage or depend on them to react the way

you need them to. Assume they will either panic or freeze.”

Neil relayed the lesson over the mike, word for word as Kyle gave it to him. He was also working on a drawing of the camp at the same time.

Angela listened as the two Eagles riding with her held a lesson on a second radio that had been cleverly hidden in the glovebox. She was glad to have noise filling the tense silence between her and Neil. She steered around the charred frame of a school bus, not viewing the small skeletons still inside. *What awful landmarks the war left us!*

“Be ready to shoot the hostage, to kill the enemy. Minor leg or arm wounds are preferred in this situation, but at no point should the hostage ever be in mortal danger from a stray round.”

Angela frowned. *This lesson is about me.*

“Be precise. If not sure on the angle or line of fire, do not take the shot.” Neil’s tone sharpened. “I repeat, an Eagle who accidentally kills a hostage, even if the enemy is eliminated, has committed murder.”

Angela wanted to protest. She saw Kyle’s headshake in the mirror and clamped down on her words as Neil repeated it over the secure channel.

“Break for discussion. Questions?” Neil let off the mike.

The radio was silent. Angela opened her mouth hesitantly. “Are there exceptions to that rule?”

“Such as?” Kyle was ready for her.

Angela flushed at being put on the spot. “Well, like if the enemy throws or pushes the hostage into the line of fire, or if there’s a big fight.”

“Yes.” Kyle gave her an assessing onceover, thinking most of Adrian’s Eagles were likely discussing those options right now. “There’s an exception to every rule, but each situation has its own way of being handled. During a fight, we would ideally try to wait for an end to it, or for a sure opening.”

“Rescue missions are chaos. Care has to be taken.”

Angela gave Neil’s emotionless tone right back to him. “It has to be a priority, thus the harsh rule. Got it.”

The men exchanged looks at her casual acceptance, not certain she understood the gravity of what it meant.

“An Eagle found guilty of murder, accident or otherwise, isn’t tossed out of Adrian’s army or banished. They’re executed, by Adrian himself.” Neil waited for her protests.

“It ever happen?” She looked at Kyle in the mirror, trusting him not to lie.

Kyle shook his head. “Not on my watch.”

“Would he?”

“Yes.”

Angela let that sink in, not sure their impressions were correct. That sense of life having immense value to Adrian was hard to miss. Maybe

he did these things anyway and dealt with the pain afterward? That, she could believe.

Neil took a quick sip of water and pushed the button on the mike. "Discussion questions?"

There was silence.

The lesson resumed. "In a hostage situation, we do not negotiate. We will not meet demands or talk about them honestly. We do not allow the enemy time to think. Quick and hard plans work best."

Angela listened to the rest of the lesson in rapt silence, absorbing as much as she could.

She would have been just as interested in the conversation going on among the three Eagles in the truck ahead of them.

5

"What if they come during the night?"

"I expect them to, or in the wake of a storm." Marc lit a smoke. "Too many stories going around to ignore their pattern of attack. They've met no challenge so far doing it that way. They won't change what works."

"How do we guide the camp to the trucks?" Seth shook ink down into the pen point.

"Red, white and blue lights." Jeremy smiled from the backseat. "Adrian will love that."

Seth took notes, wrapped in a heavy blanket. The windows were down to clear smoke and he hadn't adjusted to the chilly weather yet. "I can rig that up. Can you connect it to the wrist alarms?"

“Yeah, but it would be more dependable if Kenn did it.” Marc was proud of himself for the even tone as they slowed to make a turn.

Seth snorted. “The only way that’ll happen is if Adrian tells him to. He won’t listen to anyone else.”

Marc shrugged. “If Kenn won’t do it, I can. It just won’t be as solid. He’s better at that shit than I am.” Marc hated it that some of these plans rested on Kenn being forced to cooperate.

“What about the maps?” Jeremy had a checklist to cover.

Marc was glad for the reminder. “Neil says he has that covered. Kyle and I will look them over when he’s done and adjust where we need to. Who makes her driving schedule?”

“Kenn does those.”

Marc frowned at Seth’s answer. “Add that to the list.” He sighed. “There’s no way we’ll be done with all this by morning.”

“Adrian will distract them so we can keep working.” Seth waved it off. “Don’t sweat it.”

Marc allowed himself to be drawn back into the plans. They had to get these things set up before the slavers or the remaining twin came. He wouldn’t rest until it was done.

Marc scanned the dim sky. The storm they’d been warned of was closing in.

His gaze went to the lead rig, wondering what Samantha and Adrian were talking about up there—Rick or the weather.

“Have you always been able to predict the weather?” Adrian steered the conversation to a more personal level.

Samantha opened her mouth to lie and gave honesty instead. “Yes. It used to freak my parents out, but it helped them, so they learned to accept it.”

Adrian kept filling out his mental profile. “And the rest of your family?”

Samantha stared through the dusty window. Burnt frames of buses, cars, and bodies littered the road. “My cousin stopped coming around after I told her a tornado was coming and then her roof blew off.”

“You saved her with a forbidden call.”

Samantha shut her lids as they rolled by a farmhouse with an obscenity on the porch that she didn’t want to view in detail later. “She never came to our home after that. *Ever.*”

Adrian was quiet for a minute, letting her deal with the grief of the past. Sometimes those ghosts didn’t want to let go, no matter how hard you tried to escape.

“I learned to shut up or push my information off on data from my parent’s lab so I could keep friends, but none of them were close. I think they knew that deep down there’s something...wrong with me.”

“Wrong? You think of your gifts that way?”

“I saved Milton’s life so he could sabotage us into the end of the world.” She refused to look at

him. "I can't feel any other way." She missed the reaction to his father's name.

Adrian skipped the conversation along. "You are not responsible for the apocalypse, Samantha. Surely you know that?"

She didn't say anything.

He frowned. "Sam?"

"If I'd left it alone, he would have died."

Her expression said she was lost and searching for which way to go. Adrian was honored to guide her. "Then the next president would have caused the end. This was in the works long before your warning."

"I want to believe that, but it's too easy."

"I know it to be true. It sickens me that he was spared that day, but it wasn't your choice to make. It was fate's. She's a tough bitch to understand."

Samantha snorted, smiling wryly. "No argument there."

Needing to give her something to ease the worry lurking in her tones and body language, Adrian switched subjects. "You've made substantial progress already, in the gun class."

Samantha's mind flew to Neil. "I like it."

"I have a couple of other things you could work on, while you listen."

"Sure. What?" Samantha knew he didn't want to talk about the past anymore.

"I think you'd be a good hunter. If you pass the first level in the gun class, you can go."

Her first instinct was to say no, but the waking heart told her he'd hit his mark. "I'll keep that in mind."

Adrian hid a grin at her stubborn refusal to show interest in anything. *She's definitely a female. Now, where did I put that pry bar?* "I'd also like to have you supervise the new garden."

That got her full attention. *How did he know I like to play in the dirt?* "Sounds fine."

"Good. I'll set it up."

Yeah, I'll bet you will. Samantha believed she could trust him, but that genius could just as easily be used for evil. If Adrian ever became corrupt, it would be the same old shit starting up again.

Bright light winked at them from the rear of the convoy, drawing her attention. She would bet some old-world pettiness was happening in the last truck. *What I wouldn't give to be a fly in Kenn's ugly green bronco right now.*

Chapter Four

We Are 5-By

1

“**Y**ou want me to pick a fight or something?”

Zack’s voice was low even though he and Kenn were alone in the Bronco. “I could plant something dangerous next time to get him thrown out.”

Kenn flipped on the heat. *I’ve softened during my time here. On missions, I never used to notice the cold.* “Sure, and while you’re at it, slap her a few times, right in front of Adrian.”

Zack snickered, loving the idea after having her pull a gun on him.

The two men let that roll around for a minute, enjoying the images. With most of the top Eagles in the QZ for a full day, Kenn and Zack would be in charge, the way they both preferred it. Sometime after they made camp, Angie and the others would be out and then the issues would restart, but without Kyle, Neil, or Seth, very few of the lower level men had the balls to stand up to Kenn. As a result, he and Zack had been able to work on plans of their own.

“You got her driving schedule sorted out?”

“It’s in the glovebox, along with yours and mine for the next two weeks. Keep her busy.” Kenn spotted Lee, one of Zack’s men, glaring toward

Angela's Blazer. *Good*. At least the trucker had them in line, unlike his sons.

Zack got the sheets out. "No problem. Someone needs to shovel the dog shit and dig latrine holes."

Kenn chuckled, knowing Adrian wouldn't let it happen, but wishing it just the same. "You talk to your boys yet? Make it clear Charlie's off limits in this."

Zack shrugged. "If the wolf isn't with him, I can't make any promises. Your boy pissed mine off and they hold a grudge."

Kenn wasn't as worried about it as he had been before. "Yeah, getting your ass kicked by someone younger and smaller will do that."

Zack frowned, but didn't answer.

Kenn was confident he'd made his point. "You have the surprise waiting for Marc?"

"All tucked into his bedroll."

"Good. It won't drive him out, but it'll keep him unhappy."

Zack let his mouth fly. "Hard to get laid when you're busy being punished. He'll have to leave her alone for a while once we set him up to attack you."

It was only the truth of their plan, but to hear it spoken so openly made Kenn wince at how wrong it sounded. He switched them to the next item. "And his pet?"

This time, Zack scowled. "No takers. None of my team will do it, even for more privileges or a rank jump."

"Damn. Keep working on it."

“I could—”

“No, you can’t. It has to look like an accident. Adrian will know if *we* kill the wolf.”

2

All conversation came to a grinding halt as the convoy reached Rapid Valley. The refugees stared in horror at what remained of the buried tourist town. A recent slide had sent waves of debris laden glop through most of the small neighborhood. The mud was across the streets in thick layers that Safe Haven had little hope of driving through. In the near distance, the small town peered at them from mud-slicked hills and garbage covered valleys that used to be rooftops and windows.

Adrian’s voice came through the main radio. “Convoy halt. Kenn, find us a turnaround.”

Kenn replied a second later. “Copy.”

“He should keep going. Turning around is a bad idea.” Angela’s words were low. She didn’t expect Neil to believe her.

“It’ll take us hours to clear the road.” Neil frowned as Kyle took the maps from the kit at his feet. “We’ll lose a lot of time.”

“Better time than lives.” Kyle was thinking about the slavers who were catching up to them.

Neil frowned. “*If* there’s a problem here.”

Angela didn’t want to wait for them to argue it out, but she also didn’t want Kenn or Marc to hear

a mental call. She watched the door open on Adrian's rig, understanding what would do it quicker. "*He's* not safe here. None of us are."

"And what do you suggest?" Neil was terrified of the next thing Adrian would ask of him where she was concerned. To get Adrian's vote for the Eagles, each man had to pass a private lesson only Neil taught. He had no idea how he would be able to do it for a woman. "Don't go back, can't go forward."

"Go around."

"Around."

Neil let out an annoyed sigh at their immediate answers, picking up the mike. "Three to base."

Angela closed her eyes, trying to estimate exactly where it would happen. "Faster would be good, guys."

Adrian ducked back into the truck to answer the radio. "Go ahead."

Neil grunted. "We'd like to suggest going around."

There was silence for a minute as Adrian considered what that meant. Around was venturing off the beaten path to the Dakota wilderness. There was no way to know what waited.

"We do know what's behind us though." Adrian ignored Samantha for the moment. "Death."

Adrian pushed the button on the mike. "Agreed. Five-minute stop, full guard and then we're back on the road."

“You have a lot of faith in them.” Samantha liked that.

Adrian didn’t tell her the message was really from Angela. The Eagles would never have offered that suggestion. “Yes, I do.”

“And if they’re wrong?”

Adrian surveyed Samantha with a teacher’s patient gaze. “Sometimes they are. It’s part of learning how things work now. Without risks, it means nothing.”

“And it creates bonds that draw these people closer to you and what you want.”

“What I *need*, Samantha. Only what I need to keep them alive and free.”

Her gaze went over the mud-covered town. “Will you do any searching for survivors here?”

“No.” Adrian was sure Angela would have mentioned it if she felt life here. “We can’t stay out in the open and wait for the next slide.” Adrian nodded to Daryl as he went by the truck on his first sweep, but his words were for Sam. “You should probably go ride with Hilda and the others now. It might get rough up here.”

Sam’s shoulders slumped. Her time being useful was over until the storm came.

“Samantha?”

She looked over as she opened the door. Her breath caught at his inviting expression.

“Why don’t you sit with us for mess?”

“I’d love to.” Flustered by her quick response, she left.

Adrian waited until Samantha was out of hearing distance before closing his eyes, concentrating. On his line, they would only hear each other. He would teach Angela to do the same. *Which way is it coming from?*

Angela had been expecting him. *Northeast. Something's happening there. Not sure what.*

Adrian could feel her impatience with the stop. *The slavers?*

Maybe. There's a clear sense of danger.

Adrian swept the people getting out of their cars now that the Eagles had given the okay. *There's always plenty of that. Watch your six.*

You know it.

3

It's coming. Hold us here.

“Convoy, halt.” They hadn’t been back on the road long. Like the rest of the refugees, Adrian stared in surprise at the enormous herd of deer crossing the valley below. At least a thousand of the grass loving creatures were slowly venturing through the area. Most of the camp observed happily, lifting younger children for a better view.

“Well, she said big.” There wasn’t a sense of danger yet, but if Angela had been right about one, she was right about the other. Adrian pushed the button on the mike. “No shooting. If they stampede, we’ll lose half our vehicles and people will get hurt. Let them go by. We’ll wait.”

Giving wild animals the right of way would have raised brows in the old world, but Adrian had no wish to draw more fire from nature than they were already under just for being alive. They could roll through with the trucks first, shooting and crushing until the herd scattered, or they could wait fifteen minutes. The deer were moving north and would be by them shortly. Adrian wondered what had made so many deer band together. Herds were never more than a few hundred. This looked like every deer in the state was here.

“Four to base.” Neil cleared his throat. “There’s something moving in from the north. Sounds...big.”

Every head craned that way, reaching for guns.

Mike still in hand, Adrian stepped onto the foot rail of his truck for a better view. *She’d tell me if we needed to move, right?* Unable to take the chance, he keyed the mike. “Should we roll, do you think?”

It was very unlike him to ask openly over the radio. Every Eagle listening knew it had something to do with Angela.

Kyle answered, “Negative, Boss. We are 5-by right here.”

North of Rapid Valley, a dam burst, sending shocks into the ground that rushed out ahead of the debris wall. Already blocked with garbage blown there by the war, the riverbed overflowed; a huge mud wave rushed into the valley below.

The slide thundered down the hillside like a rocket, cutting down trees and tearing houses away

from their foundations. As it got close to the convoy, the sounds grew louder.

The deer in the valley below heard the rumbling, ears tilting in fear, noses scenting the air and then the entire herd stampeded...right toward Safe Haven.

An instant behind their panicked reaction, the wall of muddy water poured into the valley.

The front of the stampede disappeared under the mud as more liquid death crashed down. It cut off any hope the animals had for retreat. Half the panicking herd vanished.

“Stand your ground!” Adrian’s heart squeezed as the roaring increased. If Angela was wrong, the entire camp would be lost.

“What is he doing?!” Neil was horrified that Adrian would risk them all this way.

“His job.” Angela held the wheel as the Blazer rattled harshly around them. “Saving their lives.”

“And you’re sure?”

Angela didn’t respond over the roar of the debris barreling toward them. She’d already given her answer to the man who mattered.

Two hundred yards from the stunned convoy, the mud found the path of the valley and turned away.

Adrian rested his head against the seat, waiting for the pain to fade from his chest. The risks he took

were never assumed lightly, but he wasn't sure how many more like that his heart would take.

The flow of mud dissipated after the first huge wave, leaving the convoy untouched and the deer herd decimated. The difference had been one *go around* and one *hold here*.

Adrian's voice belied the chaos of his thoughts. "Let's get ready folks. Check your lists. We leave in five."

4

Neil, scared of what came next with her, and still upset over being corrected publicly, couldn't stop his mouth from opening. "Guess you think this proves you were right, but all it shows is how close to death you put Adrian."

Angela sucked in a wounded breath.

Kyle stared at Neil in surprise. "I don't agree. At least here, we had a chance to go uphill and get away. If we'd still been on 34, we'd all be gone."

Angela pulled her iPod from the glovebox. "It's not my fault you were slacking off, Neil. Try doing your job and you won't feel this way." She traded the driver's seat for gusting wind before he could respond.

Neil stared after her through the open door for a moment before unhooking his seat belt. "Guess I'll drive."

He got out and found himself alone in the Blazer when he slid back into the driver's seat. Kyle had also left him to his bitterness.

Parked nearby, Marc saw her coming and rolled down the window. He was surprised when Angela opened his door and ducked behind the seats to climb in with Dog and Jeremy.

"You don't mind an extra passenger, do you?"

Marc ignored the curious witnesses. "Not at all."

"You can have front." Seth started to get out.

"I'd rather be right here." Angela put in her earbuds. "If I'm riding in the rear, I'm welcome."

Adrian saw it in his mirror; he was positive Neil had said something stupid. He was impressed by how Angela was handling Neil's surprising reactions. It was gaining her support already—like from Kyle, who was climbing in with the rear Eagle guard.

Adrian waited for everyone to be settled before pushing the button. "Count off as we go. Eagle One, here."

5

They made camp at the top of the highest hill Adrian could find, picking trees and windblown greenness to be their evening view. The only obvious signs of a world gone by were the three gigantic crosses in the far distance, made to capture the light of the day to make them glow at night.

Much dimmer than before the sky had been blanketed with grit, they were still a shining beacon that had people tripping as they stared. A few people said prayers, but most gaped in longing for the old world where building such things had been possible.

Angela exited the truck, yawning as Kyle fell in on her right. In time, the famous crosses would burn or fall like everything else. She had no trouble ignoring the unusual view.

Marc trailed them, hating it that she was upset, but glad it wasn't going well. He didn't want her to be an Eagle.

"He didn't mean it."

She shrugged at Kyle's comfort, not wanting to talk about Neil. "It's just the first of many wonderful moments I'll have to put up with to be one of you."

"You'll never be one of us!" Kenn's voice at the edge of the tape drew attention. He flushed as men gaped at him, but he didn't back down. "You're a female. There's no place in our army for you."

"That's not true." Kyle's anger kept Marc from answering. "Get back on the right side of the camp before I tell him you broke quarantine."

"That's what Kenn wants." Angela stepped around them. "He doesn't understand he'd be getting himself thrown in until morning, but we'll be out in a couple hours." She entered the cold shadows, emboldened by the guard on her heels. "Later, *Marine*, we'll talk."

Kenn watched her go, ignoring hard glares from the Eagles. He knew Angela was responsible for the convoy avoiding the mudslide. He couldn't help but be grateful that she'd saved them, but the anger of her actions wouldn't leave him alone. She'd broken the driving schedule to ride with Marc. She would pay for that, but right now, he'd come for a different vengeance.

Kenn lingered around the QZ as Zack got things squared away.

Angela spotted Charlie on the other side of the tape, the wolf by his side. Kenn was in a strange mood and she felt better knowing her son had protection. Dog and Charlie were together more often than not now. She gave them both a warm smile as she stopped a few feet away. "Hey, boy. You okay?"

"You did it, right? Made him stop?" Charlie knew it had been her.

"Nope."

Charlie stared at the lie. "I know you had him turn us around."

Angela sighed, not sure how much of this side of their gifts he was ready for. "Can we talk about it later? I need to help John get us all tested and cleared."

Charlie nodded. "You'll be out tonight?"

She shrugged. "I should be. We only have a few results coming and two tests left."

"Yours and John's?"

Angela smiled at him. "Very good."

Distracted, Charlie's face eased at her praise. He turned toward the large, well-lit camp. "See ya later."

"Yes, you will."

"I love it that you taught him that." Marc's tone was full of emotion. "I haven't thanked you for not turning him against me. You could have."

"Not me. I secretly hoped you'd get to be his dad someday." She smiled softly. "Still do."

Eagles walking by broke the moment. Her warmth faded. "We'll be out tonight. John about has us all cleared."

Marc wanted to ask her what Neil had said, but it was better not to make the anger fresh again. "Great. You need anything?"

Angela swallowed her first response (*yeah, you!*) and went toward the medical tent. "I'll be fine after I get some sleep and calm down."

Marc snickered, but he wasn't fooled. She'd gotten her feelings hurt, but it would get worse if she meant to try out for the Eagles. Some of these men were dead set against it.

That made him feel worse. It was unfair of them to deny her the chance that Adrian had given them. Marc suddenly wanted her to succeed as much as he wanted her to forget the idea. He hated her being refused anything she wanted, and it was clear that this was top on her list right now, even above his feelings.

“Not fair.” He was ashamed. Their time was in the future. He had no right to expect her to sit quietly and wait. Being a Marine had been the highlight of his life most years. She just wanted the same comforts.

“And strength.” His mumble drew attention from passing men that he ignored. “In case they come for her and we can’t protect this camp.”

“You think so, too?”

Marc wasn’t surprised to discover Adrian outside the perimeter, behind the QZ. “Yes. She’ll turn herself over to save her son and these people. Never doubt it.”

Adrian shook his head. “I don’t.”

Marc frowned. “That’s why she’s agreeing to this.”

Adrian didn’t tell him that wasn’t the only reason. Deep down, Marc already knew it was more. “It won’t come to that. Those are not my reasons.”

“I know some of yours too, but I don’t agree with the secrecy.” Marc met his eye. “You’re lying to them too much.”

“I know.” Adrian paused to light a smoke in the thick breeze. “But until they’re stronger, this is the way it has to be. When they’re ready, honesty will come from *all* of us.” Adrian slipped back into the shadows.

Marc frowned. *What does that mean?* Tired and stressed, he went to the only empty tent with his kit. Seth was on Angie’s heels, the wolf was defending

Charlie, and Marc intended to get a couple extra hours of sleep. *Hell, maybe I'll stay in the QZ until morning and be saved the trouble of putting up my tent.*

Marc tossed his kit into the corner and followed it down. One quick tug had his bedroll open and him laying on it, not bothering with his boots. It felt good to stretch—

Marc's hand brushed something stiff under the thick padding. He was up an instant later.

He snapped on the penlight around his neck and yanked the top layer up. There was a slip of paper and something dark swaying with the breeze he'd created. Uneasy, he bent down and picked them both up as he holstered.

The wind howled against the tent, pushing the cold draft through. The scent of vanilla teased his nose. Marc relaxed, thinking Angie had slipped him a note like a school kid. He inhaled deeply of the lock of hair, its softness and ebony color marking who it belonged to, then he flipped the small photo over eagerly, wondering what she'd left for him.

Marc gasped, entire body clenching.

The photo was one he recognized from his time on base. Fury pounded at the graphic image of Kenn and Angie in bed together. Showing her upper body, it was enough to tell she had ropes around her wrist.

Marc felt the rage filling him, and didn't try to pull it in. Kenn had flashed this photo around, making cracks and snide remarks about how he

owned the woman in the picture. To realize that had been Angie was more than Marc could take.

Kenn will pay for every word! He stormed from the tent with eager feet. *Where is that cruel bastard?*

Kenn was waiting on the other side of the yellow tape as their glares met across the distance.

Boo-ya! Kenn celebrated silently as he braced himself to take what Marc was about to dish out. It wasn't only camp members who would see it, but also Adrian, who was talking with the guards on the QZ. *Perfect.*

Angela stepped from the shower camper with wet hair and hurriedly thrown on clothes, finding Marc's furious form moving toward Kenn. She ran hard, but it wasn't fast enough to stop the effects of Kenn's surprise.

Picture wadded in his clenched fist, Marc registered his target and didn't stop to duck under the tape as he swung.

Kenn hit the ground, grunting, and held himself still as Marc swung again.

This hit sent blood flying into his mouth and so did the next.

Marc used his fists steadily on the Marine, fury growing when Kenn didn't fight back.

That's how Angie felt! Marc swung again.

Kenn waited for someone to pull Marc off, allowing himself to be hit repeatedly.

Thud!

His head snapped to the side, blood spraying.

Marc shoved the photo into his mouth, sitting on his chest. “Eat that, you worthless fuck! Isn’t so easy when your victim hits back, is it?!”

Kenn was struggling now, but Marc’s rage made him stronger as he shoved the wadded image deeper. “Fucking coward!”

Marc was grabbed from behind and torn away, slung into the dirt by Doug’s huge arms.

“Stop it!” Angie’s voice barely registered.

Marc lunged toward Kenn the instant he hit his feet. “I’ll kill you!”

Kenn saw the Eagles were now standing between them and rolled over, coughing.

The photo drifted in the scuffle. Neil casually put his boot over it. He’d seen everything except the image that had set Marc off.

“Stop it!” Doug’s rough shake had Marc drawing back.

The Irishman gave him another jerk. “Snap out of it, Grunt!”

He sounded so much like a superior officer that Marc was able to regain some control—until he noted Kenn’s smirk and then he lunged again.

“What did you do?!” Kyle and Seth used their bodies to keep Marc away.

Ken spit blood. “Nothing. I was just standing here, and he attacked me!”

“You lying bastard!” Marc struggled harder.

Neil retrieved the photo while everyone was distracted.

“I’ll rip your heart out!”

“That’s enough.” Adrian stepped in front of Marc. “Stand down!”

Jarred out of his rage at the cold tone, Marc was startled at the hostility. *Why is the boss pissed at me?*

Adrian pointed. “You need to work off some steam. Go help the vet.”

Realizing the mess that he’d been provoked into creating, Marc wrenched away from the strong arms holding him and stormed toward the animal area.

Angela watched him go, worrying. They were pushing him too hard. If Kenn wasn’t careful, Marc really would kill him.

Satisfied he’d done the best he could, Kenn picked himself up, subtly hunting for the photo.

“What did you do to him?” Angela rounded on Kenn. “I know you did something!”

“I told you, nothing.” Assuming the wind had blown away the photo, Kenn turned toward the larger camp, wiping at his bloody face. “He’s not safe to be here if this is how he acts. I didn’t say one word to him today!”

The Eagles sent a disapproving glare after his retreating form.

“He did something.” Kyle agreed with Angela, watching her march off.

Neil nodded, photo tucked safely in his pocket. “He set Marc up to get in trouble and succeeded. We can’t let that happen twice.”

Adrian's last stop of the night was Kyle and Neil, who were now monitoring the far corner of the QZ while they waited to be cleared. Adrian approached them from the rear, listening.

"That's the worst thing he could have done, though. Didn't he know Kenn was trying to get him in trouble?"

"Check this out and tell me you would have done different." Neil extended the picture.

Kyle's quick intake of breath was part lust and part anger. "That son of a bitch! Those are ropes!"

"Exactly, but we can't show this, or it'll help seal it with the camp that she's Kenn's." Neil shoved the photo back into his pocket. "Or get him banished and hurt Adrian's plans."

Kyle gestured. "Burn it."

"I will..." Neil frowned. "Did you hear that?"

"Just a patrol going by..."

"I'm telling you—"

Kyle pointed. "It's Adrian."

The blond stepped from the shadows, grinning. "I remember the first time I did that. Both of you nearly shot me."

Kyle joined in the amusement.

Neil stayed quiet, feeling on the outside after everything that had happened with Angela.

"One of the rookies still might, Boss." Kyle did a fast sweep to ensure everything around them was okay.

Adrian didn't say anything about what he'd overheard. "I'd like to talk to you guys."

Neil grunted. "I'm sorry; I really am."

Adrian pinned him with a hard look, while continuing as if he hadn't been interrupted. "I need honest impressions on what value Angela might add to my army. That means yours too, Neil, if you can put aside your emotions for a few minutes."

The jab hit. Neil sighed. "I didn't mean to hurt her."

"Answer my question and we'll handle the other shit later!" Adrian was very tired. "We're wasting time with your *emotions*."

Kyle winced at the slap, but it woke Neil from the self-pity haze he'd been functioning in all evening. "Her...power speaks for itself. I'd vote for it on that reason alone." Neil realized he believed what he was saying. "And she's already good on some things. She likes it as much as we do—the shooting anyway. She'd probably be easy to teach."

"No one expects this to be smooth at first. Ease up on yourself. If it all falls, I seriously doubt either of you will be the cause of it." Adrian raised an expectant brow at Kyle.

"She's got my vote. She did after the airport kids, but today seals the deal." Kyle waved toward the mudslide they'd left behind. "We mighta lost half the camp if she hadn't stopped us."

"The slide was east of us, not west." Neil didn't understand what they meant.

Kyle was the only one Adrian had told about the mental map and plans to go north for a pick up. They'd marked the places together. Kyle ignored him. "She's a level two fighter right now and a level four, or maybe even five with a gun. That sounds like the start of a good Eagle, with the right personal training."

Adrian took a sheet of paper from his pocket and gave it to Kyle. "Check those lessons over and tell me what you think." His voice lowered. "You and Neil only, for a while."

"You think he'll come around enough to do it?" Kyle wasn't worried that his friend could hear them. This was how things got done in Safe Haven—hits that came from the front, not from behind.

"Absolutely. Neil is one of the good guys. He needs to accept that he can trust her with our lives. When he does, he'll be her biggest defender." Adrian looked around. "After the wolf, of course."

All three men laughed at that, the tension breaking.

The light of Safe Haven's boundaries began to glow with powerful magic. Their bonds circled the camp and wove a golden net of invisible protection over them. Weakened by anger and strengthened by love, the glimmering strands crisscrossed through the night, creating a bubble few of them could see, but all of them felt in one way or another. Six of Safe Haven's guardians had gathered.

“The problem is fuel.” José’s voice was annoyed. “They have to drive the tank in some places, to crush a path through.”

Cesar slammed his scarred fist onto the hood of the muddy gold convertible, knocking his beer to the dirt. “They must come faster!”

José reluctantly held silent. One day soon, this camp would be his. Maybe sooner than Cesar suspected, if he didn’t find a fresh batch of women to ease the restlessness of his men. “I will tell them.”

Careful not to let the wind rip it from his fingers, the younger Mexican handed Cesar a dirty baggie with slips of paper inside. “Rick’s message.”

Cesar read the sheets, glowering at the warnings he read. The white man was telling him to wait, but Cesar wasn’t going to. The tank team was on their way. *In a few days, Safe Haven will belong to me!*

The slaver scanned the remnants of the refugee camp, despising the signs of strength. These people were organized, powerful. He had to stop them now. “No whiskey. Tell them that.”

Groans met this order, but no one protested despite Cesar rolling them by a town yesterday that clearly had survivors. They hadn’t taken a target in over a week and the guerrillas were unhappy. Not nearly as much as Cesar, though. The stocky slaver was in a foul mood. They knew better than to cross him. One of his slaves had managed to get his gun and kill herself. Normally, he wouldn’t have cared, but this one had been pregnant with the first of his

many bastards. He took it as a bad omen for his plans to seed America with his descendants. Timed with the defiance of these patriotic refugees, the only answer seemed to be death for them all.

Chapter Five
Island Drama

April 7th
Pitcairn Island

1

“I still think this is a bad idea,” Luke stated sternly. “It might weaken your system to do so much, too soon.”

“It’s been four days since I’ve even sneezed!” Kendle protested.

Switching tactics when he grimaced, she smiled innocently at him. “Can I come out and play now?”

Luke chuckled. “We’re going, under protest.”

Kendle was glad. Her minor cold had come on suddenly and Luke had made her stay in bed, wanting to be certain she didn’t have a relapse, but if she didn’t get outside for a while, she’d suffocate.

“I’m fine, really.”

“The second you show signs, I’m picking you up and bringing you back here.”

The movie star’s grin widened. “You know there’s only one way to make sure I stay in bed, right?”

Magic sparked between them and the former pilot laughed. “I thought about that, but we need provisions.”

“Yeah, like razors,” she muttered, thinking of the jungle on her legs. No way she was letting LJ get anywhere near her until she could shave.

“You got your jacket?”

This time, she couldn’t stop the sharpness in her tone. “Yes. I also have extra socks and water. Can we go now?”

Luke sighed, feeling her impatience. He was always impressed with her ability to do what she needed to without railing against fate. The woman he’d viewed on TV before the war was a risk-taker, not afraid of any danger, and it had to bother her that she now had limits.

“Yes. Let me lock things up.”

That had her brow puckering. They’d recently begun to lock the cabin when they went somewhere. It was a result of two women on the island going missing. All the evidence pointed to them being abducted from their bedrooms, and the townspeople were up in arms. There had already been two searches, both of which Luke had locked her in for and joined, but no signs of the women or their attackers had been found. It was causing changes on this small island that even the end of the world hadn’t.

Kendle turned toward the jungle, not wanting Luke to know what she was thinking about again. The people here refused to believe there had been a war, despite all the signs. She and Luke had made a second trip to town yesterday, and left without any supplies after getting into an argument with two

other patrons in Baxter's. The men had overheard her comment about the sunsets, comparing them to the shots of the sky after a nuclear detonation, and it hadn't taken much from there to spark the fuse. Admit it or not, the people here were worried that whatever had happened might find its way to this tropical paradise. Denial was how they were handling it.

"And sarcasm," she muttered, flushing at the memory of their words. She'd never been called a whore so harshly and it was still stinging. Even Luke knocking the snob on his ass hadn't helped. He'd gotten her on the bike and out of sight before the tears came and she'd let them run down his back, unable to do more than hang on. As LJ sped them furiously home, she had been certain that would be the last time they went to town for supplies. Whatever they needed from here, they'd make or go to the crazy woman for.

"Ready?"

Kendle shifted her kit more firmly onto her shoulders. "I'm right behind ya."

Instead of moving toward the jungle, Luke stopped by her and held out a thin cord of strong rope. "Around your waist."

Kendle did it without argument, handing him the ends so he could tie it the way he wanted. She knew she should have thought of it. Tied, was the only way she'd ever let her crew travel through a jungle, but the time before felt so far away most days that she often forgot who she'd been.

Luke dropped into the soft grass at her jean-clad legs, hoping this wasn't as bad an idea as it suddenly felt like. His hands snaked around her, tugging the ropes into place.

When he stood up, so close and warm, Kendle leaned in to place a soft kiss on his jaw. "Thank you."

He let the worry out a little, gruff tone covering his response to her action. "Stay close."

Luke tied the other end of the rope around his own waist, leaving them about four foot of space.

"Like I could get far in this setup."

Luke didn't grin. If not for them being out of so much, he'd put his foot down and stay here. This was a two-day trek and funny things were happening on the island. Besides the missing women and fruitless searches, there were also rumors of townspeople sighting nonresidents in the jungle that fled when spotted. There had also been two people who swore they'd heard boat engines last week.

He and Kendle had only been in town for a little while, but there had been more of the residents there at one time than ever before. Each of the small rooms the shopkeepers sometimes rented out were full of their neighbors who lived in the more isolated areas. *Bad times found their way to Pitcairn Island after all*, he thought.

Luke set an easy pace and for a while, there were only the sounds of the island around them. Kendle let her mind wander. She was still so

grateful to be on land that it was common to find her staring at the sand or trees for long minutes. Being surrounded by nature was a sedative to her nerves that increased when they continued to get farther from the roar of the ocean. She was anticipating the liquid death not being the first thing she heard upon waking for once. She'd survived and she wasn't alone. It was still enough to make her happy and she followed contentedly, enjoying the sights and smells.

Luke was glad to be able to give her something she wanted, but he still wished he could have left her at the cabin. The searches for the missing women had taken him away for a few hours of whacking and insult ducking, but there was no way he could stand to leave her unprotected for two entire days. Now that they were out here though, the feeling of danger was getting stronger. Even so many years out of action couldn't dull the instincts he had once trusted his life to and LJ sped them up a little, hand staying close to the sheath on his belt.

In his hurry to get her somewhere safer, Luke stepped over the very shallow grave without recognizing it for what it was. Whoever had put it there hadn't been concerned with the body staying buried.

2

An hour later, the feeling of menace had faded and the afternoon commenced with a sudden

brightness that lifted Luke's spirits. He loved being in the jungle again. Before, when he'd been so alone, the greenness had been suffered through. Now, because of Kendle's love of nature, he'd begun to make peace with his past. She finally knew his full story.

He'd told her while she was sequestered in bed last week, and he was still stunned by her easy acceptance of the mistake he had made. Adamant that it hadn't been his fault, her comforting arms had broken through the shroud his guilt had built.

The enemy had purposely held the POW's below that Laos village, hoping the innocent civilians would provide a cover. When he and Frank had gotten the others clear and called in that they were alive, the small town had been firebombed despite their attempts to convince HQ to handle it from the ground. Luke had carried the guilt all his life until Kendle. She'd gotten through the wall and her needs were now more important than his. When she'd said she wanted to hike, he'd had to force himself to agree, but once out here, the beauty had returned for him, bringing peace.

Because of Kendle.

Who's probably hungry, he thought, able to hear her quiet footsteps behind him, but no sounds of her being winded yet. Their hiking was returning her strength and he was glad her cold had been only that and not more of the pneumonia that she'd been battling when he found her.

Luke steered them around a large, vine-covered Miro tree and stopped, using his arm to wipe at his forehead.

“Are you feeding me now?” Kendle joked, shifting her kit from her shoulders to the ground.

“Some bread and water, and then you’re back on the road.”

She giggled, the noise echoing off the thick pad of treetops above them. They ate a small meal in the shade of an enormous Piñon tree that had more branches than she could count. Obviously old, she wondered what stories it might tell about those who had come this way before them. Some of the bark was petrified, and near the top of the branch, there were lines that she spent a few minutes examining while they finished eating.

The markings were rough, old, and she strained to make them out. What name was that? It started with an A, but that was all she could make out. The rest of the lines weren’t in any order that she could see, not even forming a picture, and she wondered if it was an ancient map. Maybe to a pirate treasure?

That was the old world, Kendle told herself sharply. Fame and fortune weren’t worth shit now.

“Did you say something?”

Kendle was still busy trying to banish that part of herself that had sent her into films and the spotlight. “No, why?”

“Thought I heard...engines?”

They both waited in silence, listening hard, but there was only the jungle –chattering monkeys and chirping birds.

Luke laughed it off, gathering their mess. “Hearing things again.”

Kendle raised a brow. “Again?”

Luke’s shrug was embarrassed. “I was doing rounds of the cabin last night and thought I heard footsteps.” He grinned. “I’m old, it happens.”

Kendle wasn’t fooled by the joke. He was worried.

Luke handed her kit over. “Let’s roll.”

She snapped a smart salute. “Yes, sir!”

3

The excitement of the trip wore off for Kendle as the day warmed and sweat rolled down her neck. Skin covered for protection, the heat was smothering, and she was glad when the glaring sun finally faded behind the treetops. Soon, it would cool off.

Luke passed a canteen of water and she sipped at it, stomach unhappy with the heat and walking. None of their hikes had lasted more than a couple hours and she was feeling tired, something she recognized as a side effect of the radiation or whatever she’d been blasted by. It hit her hard when it came and she swayed a bit, steps no longer careful.

Luke knew she needed a break, but he wanted to reach the creek before dark and he tugged gently on the rope until she was at his side. He slid an arm around her and kept them moving, feeling her relieved body melt against his. Damn, she was hot.

“Maybe we should make camp around here and go on in the morning,” he suggested and wasn’t surprised when she disagreed.

“I’m fine. The sun will go down and I’ll get a second wind.”

“We’ll be at the creek in another hour. We’ll camp there and get our supplies in the morning.”

Kendle was too uncomfortable to insist. She’d made good progress, but it was clear she had a long way to go before she would be healthy again.

The day got warmer as they wound through the jungle, following a faint path that Luke kept track of. The tracks he saw were old, mostly animals, and it made him feel better to know they were the first ones to come through here in a while. Much like when he had been Whacker in Vietnam.

“Do you smell that?”

Luke inhaled deeply. “No. What?”

Kendle sniffed again, sure it was strong enough for him to pick up too. “Sort of like...oil or gas fumes.”

Luke didn’t know if there was anything in the air or not. He wasn’t picking up much beyond the plants and animals around them. “People here have stashes. It’s probably a resident.”

Kendle slipped on a sharp rock, clutching at his arm, and LJ hauled her into place, thinking she was still too light. “All right?”

“Yeah, my shoe flap caught a rock.”

That was one of the many things on their list, what they had gone to Baxter’s for yesterday, and Luke steered them around the more obvious ruts and stones. Damn stupid townspeople!

Kendle could feel his sudden upset through the rigid lines of his body and guessed what had triggered it. “You know there’s a good chance I wouldn’t have gotten a pair anyway, right? Did you notice that puke green tennis shoe? Who wears that?”

Luke chuckled despite his anger. She hated him to be upset. When he fell into one of his...moments of the past, she was quick to snap him out of it with a joke or comment he wasn’t expecting. Life with Kendle was all peaches and sunshine. But for their past and the apocalypse, their life together would be perfect.

With Luke supporting most of her weight, Kendle was able to get her wind back and cool down a little. The sun was beating harder, but his big shadow kept some of it from her and she instinctively leaned into his side like a lover, enjoying being so close. He was hard and rippling strength against her, sending those stray curls of want into her stomach whenever he gazed down at her.

No, she definitely didn't view him as a man old enough to be her father. Luke was as far from that, for her, as it got.

Wondering about her thoughts, Luke didn't want to interrupt the moment with words and settled for pressing a gentle kiss to the top of her head and drawing her closer. Her arm went around his lean waist, the rope now coiled in his free hand, and the rest of the walk to the creek flew by.

4

An unnamed snake winding through Pitcairn's lush greenness, the creek was a narrow, deep waterway with mossy banks and a slow current. It twisted out of sight in both directions, almost hidden by the bushy leaves, and Kendle stared in awe.

"Beautiful."

There was no paralyzing fear at the sight of it, as Luke had been half expecting.

"Can we swim across?"

Before he could answer, the water rose near the bank, crystal drops swelling into the air as a large crocodile padded out.

Kendle recoiled in horror, stumbling into LJ's arms. She stayed there.

"Yeah, she might not like that."

The amusement in his voice calmed her and she flushed, thinking of the survival challenges she'd been on. She knew better.

“I didn’t realize crocodiles were so far south,” she stated, watching the huge animal pad into the shade of an uprooted tree.

“They’ve been moving farther from the big landmasses. We get a lot of things out here that are trying to escape progress.”

Kendle shook it off, peering around for a bridge. “So where do we cross?”

Luke motioned to the rippling water. “There.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“Is there a boat or something?”

Luke was busy digging through his pockets. “Or something.”

Kendle waited as patiently as she could. Thanks to the crocodile, she was now feeling the same dread that struck her when she heard the ocean. When he began tying ropes together, her brows drew together in concentration, trying to figure out what he was doing.

A few minutes later, her lips curved into a grin as he put together a rope ladder. Upon recognizing it, she tilted up to find a tree house. Cleverly built around the trunk, the small shelter was so well hidden; she doubted many people even knew it existed.

“We’ll hang up there til morning and then cross.”

Her thoughts drifted to spending the night in the small shack and she blushed.

Kendle's thoughts changed as they climbed up. From the garbage and personal items she got a quick glimpse of, someone was using this as a home and she wasn't surprised when Luke immediately got them down and out of the area.

What bothered her was the concern on his face. Did he mind that someone had been using his place? Kendle frowned. Was it even his place?

It took her a minute to realize he was leading them back the way they'd come and she stopped. "Hey, what gives?"

Luke kept walking, tugging her along. "We have to get to town."

Kendle stopped resisting at his tone. "Why?"

"I need to talk to the Mayor."

Kendle flinched. That was Ethan's daddy.

"For what?"

"I saw something that I need to tell him about," Luke ground out, wishing she would leave it alone.

"What was it?"

Luke increased their pace, mind flying. They would have to walk in the dark. He could put her on his back if he had to.

"Is this about the missing women?"

Luke flinched. "Yeah, come on."

He led them onto a more traveled path, not liking the quietness of the jungle around them.

Voices came to them, male, and Luke started moving again. "Good."

They went a few feet into the thick greenness before Kendle could hear what he had. Footsteps and... muttering?

“Who’s out there?” Luke called.

“Who indeed, you ruffian! Tired of the game finally?”

Luke and Kendle emerged from the bushes into a small clearing, and found three servants in tan slacks and vests surrounding a fourth man. This one was tall, expensively dressed, and very angry.

“You’ll be paying for this, Mr. Johnson! I’ll see to it personally.”

“What are you talking about?” Kendle asked, but was ignored.

“I’m glad you’re here, Kraft. We found something...”

“Of course I’m here, you idiot!” the Mayor snapped, “You led me on a merry chase, but it’s finished now and I’ll have my cloak!”

Luke frowned, listening to the man this time. “What?”

Their complete confusion was obvious and the man wilted before their concern.

“It wasn’t you.”

“No, but listen, we found something in the creek shack. You need to gather a group of men and we’ll do another search.”

The Mayor regarded him as if he was a fool and Kendle recognized that glassy stare from her own terrors. He was afraid of something.

She stepped forward. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not.”

He gawked at them with eyes the same shade of green as his Ethan’s were.

“I’ve been following the ghosts, and now one of them has stolen my favorite cloak and I can’t get it back.”

Shock, Luke thought.

Kendle took it a bit more seriously. “Did you see someone take your cloak?”

The Mayor fidgeted from foot to foot distractedly, removing his hat to wipe at his forehead, “I saw a shadow grab it from the line right after the maid put it out. I was in my common room with the valets.”

His accusing glare went over Luke as he said this, making Kendle want to slap him, but she kept pushing for answers instead. “What did you witness exactly?”

“There was a man...a ghost man. He had my eyes!” The Mayor shoved himself away from her. “I’m getting out of here.”

“We’ll help you get home,” Kendle offered and was shocked by the revulsion in his response.

“I’d sooner walk with the ghost. Excuse me!” He was gone a few seconds later, his valets trailing silently behind him.

“He’s nuts too,” Luke muttered.

“And scared. Something spooked him.”

“What do you think he’ll do?”

“I’m not sure he even heard me.”

“Who else can you tell?”

His snort was quick. “There’s not been any real crime on Pitcairn in years. There’s one police station, on the other side of the island, and that’s it. If someone goes missing, the residents usually band together and go searching.”

“Do you want to go try to get a search party together ourselves?”

“Won’t do any good without one of the Krafts’ there to nod and say ‘yes’ in the right places. We’ll have to tell the Bounty Bay sheriff.”

Kendle waited patiently and Luke finished his thinking aloud.

“We already sent for him when the women went missing. If he’s coming, he’ll be here in the next few days. It’ll take us a lot longer to go to him and we might miss each other along the way.”

He glanced up at the sinking sun. “We’ll keep going to Jenna’s store. Sheriff Cole should be in town by the time we get there. If not, we’ll go find him.”

“There’s a bridge or something, right?” Kendle asked.

Luke tried not to think about what he’d found in the shack. “Or something.”

Luke led them to the base of a cliff wall that was overgrown with vines and moss. Under a far edge, he tugged, and a wooden plank slid out from under the stone. He hefted it over his shoulder.

“Come on.”

The plank was thick and sturdy, and when he brought them through the trees a bit farther up, she grinned in delight.

“Or something, all right.”

There was a rope seat hanging from a high tree branch. Connected to more cords that stretched across the dangerous creek, all it was missing was the actual seat that Luke had over his shoulder.

“Ever do this?”

“I didn’t get to do the tree flying or the research when we flew to Brazil. The plane crashed.”

Luke slid the wooden plank in place. He’d watched the documentary after she had been rescued, thinking how lucky she’d been to survive at all, let alone only losing one crewmember. The crash itself had been captured on film by another plane and it was ugly.

“This is simple. Hang on. It sways a lot more than a normal schoolyard ride.”

He guided her into it and when he sat down beside her, she snuggled into his embrace.

“Hang on,” he ordered and she obediently clutched the harness with a tight grip.

Luke pulled the machete from his pocket and whacked through the anchor rope with one harsh swipe.

The swing jerked, sliding toward the water and Kendle laughed aloud. *I’m finally flying!*

The jarring stop as they hit the ground on the other side tossed her from the swing and she landed in a pile at his feet, still giggling.

“I’m gonna...wanna...do that...again.”

Luke let go of his rigid control, caught up in the moment. “Whenever you want, Darlin’, just say the word.”

Happiness was foreign to both of them, but it felt natural to lean in and seal their joy. “I love you, Kendle. You know that already.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “And I’m happy with you, Luke, honestly. This feels good.”

It wasn’t what he hoped for, but it was enough for now and he dipped to her lips for a longer, fire-building kiss that had them both a bit dazed when he finally pulled away.

“We should go.”

Kendle melted against his side once more, grinning. “As long as we get to do that again on the way, you can take me anywhere.”

5

The crazy lady across the creek was indeed that-crazy.

Kendle liked her on first sight, waving to them with a gun in one scarred hand and a cigar in the other.

“I won’t sell ya more than two of anything and I ain’t got two of much.” Her voice was younger than her face and she motioned at Kendle. “You go first.”

Kendle turned to Luke in confusion and he flashed resigned amusement. “She won’t let more than one shopper in her place at a time. House rules.”

He didn’t sound worried, and Kendle stepped up onto the wooden porch and followed the woman inside.

Now that she was closer, Kendle saw that the woman was barely that, more of a girl in a woman’s body and she wondered briefly what had happened to make her pick this way of living.

“What’s your list?”

Kendle reached for the paper in her pocket and the gun rose.

“Real slow.”

Luke appeared in the doorway. “She’s getting the list, Jenna.”

The woman calmed at the sound of Luke’s voice and lowered the big weapon. “Things ‘r funny now.”

They both agreed, thinking of the Mayor and the shack. Kendle handed over the list with a friendly smile and got a toothless grin.

“She’s cuter than the last ‘en you brought round here.”

Kendle froze and behind her, Luke did the same.

“The last one?”

The woman gave her a worried look, “She was torn up some. Don’t let him hurt you like that.”

Sure she had Luke confused with someone else, Kendle grinned. "I'm the one he'll have to watch out for."

Instead of an answering comment, the woman turned to Luke. "You paying gold like usual?"

"I have cash. I've never paid you with gold."

The woman studied Luke as if she hadn't met him before. "Who are you?"

"Luke Johnson."

"The outcast who killed those people in Nam?"

Luke flushed. "Yes."

Kendle felt her anger begin to grow. Would this woman treat him badly too?

"Always hated those darkies," she muttered, shocking Kendle. "Should be a hero."

The woman began to gather the items on the list and Luke rolled his eyes, mouthing *crazy*.

Kendle hid a snicker, agreeing. The woman had definitely been alone too long.

"Ain't got no cream left, but there's sugar. Find a quart of milk and make your own."

Luke grunted. He usually did that anyway, but the trade of...milk with the maid at Baxter's was over now that he had Kendle.

As if she'd heard the thought, the woman glanced over at him. "Mora was here yesterday, asked about you."

Luke glared. "I've told her."

"Aye." The woman stuffed things into one of her net bags. "Coffee's long gone for town folks,

but I might still be able to find a small amount for ya.”

“In exchange for?”

The woman pointed upward at Luke’s question. “Got a hole and no man help.”

“That’s worth a lot more than coffee,” Luke protested.

“Guess I could feed ‘n house ya for the night too,” the woman gave in reluctantly.

“Saves us the trouble of making camp in the dark,” Luke stated, looking at Kendle.

Kendle shrugged. “Whatever you want to do is fine.”

“The wood’s under the porch. You’ll find the rest already up there,” Jenna instructed.

“You’ve had someone working on it?” Kendle’s question was drowned out.

“Hello in the hut!”

Jenna gestured at Luke. “You make sure she don’t touch nothin’.”

They stayed inside as the woman went out to greet the new arrival, and Luke gave Kendle an apologetic glance. “I told you she’s not all there, didn’t I?”

Kendle wasn’t offended. “I’m not a resident. It shows.”

Luke wasn’t sure what to say to that and was saved a response by the conversation going on outside.

“Won’t tell you nothin’! Get off my property.”

Luke went outside.

Kendle followed.

“I’m not here for your traps, Jenna. I’m searching for... There you are.”

The sheriff scanned them both with a knowing smirk. “Figured you two would be heading this way after what happened in Baxter’s.”

“How long have you been in town?”

The man’s weather-beaten face went cool at Kendle’s question. “That’s none of your concern, Ms. Roberts. I’m interviewing everyone on the island.”

The sheriff wasn’t putting off the vibes of a friend and Kendle added little as Luke told him about the things that had been happening.

“And you say the Mayor was upset or jumpy?”

“Scared, shocked.”

“What about the shack? Any tracks in the blood to go with that handprint and hair?”

“I didn’t stay to do your job. I got her out of there and we headed for town,” Luke snapped, angry the man would spill something so awful in front of the two females. “That’s when we stumbled across the Mayor.”

“Stumbled upon Mayor Kraft...” The sheriff was writing in his little notebook. “You run across anyone new on the island?”

Kendle waited for the wide man to walk toward her, but he didn’t.

“I thought I heard an engine on the way here. Faded too fast to be sure.”

“You buyin’ something or gettin’ outta here?”

The crazy woman had either forgotten she'd told the Sheriff to leave or changed her mind, and the uniformed man didn't remind her.

"You got any of that fly soap left? Damn bugs are worse than last year."

"Got half a bar some dumb tourist tried to steal and broke when I chased him off."

"That'll do."

The woman came inside and Kendle followed, not caring for the way the lawman's leer crawled over her red skin when Luke looked away. He was a sleaze, she'd bet on it.

"Can I do anything while he's working on the roof?"

"You read?"

Kendle wondered if the woman's sight might be going bad. "Yes. Would you like me to recite you something?"

The woman snorted, handing her a thick book from a nearby shelf. "Read yourself that and then come here and we'll make our plans."

It was the Holy Bible.

"Is she staying with you permanently?"

The insinuating question drew Kendle's attention to the men outside.

"Yes."

"You know her from the mainland?"

"No."

"You're giving me very short answers. Wanna tell me why that is, Mr. Johnson?"

Luke glared at the man. “Well you’re askin’ some real stupid questions. Unless you think she’s the person responsible for those missing women, she’s none of your concern!”

The sheriff’s face filled with satisfaction. “So, the rumors are true. Have you told her about your past?”

Luke flushed with anger. “Yes, she knows it all,” he ground out.

The lawman frowned coolly. “I’ll check into that.”

Luke’s fist locked into place to keep from hitting the bastard. “You do your job while you’re at it, and find out who’s causing trouble or October’s elections could include a new peacekeeper. Won’t take much after the way you’ve handled things.”

That struck a nerve and the man snapped his pen in and put away his notebook, suddenly finished. “I’ll stop by the shack next. If I need to talk to you again?”

Luke hedged, not sure why, but willing enough to lie now. “We’re leaving tonight.”

He heard the woman and Kendle come out onto the porch, and waited for one of them to give away his bluff, but there was silence.

The sheriff stepped by to get his package, neatly covered in a sheet of plastic wrap. He handed the woman a stack of coins. “Put the rest of that on my bill, mother.”

“I will, Cole. Be safe.”

He left Luke and Kendle speechless. He was her son!

The woman cackled, going to the side yard. “Love that one. It never gets old,” she snorted in amusement. “Usually only works on mainlanders.”

Kendle and Luke shared a rueful grin at the joke that had been played on them, and followed the woman to their assigned chores.

6

“They’re calling a town meeting,” Luke told the two women as they ate supper, thinking that Jenna probably didn’t care one way or the other.

“The Sheriff said one of the items being voted on is whether or not we should draft a crew to go to the mainland and find out what happened.”

I might be on that ship, was Kendle’s first thought, and she looked up to find Luke staring at her knowingly.

“I told him we’d be there for the meeting.”

Kendle managed not to say anything, swallowing her fear of seeing Ethan.

“Well, I won’t,” Jenna stated firmly. “As long as those Krafts’ are in charge, won’t nothin’ good be done no matter what way you vote.”

“You’re not the only one who thinks so.”

Jenna’s voice was grim, “That won’t matter, neither. They’ll rule this island until they die, like their murderin’ relatives did.”

“How long has their family been in charge?” Kendle asked curiously.

The woman made a crude motion. “They’re from those that came in 1790, the Mutineers.”

“You mean the legend of Bounty Bay?” Kendle had studied it for a book report in high school and been fascinated. “I’ve read about that.”

“Weren’t no legend. Those pirates settled this island and their offspring’s been rulin’ ever since.”

Kendle thought quickly, sensing the woman had a piece to the puzzle she’d found earlier on the tree. “Have they always been so...”

“Evil? Deranged? Yes. They get or take what they want. Always have.” Jenna gestured at their mostly untouched plates. “How’s them cricket balls? It’s a new recipe.”

7

The sheriff had no trouble finding the creek shack, and the ladder still hanging there gave him a chill. No one on Pitcairn ever left rope or the like behind, unless they were in a hurry. Something up there had spooked the Vietnam vet and that was a problem. Luke was one of the toughest people on this island. Like him or not, Cole was glad the hard-ass would be at his mother’s place tonight. No way would Jenna let them leave after darkness fell.

The sheriff peered up as the shadows came in with the sun sinking below the haze of clouds. Maybe he’d hang around and discover if someone

came here during the night to clean things up. If so, he would have some answers. If not, he'd go up and try to fit new pieces into the puzzle.

The choice made, Cole swept his tracks into the couple's scattered markings and settled himself in a low tree half a dozen yards away. With his gun in his hand and a pouch of extra bullets, he felt confident that he could handle whatever came up.

8

Luke labored on the roof well into the evening. Kendle sat in a chair and went back and forth from watching him, to reading the book Jenna had given her. Instead of the laughter she'd expected, the woman's face had lit up in satisfaction at the sight of her opening it and that had been enough to get Kendle to keep going. Now that she had, the world of life's creation was dazzling her with all the possibilities. What if man wasn't created in God's image at all, but in that of—

“There's a page further on you might care for,” the woman muttered as she went by, being careful not to let Luke hear. “But you mind what comes between just the same.”

Kendle flipped through the pages, curious, and found a folded corner near the rear. It opened to Revelations and held a single sheet of dingy yellow paper. Sensing the way Jenna wanted it handled, Kendle first glanced up to be certain Luke was out of sight before opening it.

“The Mutineers rushed upon our beach like a storm, the leader killing my dad and taking his place. He wasn’t a ghost, I saw him bleed, but he was a demon! and he possessed my father. Brought back from a saber to the heart, he has become the evil that stalks this island. Not only does he rape and pillage, he takes free women and natives, selling them into slavery. My beloved little sister has met this fate and I’ve no choice, but to try to kill him. Please God, help me! There’s no one I can trust, not even mother, whom I fear is also possessed. My heart mourns the life I once knew.”

Kendle felt tears come and blinked them away. She had questions flying through her mind, but Jenna was nowhere in sight. Was it the Kraft family? Where was this girl now? Was it Jenna? Was she a Kraft?

Not thinking to tell Luke she was stepping outside, Kendle moved that way with the slip of paper in her hand.

9

“Kendle?” Luke scanned the kitchen before stepping onto the porch. “Kendle? Jenna?”

There was no answer and he came down the stairs slowly, identifying her tracks. He followed them around the side of the house, aware of the lack

of normal jungle noise. He drew up short at the voices.

“He wouldn’t tell and I won’t either.”

“You’ve given your word.”

“And I’ll keep it, but I don’t understand why you’ve told me all—”

“Because you have to take my place.”

Kendle’s voice sounded shocked. “Are you kidding me? You are crazy.”

There was no response to that and Luke stepped around the side of the building to find them both thumbing through stacks of books they’d pulled from crawl space boxes.

“Here it is.”

The woman handed a sheet of paper to Kendle. “That’s my dad. *Before.*”

Kendle pretended she hadn’t noticed Luke and he slowly faded into the jungle to observe.

“Do you have one of him after?”

“Not even a town picture on the wall. Cameras can’t capture images of the Devil.”

Luke’s mind raced. Someone in town was her father, someone who didn’t have any photos of themselves on the community walls.

Only one person didn’t have pictures up. It was a big joke between the shopkeepers to surprise him into one. The crazy lady’s father was Mayor Kraft.

“And your brother?”

Jenna flinched violently. “That thing is not my baby brother! The mutineers dragged him into the jungle and when he returned, he weren’t Ethan no

more, but some slobbering pile that lie on our floor and wet himself. He calmed down after a year or two and started acting right again, but the humanity was gone. They got my whole family!” She glared at Kendle wildly. “And they’ll get you too, if he’s not careful. They’re already watchin’, waitin’ for the chance to possess you, movie star.”

The woman went toward the house and Luke waited for her to be out of sight before joining Kendle by the fire of the heat-can that also served as an ‘open’ sign.

Kendle held out the photo and Luke stared in shock at the image of Mayor Kraft, an old man in his sixties at least.

“There’s no way that’s *this* Mayor, right? The last one?”

“She’d have to be at least that old, too. She’s lying.”

Kendle handed him the slip of paper and kept studying the photograph. There was something about it.

“This proves nothing. You know that, right?” he demanded, dropping the yellowed letter on top of the closest box as if it was too hot to hold.

She nodded, but for her it was another clue. That was a page torn from a terrified girl’s journal and it had reminded her strongly of her twin, Dawn, whom she had lost in the war.

“She’s suffering from a trauma, Luke. Something happened when she was a kid and she’s hoping for help. Can’t we check it out?”

Luke stared. “And do what? Force him to acknowledge his daughter? Didn’t seem like she wanted him around.”

“She wants me to kill him for her,” Kendle blurted.

Luke’s scowl took up his whole face. He snatched the items from her hand and tossed them on top of a nearby stack.

“Crazy Bat!” He tugged her close, ignoring her protests. “I’m staying by you until we get the hell out of here.”

Kendle gave in, snuggling into his warm embrace. “You’re the boss.”

Kendle and Luke spent the night in a corner bunk with their blankets and each other to keep them warm, both scanning alertly at every sound of the creaking hut. By the time dawn found the island, they were back in the jungle, leaving the small woman to her craziness.

The feeling of danger Luke had noticed on the way there returned when they finally neared the cabin. He was glad to discover the door untouched, his alarms still in place. He also didn’t find any prints, but there was a clear feeling that someone had been here and he combed the area for any signs. Something was going on here, something dangerous, and he doubted it had much to do with ghosts of the dead pirates who had settled this

island. His bet was on the living. They were usually the problem.

Chapter Six

Troopers And Trackers

Near Plainview, SD
April 8th

1

Adrian moved his herd hard and fast after leaving the Black Hills, making almost 70 miles in three days. As soon as they camped for the next break, his worry returned. Every pause they took allowed the slavers to get closer.

There were already people lined up outside, and he motioned the first of them in with a warmth he didn't feel. The heartburn was worse than usual. He had sent out trucks to clear paths in two directions in case they needed to run. Everyone was on high alert. He could have kept going, but his witch said an attack was coming and there was no outrunning fate. It was something he wouldn't try. *Without her words, what would I be doing right now?*

Adrian directed Marc to the empty chair as he stepped inside and the wolf curled up in the doorway. *Much the same.* If the camp knew the slavers were coming, they'd panic and run. They weren't strong enough yet to think of challenging the killers. "What can I do for you today?"

“I’d like to talk to you about some holes in security.”

Despite knowing their deaths might be coming, Adrian couldn’t prepare openly or warn his people; it was hard to keep his mind on things at hand. The worry was relentless.

By the time he had cleared the short line waiting to speak with him, Adrian found himself calling out to her. *There has to be something else I can do. Will you look for me?*

Angela got up from her seat at the center mess table without speaking. She’d been waved into the happy group for each meal, and while she was grateful to be welcome, she hated how everyone observed the center people so closely. *It’s like sheep watching the shepherds to know when to run.* She finally understood why the Eagles and Adrian sometimes referred to them that way.

The four men at the table didn’t speak, but their eyes followed her toward the tents. A few seconds later, Seth appeared. Her guards were still mostly unnoticed by both the camp and lower levels of Eagles.

Angela walked through the people she was coming to care for, not responding to greetings or questions. She’d done what they wanted for the last two days. She drove, had a shift with the doctor in the medical tent, spent time with Charlie in his new canvas, had a shower surrounded by shadows, then went to her tent to spend the night tossing. Then she

got up and did it all again. She didn't care for the routine. In fact, she hated it after even such a brief time. The sentries she had begun making friends with while in the quarantine zone were hanging back, waiting for Adrian's choice, she assumed, and she was back on the outside. That brief time had given her a glimpse of what Adrian was offering and she wanted it.

There were three people in line waiting for Adrian when she arrived at his tent. Angela was surprised when he cut things short with them and shook his head at two more moving his way.

He motioned her in, then shut the flap. "Thank you for coming."

She surveyed his spotless canvas home in the manner the Eagles always did, verifying things were okay by the state of his tent. "If you're busy, I can come back later."

"Now is better for them too, they just don't know it."

Angela heard the assurance he needed but couldn't ask for. She gave him a smile that was a bit fuller than she'd intended. "Well then, I'm all yours."

If only. Adrian smothered the thought. She already had two dogs sniffing at her heels. She didn't need a third. "How are things?"

Angela sighed, impatient. "I don't need to be warmed up."

Adrian frowned, a bit stung. "I need to know some things about the remaining twin and the

slavers. Like where they are and if the brother will come alone or with help.” Adrian observed in fascination as she searched for him.

“Not far enough. The Black Hills, using our old site.” Her lids opened to reveal a smoky, rolling blue that waited for his next question.

“And the twin?”

“The weaker of the two. He’ll want help, but he’ll sneak in during the night if he has to.”

Her voice sounds like endless minefields. “We have plans in place.”

“But you have no faith.” Angela couldn’t stifle the yawn fast enough and quickly tried to distract him before he could bring it up. “I’ve stayed out of sight about as much as I can stand.”

Adrian heard the confirmation of Marc’s earlier words in her tone. “Marc was by earlier and he made your unhappiness clear. As of this moment, you are free to come and go.”

“But you won’t lift the guard.”

“No.” He saw her brows draw together and shrugged. “They wouldn’t listen to me anyway on this one. Your man has them in line.”

“When?”

“When you’re safe.”

Angela snorted unhappily. “That could be awhile.”

Adrian was torn between needing her protected and making it possible for her to stay. “We might be able to change it to no protection during meals and activities with the Eagles.”

She waited, sure he'd give a little more.

He let out another sigh. "No guard during the day, unless we're traveling, or there's trouble."

"Thank you."

Her happiness faded and he noted the small glint of fear.

"I need something."

"Name it."

"I want that guard assigned to Charlie—an Eagle who won't let him leave without my permission. Not for any reason or with anyone, but me or Marc."

"Marc talked to me about that this morning too; he was surprised you hadn't."

Angela shrugged. "I hadn't made up my mind."

"So you've chosen the *other* Marine?"

Angela stiffened. After the dreams that the witch had put her through last night, the thought of talking about her love life with this man was mortifying. "Things are over with Kenn. I'll tell him soon, or he'll provoke me into hurting him with it, but I have no idea what he might do."

"Accept it."

"That's my hope."

"And when you do go to Marc?"

She blushed, but didn't deny it. "That's too far away to think about yet. For now, I'd like to be considered single."

"You're waiting to see if Kenn's going to be a problem? Trying to ease him into the idea of you with another man before you actually do it?"

She gave him a short nod, pale cheeks stained with color.

That would give the camp a choice, but none of them would care for it, including her men. And it wasn't what she wanted, either. He felt that.

"But it will give me the two things I need most, if I'm careful." She needed him to know she'd thought it through. "Right now, I'm not strong enough to be an Eagle and the mate to a man like Marc. I'll be constantly pulled between the two things I love and one of them will suffer."

"But if you're already in my army..."

"Then I'd never let it be taken from me. I'd know going into things that I'd still be an Eagle first, no matter what."

They were the words that each of his highest men had told him in confidence after realizing his dream. To hear it coming from a female was a bright moment for Adrian. It was not only proof of his hard work and plans, it was also a sign of their future finally starting. "There's a private lesson tonight, during mess. First, you have to find it without being stopped by any of the guards. If you still want to be an Eagle when it's over, you can train publicly."

2

"You're sure?"

"Sorry." Samantha shrugged apologetically. "I've never seen him before. Are you certain you did?"

“Yes!” Cynthia snapped. “He was government, I’m positive of it.”

So am I. Samantha gave her a cool glare. “Lies like that could get him banished.” She turned away. “Or you killed.”

Samantha entered the area behind the supply trucks, pondering her defense of Adrian. Cynthia was the enemy, representing the old ways she was always accusing Adrian of. The reporter was so blinded by her obsession to know who he’d been that she couldn’t see her own flaws. The camp appeared to have written her off as just another bitter star from their past, but Samantha thought Adrian needed to be incredibly careful or the reporter would figure it out. Cynthia was far from dumb.

As for who Adrian had been, it had come to her late last night, but it had taken only a short deliberation to decide it didn’t matter. It might have if she hadn’t spent the time with him in his rig. He wasn’t like the leaders of *before*—he actually cared about people. Adrian wasn’t responsible for the mistakes of the old world, no matter who his father was; she thought most of the camp would agree. The few who wouldn’t, would keep the rest of them stirred up until he was forced out and Safe Haven collapsed. Like it or not, he was right to hide it from them.

Samantha mouthed a hello at the ponytailed sentry sitting on a high branch of the tree that overlooked the gun class, enjoying his surprise.

Billy hadn't thought he'd been spotted with all that leaf cover, but Sam was getting better at feeling eyes on her. She strode toward the bleachers with a small smile.

Since her ride with Adrian, some of these healing people had also been friendlier. She was glad, but that feeling of doom was impossible to shake. Even having the doctor tell her all the blood tests had been negative hadn't erased it.

"Morning, Samantha."

The den mother was alone with two steaming mugs on the bench next to her. Samantha greeted her reluctantly. It wasn't that she disliked the German lady, she just didn't feel like listening to her today.

"Morning, Hilda."

Knowing it was rude, Samantha chose to sit at the far end, not in the mood for all the chats these women wanted to have or the advice they gave. She needed time to think, to figure out how to—

"Death surrounds you."

Hilda's words gave Sam a deep chill and she automatically took the mug that was held out.

"It followed you here. You and the other one Adrian wants us to see as a man."

Ready to do battle to get out, Samantha was unprepared for the woman's next harshly spoken words.

"It is good, ya? You have led them to their deaths. Those they've slaughtered will be grateful." The woman left.

Samantha sipped the strange brew that smelled like tea and tasted like coffee. *Is Hilda right? Is it supposed to work this way?* If Adrian and his Eagles could handle Cesar, then she hadn't done anything wrong.

Samantha sighed. That evil man wasn't the only problem. When the slavers attacked, Adrian would be busy protecting his people from outside threats. With Rick already here, Adrian was in danger.

"Hi."

Samantha looked up to discover Neil and his team walking by with hands full of equipment. She realized he and his team were teaching the gun class today. She'd noticed Neil before now, but with the dim sky to complement the golden flecks in his hair, her body responded. *He's cute.* "Hello. I'm Samantha. Sam."

"Right on top." Neil studied his sheet as if he didn't know who she was. "You're early. No breakfast?"

Samantha was aware of his team giving her funny looks. "Not hungry." She flashed a smile. "Besides, I wanted to get here first and mess with things so I can pass."

Neil chuckled, surprised by his instant desire to help her. What was it about this group that had come in? Other than Rick, they all had a spark that drew people. "Come help us set up, then. Better chance that way."

Self-conscious, Samantha followed Neil into the midst of the working Eagles.

None of them missed the way her hand hovered over the gun on her hip. They recognized the weapon as Adrian's, so none of them asked about her having it, though she hadn't been through the class yet. There was only one way she'd gotten the boss's gun. They wouldn't question his choice.

Samantha cleared her throat. "What can I do?"

Neil gestured at the line of targets. "Help me roll these onto the spots my team is marking off."

The roller-bound targets were large and bulky, but she was sure Neil could have done it by himself. Make-work to keep her from feeling so alone? *Probably*. She shoved the target against the ruts in the ground. It was nice of him.

"This is good. Let's get the next one." Neil used a subtle gesture to tell the Eagles to leave the remaining targets for him and Samantha.

His team obligingly labored on other things while studying them both. Did Neil like the blond woman? Jeremy had mentioned his suspicions to the rest of their team. Neil was unaware of his every expression being scrutinized.

Samantha and Neil placed all the targets onto their marked and measured places, silent except for his directions. Each one took them farther from his men; the large rollout at 200 feet was at the edge of the caution tape.

Samantha saw Neil scan those on duty before sweeping the area himself. She was comforted by how serious the Eagles took their jobs. "Anything else you don't really need help with?"

Neil laughed. "I'll think of something for you to do, Miss Moore."

The offer sounded very personal. Neil started to clarify.

Samantha let her new emotions answer. "If Becky hears you say that she might try to kill me."

Neil tensed.

Samantha realized she'd made a mistake by bringing it up. She'd only found out by listening to the other women gossip. *Neil knows it isn't a secret, right?*

Apparently not, because his mouth was open, and his cheeks were flushed.

Samantha sighed. *I can't get the hang of things here.* "It was a joke, sorry." She strode toward the bleachers at a fast clip.

Neil stared after her in confusion. *Awfully jealous tone for a joke. What the hell?* She stiffly bypassed the filling seats and disappeared behind them. She wasn't staying for the practice now. *Damn.* The rest of the gun class was tedious for Neil.

He kept watching for her to return or even walk by, not paying attention to the lesson. Usually, this was the best lesson to be in charge of, but shortly after the women began firing, Neil found himself shuffled to the rear by his own team. It was where they put Eagles who were having a difficult day, so that it wouldn't rub off on the women—something no one wanted. It was humbling to find himself in that position. Then it was torture as he spotted the object

of his frustrations coming back toward the class, but he wasn't close enough to talk to her anymore.

Samantha marched by the bleachers with determined steps. *Neil's the one who likes young girls. Why should I miss my test and the hunting trip?* She strode to the guard with the clipboard, pretending Neil wasn't watching her. "Am I too late?"

Jeremy subtly rotated so he could view Neil's profile. "Nope." He waved her to the line, noting the sudden life in his team leader. "Last shooter."

Jeremy took a minute to study her paperwork and her. This was the first woman Neil had shown any interest in, other than Angie, and who could blame him for that? Neil liked to flirt, especially with little Becky, but he needed someone stronger.

Jeremy began evaluating Samantha as if she were in line to be Neil's mate. "Whenever you're ready."

Samantha got set, trying to remember everything; she jumped at Jeremy's voice near her ear.

"Your grip's too tight. Try to relax; pretend none of us are here."

His soothing tone allowed her to do just that.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"Three hits at fifty feet. Pass. Pack it up!" Neil instantly hated how close Jeremy was standing to her.

He sounds mad. Samantha sighed. “Can you tell him I didn’t mean anything by it?” She turned to leave.

Neil’s second in command stepped in front of her, following instincts Adrian was slowly teaching them to trust. “Level two test, now.” Her chart notes came to mind. *No blindfolded attempts yet. Apt to panic and fire randomly.* “No blindfold.”

Samantha opened her mouth to say no. She met Neil’s angry glare over the guard’s shoulder. Tension crackled. “He doesn’t like this, you talking to me.”

Jeremy didn’t deny it. “It is for him, though.”

Curious. Why wouldn’t Neil want me talking to his team? Because of Rick? Samantha shrugged. “Okay.”

She needed five bullseyes in any target, or one in the farthest to achieve level Two. She wanted to go for those closest to be sure of passing, but at that moment, she wanted Neil’s respect more. To get that, only the best shooting would do. “Are questions allowed?”

“Absolutely.” Jeremy was pleased she had one.

“What’s the wind? I know it’s south to southeast again, but I can’t feel the gusts for the bleachers.”

Jeremy scanned the flagpole dials Adrian had put up. “Ten to eighteen.”

“Thanks.”

Jeremy wasn’t sure what else to say and cleared her a wide line of fire. She’d asked an Eagle’s question. Would she be like Angie and want to join

the Eagles? Did it matter? Would being an Eagle make her a better candidate for Neil's mate or would a strong woman intimidate him?

Bang! "Damn it!"

Samantha's curse was lost under Neil's impressed call.

"Bulls-eye, farthest target!"

Jeremy grinned. "That's a pass."

"Got a band aid?"

Jeremy saw her hand dripping blood and intuitively knew what had happened. "I've done that so many times I almost don't feel it anymore. Come on over here."

As soon as the sentry pulled out the first aid kit, they were surrounded by men, Neil the first to reach them.

"She okay?"

"What happened?"

"Slide got her."

"That sucks."

"Can't tell you how many times I've done that."

Instead of scaring her, Samantha felt her uneasiness lift a bit at their concern. She held up her hand as Jeremy opened a bottle of alcohol. "A bleed is an automatic pass, right?"

There were snorts and chuckles from all of them except Neil.

Jeremy leaned a bit closer to the woman than he needed to, testing the strength of Neil's attraction. He had a plan forming, but Jeremy was suddenly

positive he would be the one unhappy when it was done. “This part’ll hurt a bit.”

Samantha’s smile was cut off by a grimace of pain as he dumped the bottle over the gash. “Damn it!” Sam squeezed her lids together against the sting, barely aware of shuffling noises.

“Think you used enough?” Neil’s voice was full of a hardness his team wasn’t used to hearing.

Jeremy glanced up innocently. “Do you think I should do it again?”

Eyes still shut, Sam tried to pull away. “No!”

“Stop it, let me check it out.”

Samantha froze, realizing it was Neil now gently holding her throbbing hand.

“It’s not that bad, but there’s gun oil under the edges. John or Angie should clean it.” Neil fished through the kit for a bandage, trying to hide how touching her had affected him. “You can look now.”

Samantha grinned as she took the bandage. “Sorry. I’m a coward at heart.”

“The opposite, maybe.” He watched as she slapped the patch on without wincing. “Do you want someone to walk you to the medical tent?” He looked around and realized they were alone. His team was suddenly busy packing things up. Neil grunted at the obvious matchmaking. “I’ll walk with you. I need to talk with John anyway.”

Sam waved it off. “I’ll throw some Neo on it later. I’ll be fine.”

Neil chuckled. “You just don’t want the alcohol again.”

She smiled. “Or the time. I needed to pass the first test today, so I can go hunting.”

Storing the knowledge that she’d come for a level one test, and gotten level two, Neil pushed his hat up, face as cool as ever. “I’m surprised you’d want to. It’s bloody work.”

“Life is bloody.” Samantha wiped her stained gun down the side of her jeans before sliding it into its holster with a loving pat. “I’ll clean you up after. Our work is not yet finished.” Samantha moved toward the parking area, adjusting her bandage. “Catch ya later, Neil.”

“Yes, you will.” It shocked him to hear those words fall from his own mouth. Neil spun around to keep her from reading it as she turned back curiously. Those were the words Marc and Angie used.

His team saw their want and the confusion and exchanged grins of recognition. Neil did have an interest. They were glad. It took a real woman to complement a real man. They wouldn’t let Neil destroy the harmony of their team by choosing a mate who was too young to handle the secrecy of what they were doing. Samantha, on the other hand, was a grown woman who knew life’s lessons well. If Neil was willing to switch his affections to her, they might be able to support it.

“Do you still plan to join the Eagles, even though everyone is dead set against it?”

Angela had been expecting the question. “Yes, Charlie, I do.”

They were in a corner of the medical tent sorting through files, and though the doctor and his wife could hear, neither of them censored their words.

The teenager was quiet for a minute, letting that sink in. Angela could feel his disapproval and fear. She wanted to tell him it would be all right, that she wouldn’t be hurt, but she had no idea if it was true, only that she was willing to take the risk.

“Why?” Charlie was worried about her getting hurt.

Angela shrugged. “It’s how I want to help, contribute.”

Charlie gestured. “But you’re already doing shifts here.”

“I’ve got more to offer.” Angela heard her hard tone, but she didn’t take it back.

“Eagles are men.” Charlie pointed at the people gawking through the open flap as they walked by. “The camp won’t like this.”

“They’ll adjust.” Angela gave him a pointed look. “So will you.”

Charlie ducked his head.

Angela let out a sigh. “Adrian needs help, and I can give it. Should I tell him no?”

Torn, Charlie hesitated. “Maybe.”

“Would you?” Her tone softened. “Could you?” Telling him she knew of his hero worship of Adrian.

Charlie's lips twitched at her attack. "I don't think so."

"Same here." She handed him a stack of folders. "Put those in E-F. Have you seen your dad today?"

Charlie glanced at the doctor and nurse in the tent with them before answering. "They're at the trucks, sorting some new stuff. Dog, too."

Angela hoped Neil or Seth would keep him from reacting to anything else that Kenn might try. Marc had spent all day yesterday helping the vet; she hadn't spotted him once since then. "It would be nice if you could find some time to spend with him. He traveled a long way to meet you."

"He came for you, not me!" Full of a teenager's temper, Charlie shoved himself up off the canvas floor. "I've got things to do."

Angela let him leave, ignoring the sympathetic gazes of John and Anne. He was scared of pushing Kenn into hurting anyone, but he was also angry that Marc hadn't been in his life all these years. They would have to talk about that before any real bond could grow between them. His fault or not, Marc had time to make up for and questions to answer.

John watched Angela, as did Anne. They weren't sure of the new female healer yet, still a bit uneasy about her beauty and her tag-along, but it was obvious that there was a hard road ahead for Angela and her son.

For us all. John stiffened at a fresh wave of pain in his burning gut. The war hadn't ended yet.

Kyle joined Kenn in the parking area. "I want you to switch me or Neil on the driving schedules."

Kenn didn't come out from under the hood of Adrian's overheating semi. "No."

"Kenn."

Kenn smacked the wrench against the hood. "What?! Angie and I won't be alone. Zack and Lee will be with us."

Kyle snorted. "Yeah, your biggest fans. Switch one of us and take it out on that one."

"No." Kenn still hadn't looked up. "Go away."

Kyle gave a mock sigh that instantly got the Marine's full attention. "Okay, but it'll be hard for my Eagles to concentrate on covering your six, if they're worried about hers."

Kenn rose, glowering. "Are you threatening to slack off?"

"Nope. It's just something to think about." Kyle headed for the mess. "Anything can happen out there on the road."

Kenn didn't hide his hatred as Kyle left. *One day that man will push me too far.*

Zack joined Kenn, glaring at Kyle as the mobster walked away. "You want I should kill him for you, Boss?"

Kenn snorted laughter at Zack's heavy mock-Italian accent. "The sooner, the better."

Zack's grin faded. "You gonna switch the schedules?"

Kenn shrugged resentfully and wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Probably. They're playing hardball right now."

"Rumor says she's gonna be an Eagle."

Kenn stiffened. "What did you hear?"

Zack frowned, remembering Kenn was out of the loop now. "She told him she wanted to be in his army."

"What did he say?" Fear tightened, stretching Kenn's nerves.

"He'd get back to her."

Kenn's heart sank. That was as good as a yes where their leader was concerned. Adrian was only taking time to evaluate the reactions for problems that might arise.

"The men are worried they'll have to hit her."

Kenn snorted. "She won't draw numbers for cage matches, bet on it."

"It won't matter, if she fails the private lesson with Neil." Zack kept trying to make Kenn feel better. "Or if Adrian's guard dog refuses."

Kenn had forgotten about that; he instantly felt better. Neil was a boy scout, like Marc. "He won't be able to hit her."

Zack swept the trees, narrowing in on a shadow padding through the molding foliage. *Just that damn wolf.* "I'm not so sure about it now. She got him in trouble with Adrian. He's been worse than usual with the Eagles."

Kenn only knew the woman he'd lived with, controlled. "She won't be able to take it. One good hit and she'll be on the ground, crying like she always did. Either way, she'll never be one of us."

5

"What does it take for a guy to become one of you?" Rick's tone was exactly right. "'Cause it's getting lonely on the outside."

Mitch was surprised the man was taking the time to talk to him. He'd picked out how important that group was. If the other three would be high up here, maybe this one would too. The radioman leered. "Yeah, these people know how to give a cold shoulder."

The traitor extended his hand. "Richard."

"Mitch."

They shook.

"Got any suggestions?"

The drunkard bobbed his head at the peaceful camp behind them. "They like people who are useful. Do something big for the boss, and you'll have more friends than you want."

Rick beamed. He had something big planned for Safe Haven's boss. Just last night he'd begun to cut the hole in the rear of his tent that would give him some freedom to set things up. The slaver-in-disguise leaned closer. "Can I do anything for you in return for your advice?"

Always one to grab an opportunity, Mitch lowered his voice. "I always need things."

"Good. Maybe I can get them for you."

"Everything okay here?" Kevin didn't like the new guy talking to their radio man. "Where are you supposed to be?"

Mitch glared. "Ease up, Kev. We're just talkin'. He ain't askin' anything he shouldn't be."

Kevin ignored the hostile tone. "What did he ask?"

Mitch and the guard were not friends. Kevin had felt Adrian's dislike and now made no secret of the fact that he thought Mitch should be banished for being drunk on the job. Because of that, the ex-dispatcher didn't think twice about covering for his new friend.

"If there are food or clothes limits. Look at him. He needs new rags and good portions."

Kevin wasn't fooled, but knew he'd get no other story. He went to find Kyle so it could be added to their nightly reports.

Behind him, the two men exchanged satisfied glances.

The other Eagles in the area glared until Rick returned to the main camp.

Chapter Seven

I Liked It

1

A little before evening mess, Adrian was finally alone with Marc in a supply truck. They were sitting on the bumper, smoking and waiting for another full trailer to be brought around so they could keep sorting.

Adrian turned to Marc as Dog disappeared into the bushes that surrounded the camp. “You know what answer I’ll give if she passes the private lesson?”

Marc snorted, voice sharp. “Of course. You set it up that way.”

Adrian didn’t rise to the challenge. “Will you leave over it or stay and suffer because you don’t think we can keep her safe?”

“Safe? How about alive?” Marc holstered his mouth. “I know you can’t protect her yet. That’ll hold me here more than any of these little bonding moments, so you can keep the offer you’re about to make. I’m not going anywhere.”

Adrian let out a sound of annoyance. “You’re either a leader or a follower here. Want a chance with her? This is how you get it.”

“And in return?” Marc was suddenly weary again. “What do I have to do to stop being the extra dick she brought along?”

“Embrace the dream, Grunt. Not blind and unquestioning, but not the half assed shit you’re delivering, either. Stop fighting the current and swim with us, help me *lead* them.” As the hunting crew pulled in, Adrian headed that way. “If you can’t share her, you can’t have her. She’s as much as said so. I’d spend some time learning to play better with others.”

Marc shook his head. He got the warning; he understood the leader knew Angie might want to be an Eagle now more than she wanted to be his mate, and Marc resented him for it. *If not for Adrian, she might be mine even now!*

Marc sighed, pushing away the bitterness. She wasn’t leaving and they couldn’t be together until they found out if Kenn was crazy enough to get himself banished and sneak back in as he’d threatened. As someone who knew every detail of camp defense, there was no way they’d ever be able to protect her from all sides against Kenn. And Marc knew if he were climbing into the rack with her every night, he’d never stay alert enough. Kenn needed to be right here where they could watch him and that meant pushing him, small steps at a time, to determine if he needed concrete shoes.

Instead of the normal rookie shift, most of Neil's team was on duty when the two trucks of hunters pulled in.

Samantha left the truck amid calls of good work, covered in crusty animal blood.

The five men guarding the area understood she'd been testing herself by going. Usually, only rookies did that and it helped seal Jeremy's decision. He knew Neil wouldn't be happy with little Becky for long, even if she wasn't so...flaky. He'd always be the teacher. With Samantha, Neil would be challenged. His entire team had been hoping he would show interest in anyone else. Now that he had, they would try to make him happy and secure their new lives. Of all those here, Neil tried the hardest to emulate Adrian; it made him easy to follow.

Jeremy keyed his mike even though he'd already spotted Adrian coming their way. "Com to Eagle One. Huntin' crew is home. All's 5-by." Jeremy faded into the background to wait, wondering how strong the pull was.

Less than a minute later, a state trooper's hat appeared through the fog.

Samantha wasn't aware of anything, except that she was back in the normalcy of camp. The trip had been worse than she'd expected. The hunting had consisted of cornering a small herd of deer and opening fire. Only two of the eight members who'd gone along had been able to do it when Doug's call

came—Lexa, a gun shop owner who'd thrown up afterwards, and Samantha.

Samantha pushed away her revulsion at the memory. She'd stepped forward without any qualms, eager to practice her new skills on the terrified targets. The Eagles had called her headshots perfect. Even Zack had given her an arrogant gesture of recognition. She'd passed their test and failed her own. *I liked it. I like to kill.*

"It's the same, for some of us."

Sam was startled to find Neil walking next to her. They were behind the shower camper, almost out of view of everyone. "What's the same?"

Neil gave her the truth the camp couldn't handle yet. "We loathe the part of ourselves that likes to spill blood."

Sam stopped. "How did you—"

"I've been there." Neil watched her red streaked hair blow in the stiff wind. *Sexy. And odd that I think so.* "We all have. Facing the evil inside is hard, but you're always better off knowing your true limits, your true self."

It sounds like he actually cares. Samantha raised a brow. "Do you always meet the new killers when they come in?"

Neil chuckled, but his tone was serious. "Yes, ma'am. I meet the survivors too." Neil tipped his hat to her and joined his team, eager to know why they'd volunteered for duty again so soon.

Not sure why, Samantha felt better. *Because I'm not alone in these feelings or because it came from Neil?*

Confused, Sam stewed on it as she got a shower. The water beat the tension from her shoulders, but the sight of herself murdering all those terrified deer wouldn't leave her mind. What if they'd survived the mud wave just to be eaten? *What kind of a caring creator makes a life circle based on violent death?*

When she stepped from the camper, Samantha had settled some things, but all of them were forgotten when she spotted a familiar shadow lurking in the darkness nearby.

"Hello, Samantha."

Instantly on edge, she stopped. "Rick."

The grimy black bandana and those greedy green orbs were all that remained of the man she'd traveled with. She sensed more strength, more danger in him.

"How are you?" Rick leered at her exposed skin, remembering running his hands all over it.

Sam's tone stayed leery. "Better. And you?"

Rick flashed a menacing grin. "Oh, I'm good, baby. I'm settlin' in and gettin' comfortable."

Sam retreated several paces.

Rick was gone an instant later.

She sucked air into her lungs. He was warning her that he hadn't forgotten their deal. *Did anyone notice?*

Neil's icy face was right behind her. "What did he say?"

"That he was settling in and getting comfortable." Instead of scorn, she got an answer that allowed her to breathe again.

"Good, he's relaxing. He'll get cockier and then we'll have him." Neil's voice softened. "Until then, keep that gun close."

"I will." She turned toward the mess, sighing when she noted how crowded it still was. *Lovely.*

Neil was drawn to the sound. "You got plans for dinner?"

Samantha's heart thumped. She should tell him yes, put an end to things here and now. "No."

A bit arrogantly—he was high up here, after all—Neil smiled "Good. Hang on a minute." He made motions to one of the shadows nearby.

The Eagle went to make a report to Adrian. Anything on Rick went straight to the boss as soon as it happened. They hadn't given him a job yet, hoping the free time would allow them to catch him in the act. So far, the janitor had spent each day doing what any other refugee here did.

Neil looked at Samantha with a thick feeling in his stomach that he accepted in reluctance. I want *her. Becky would be a tight fuck at night, but Samantha, I can love...* "Come eat with me. Afterward, I'll show you how we work off the extra tension."

Happiness and caution flooded her face in equal measures. Neil's mood lightened. *She might like me, too. That will make things easier.*

Unable to resist, Samantha nodded. "Just for a little while."

Neil smiled. "Good." He started to cup her arm, then thought better of it. They traveled toward the main camp, side by side.

Behind them, more than just his team gawked at the sight.

3

"Adrian has sent all of you here for assorted reasons, but I promise you'll leave bleeding. This is no easy lesson." Doug swept the men waiting in the dark. "You'll notice others here. They've been invited to see what you have to go through to become an Eagle. Don't disappoint them, or him, by giving up because of a little pain—"

Doug glanced up as Angela stepped from the shadows. When she gave him a cool nod that said she had Adrian's permission to be here, he winced. She reminded him strongly of a man he'd served with. She had that same look of confident kamikaze that Joshua had gotten when shit hit the fan. "This lesson will cover the basics of a fighting type all Eagles must be proficient in by level Five. Kenn and Daryl will demonstrate."

The other observers craned their necks, ignoring Angela as the two fighters squared off with hard glares.

Doug kept his attention on the newest rookie he was about to be training, mind still on his buddy. He and Josh had been drinking off base, suckin' 'em down to forget a bad moment they'd shared. A cute girl with more chest than brains had asked him for a dance. When Josh had said no, that he had a woman waiting at home, the drunken party girl had asked him who the hell he thought he was. The immediate response had been one Doug had never forgotten.

"I'm a dirty, nasty, filthy Army Grunt and the bloody tip of my nation's spear. Who the hell are you?"

That's what Angela would be to Adrian, Doug was suddenly positive of it. The big man continued instructing, not sure Marc would be able to handle it. "If you watch this and think *I'd never be able to stand that*, leave as soon as you have the thought, because you're right. If you see the blood and think *that's okay, I'll take a Tylenol before it starts*, you might belong here."

Angela moved toward the small ring of hay bales, stomach in a hard knot as she sought a better view. Adrian hadn't said Kenn would be here.

You didn't ask. The witch tried to help. *Now, you know better.*

Kenn and Daryl were already trading hits, but not the average punches. These blows were done

with sharp, fast jerks and graceful slides into the other man's personal space to deliver a vicious hit. It was the fighting style Adrian and Neil had used while they were in quarantine.

"You'll notice it's quick in and even faster out. This type of fighting is called kai and only one person in camp knows all of it. He'll be here in a few minutes to start your training."

Angela assumed Doug meant Adrian. She wondered if he and Kenn would fight. Daryl was good, but not nearly enough. Kenn's big hands were giving the Eagle what he'd given her so many times.

"Kai accomplishes two things, quickly. It causes severe pain and puts your opponent out of commission for a while."

At Doug's words, both fighters delivered the ugliest shots Angela had ever seen outside of movies.

Daryl was the one to eat dirt.

"Not everyone can be good at it. Tonight, you only have to survive." Doug gestured at the biggest of the five pale men. "Jake, you're up."

4

"Aren't you eating?"

Neil sipped bottled water as Samantha devoured a plate of fries covered in ketchup. She was finally starting to put on a little weight. *It looks good on her.* "I have a lesson in a few minutes."

Samantha frowned. "I thought we were going somewhere."

"We are."

He's taking me to a lesson. She shrugged. "Okay."

A little disappointed, she picked at the fries.

Neil hid a smile. She thought he was taking a test and wanted to show off. Good. She would be distracted from her thoughts about Rick and the hunting trip.

They had spent a quiet ten minutes at the center table so far, but the crowd around them had fallen silent the instant they'd gotten in line. It hadn't changed.

Samantha had acquired a permanent pink streak across both cheeks. "I'm not supposed to be at this table, right? That's why they're all staring?"

"Sorry, I thought you knew." Neil heard his own surprise as he spoke. "I've never done this before."

"Done what? Had a meal..." She blinked. "They think we're on a date!"

He reddened a little.

She raised a brow. "Are we?"

Put on the spot, Neil couldn't lie, but his first thought was, *yes*. "Not unless you'd like it to be."

Not expecting that, Samantha wasn't offended. "What if I did?"

Neil smiled, body language saying more than his mouth. "I'd be flattered and happy to play along."

Play along. Now the sting was there. “I’ll let you know. I’m not sure I like how you asked.”

They were both laughing as they stood up to clear their mess.

Samantha was extremely glad to be gone from the mess a moment later. Out here, it was just the cool breeze, the darkness she’d been in since the war, and Neil’s comforting body next to hers.

“I’ll be there for about half an hour and then we can do something else if you like.” He leaned a bit closer than he normally did with the women here. “I know the boss. I can sneak you into the training tent for a quick drill.”

Sam smirked, sliding into his personal space with no hesitation. “Can I have the sweaty towel, too?”

“Of course.”

Still chuckling, the couple went toward the area that Angie had only found by using her gifts.

5

“Now that the warmups are done, Neil will teach you three basic moves that you’ll practice every day on your own. Do it or not, you’ll still have to get by him for every test and he’s no easy mark either.” Kenn’s tone was gloating.

He’d beaten on all five bloody men now listening with a clearer idea of what they’d signed up for. He couldn’t wait for Angela to duck into that tent for a session with Neil. Her game was about to

be over and he'd have his life back. "When Neil calls your name, leave the guns out here."

During the last two matches, Angela had been studying those gathered for the lesson instead of the battles themselves, sensing Kenn might be showing off for her by hitting harder than he had to. While she was scanning the half a dozen extra observers, she'd gotten a lot of hostility. None of them were willing to accept that she was also one of Adrian's handpicked people; it made her angry. She needed to be here as much as they did. Kai was harsh enough to allow her to handle any opponent.

Neil and Samantha appeared through the darkness.

Kenn gestured, hiding a frown at Neil not being alone. It deepened when he saw who Neil was with, but the new woman was still better than it being Marc. "Here's the teacher. First man to the tent is...Tucker."

Neil directed his new friend toward Angela, hoping she wasn't on the list waiting inside the tent for him. "Keep her company, will ya?"

Samantha wasn't sure Angela wanted it. She stopped a few feet away as Neil slid into the tent.

The two females exchanged polite smiles, but not words as they listened.

Tucker entered the tent.

"You're sure?" Neil's voice was hard.

"Yes." Tucker's tones were shaky.

"Then, let's get to it."

The sound of a struggle echoed, then Neil's voice. "Like this." *Thud.*

"Lower." *Slap.*

"Faster." *Thud.*

It sounded as if each order was followed by a hit.

Tucker came out with a limp and a bloody face, less than three minutes later.

The two women instinctively moved closer together for comfort.

Neil cleared his throat. "Anderson."

It was a fast, private class, which was the good side. The bad side was a nervous Neil giving the lesson, having verified that Angela's name was indeed on the list. He knew he would treat her like any of the others that Adrian had sent to him for toughening up; he hated the boss a little for showing him that he and Kenn had more in common than he'd ever realized.

6

"Angela."

Angela went toward the small canvas at Neil's call, heart thumping. Listening had reminded her of the years Kenn had abused her. The fear had grown with each bleeding man to leave the tent. Now she had to conquer those fears or give up the idea of being an Eagle in Adrian's army. This was why he had sent her here—to see if she could handle getting, and delivering, a real hit.

Angela wasn't as scared as she had been during her time with Kenn but sweat rolled down her spine. Kenn had been called away, but the taste of acid was still on her tongue and her body felt stiff, foreign. *This isn't going to go well. I'll get hurt.*

She paused in the flap, meeting Neil's cool gaze as he stood with deceptive casualness in the middle of the bloody floor. *Is that what I'm afraid of? The pain?*

Angela considered. *Yes.*

And if there wasn't any pain?

"Then I wouldn't really learn it. Pain is a memory maker."

Neil didn't speak; he waved her in.

Angela went, determined to conquer a weakness.

7

Marc spotted two Eagles near a small tent, with Samantha lingering nearby. He moved their way with a raised brow that was ignored by them and by the stiffly standing woman.

He saw a .357 lying in front of the tent and bristled. *Who's in there with Angie and what are they doing?*

Samantha felt Marc and Dog come up beside her, but she didn't look at them, not wanting to miss anything. Neil and Angela had been in there twice as long as any of the others and not one sound had been heard until a minute ago, when there had been

a thud that she would swear was someone being hit. Was this Neil's idea of blowing off steam?

Thud!

"Again." Neil's voice sounded pinched, as if he was in pain.

Slap!

"Harder!"

Marc stomped toward the tent, blood beating furiously. "What the hell is going on here?!"

Thud! "Damn."

"Pay attention!"

"He'll come in—"

"Do you want this or not?!"

Marc hadn't heard Neil's tone of command yet. He froze in the flap at the sound of it. That was Adrian's rehearsed script. This was the private lesson.

Thud!

Marc started to go in, unable to let anyone hurt her.

"Don't interfere!" Angela had flung out a hand, not taking her eyes from Neil, who was getting set to repeat his motion. "I mean it!"

Again, the tone of command halted him. Marc winced as Neil slipped inside her ring of protection and used an open palm to drill her shoulder.

Thud!

Braced for it, Angela ignored the dull throb and ducked under his arm to do the same to him.

Slap!

Even hitting him her hardest, she couldn't match the strength he was using against her. Marc was glad of the brutish arms that dragged him away from the flap. He didn't want to do anything stupid. *Yet.*

Doug let him go a few feet away, ready to defend himself if he had to, but Marc had gone cold; he was too furious to move.

Doug straightened his red vest. "She wants to be one of us. You'll understand that if you bother to try."

The big man left him alone, blending back into the shadows.

Marc was too upset to think clearly. How could she want this? *She's a woman, not a man!*

Thud!

Marc winced.

Samantha did the same. Doug's words hadn't eased her anger either; she waited for it to be over, eager to deliver a scathing rebuke.

"Do it again but hold your wrist like this."

Thud!

"Very good. That's your homework. Train yourself to remember that pad. When you've built up some muscle mass, you'll be able to deliver the same force as a small man."

Angela took a moment to get her breathing and emotions under control as Neil made notes in his book. She was still afraid, but it had gone better than she'd hoped for. Neil hadn't wanted to treat her like the others, but her nasty attitude had forced him to.

After a little while, he'd gotten into it, liking how fast she was. "Thanks. I know this wasn't easy for you."

Still in his shell, Neil shrugged. "Adrian sends 'em and I beat on 'em. That's the way it works."

"Who do I talk to if I'd like another lesson?"

Neil stopped writing. "Do you?"

"You know it." She gave him a rueful smile. "But in a few days, when these bruises heal."

Impressed despite himself, Neil chuckled. "I'll let him know."

They came from the tent together, tension mostly gone.

Angela stopped by Samantha. She whispered into the woman's ear.

Samantha stared at her but didn't respond.

Nervous about facing Marc's anger, Angela turned too fast and couldn't hide a grimace when pain flared in her leg.

Marc's anger grew. "And you want this?"

She bristled at his insulting tone. It said she was nuts. "I can't be an Eagle without passing matchups, Marc. I have to learn, and from someone who'll actually hit me."

"Looks like you found someone, though I am surprised by who it is. I thought cops were the good guys!" Marc glowered at Neil.

Angela slid into his line of sight before he could pick a fight. "I would have gone through the same thing if I had joined the service, right?"

Marc blew that off. “This isn’t the US government. It’s a group of refugees playing war!”

“I don’t feel that way about it and neither do these men!” Angela lifted her chin. “It’s for America.”

“It’s for Adrian!” Marc was honestly angry with her for the first time since they’d been reunited. “I can’t believe you’re so fast to follow. What happened to not going back under some asshole’s thumb?”

Angela scowled as their witnesses moved back to clear a line of fire. “He’s not an asshole, and I’m free to do what I want. You should remember that.”

Peering between them, Dog whined uneasily.

The sound brought both of them back to where they were, and who they were arguing with.

Marc snapped his mouth shut, trying to regain control. When he finally spoke, his tone demanded honesty. “Why an Eagle, Angie?”

She kept her focus on the gritty sky as she answered, not wanting him to see the evasion. “I like how it felt to help those kids from the airfield. I like how it felt to be a part of something that good. We gave them a life back.”

Marc didn’t call her on the short answer to his question. There was more to it than that and he knew it was important to their future. “Is it about us?” Marc didn’t like the dismay and guilt that crossed her face.

“No, I’m sorry. It isn’t.”

He tried not to let her see that sting but failed. “You’ve got other prospects. I understand; you can have—”

“What would make you think that?” Angela was too tired and sore to fight with him. “Doesn’t matter. It has to do with the women here. In case you’ve forgotten, Kenn’s the only one who always thinks of himself and his wants first. I like to help other people, not control them.” She stomped off.

Marc let her go, anger fading. He didn’t have the right to tell her to stop any more than Kenn did, but it still hurt. Maybe she still didn’t feel safe. Maybe it was about helping the women here. *Or, maybe*, he thought, going to his tent with a last glare at Neil. *Maybe Angie just lied to me.*

Angela wasn’t certain why she hadn’t told Marc all of it, except that he’d take it badly and she didn’t want the scene. All he wanted was their chance to be together, but she was watching the women here, seeing how much she could do for them by fulfilling Adrian’s dream and becoming an Eagle. She had a chance to shape the future of these postwar females and it was becoming something she deeply wanted. Adrian was trying to clear the way for her, but there would be more problems like this one. Did he have the camp’s reaction covered too or should she be figuring out a way to ease them into it? What about his men? Neil clearly hadn’t known she was coming. Mind full of her first success, and worries over the next step, Angela let her feet carry her away from Marc.

Marc went in the opposite direction.

Dog hesitated, then followed Marc.

“What did she say to you?” Neil had joined Samantha without speaking. They’d listened to Marc and Angie’s argument and watched the couple disappear.

Sam sighed. “That each hit hurt you as much as her, but there’s nothing you won’t do for Adrian and I should know that now, before we...get involved.”

“And?” Neil waited for her to unleash the words that would stop this attraction he was feeling for her.

Sam turned away. “I’ll take a lesson like you just gave her.”

Neil’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

Samantha didn’t stop, sure he’d heard her. She entered the camp with a million thoughts flying through her mind. Two of those were strong enough to override the others. One was that she wasn’t scared of Neil. She liked him, from his sun marked skin to his thick, brown curls. The other was that with his help, she could get strong enough to survive alone again if she had to. Angela’s determination to be an Eagle was contagious.

Neil didn’t follow. Instead, he turned to the extra shadow he’d spotted lingering in the darkness. “I’m not sure I can do that.”

Adrian shrugged. “You did it with Angie.”

Neil grimaced. “She had to provoke me and if I hadn’t already been upset, it might not have succeeded.”

Adrian used the most common of his teaching tools. He distracted Neil. “How did she do, by the Neil standard?”

Aware and willing to put off the choice, if even for a few minutes, Neil delivered his report. “Amazing for a female, awful for a man. She has almost no upper body strength. I doubt she’ll be able to do a pull-up for a while, but she makes up for it in quickness.” His voice lowered as he fell into account mode. “She was reading me in there, able to avoid. She has the three-set moves down. She’ll have it smooth, fast, if she practices it at all.”

Adrian waited, knowing there was more. He ignored the inner man telling him to take Neil’s head off for hitting her.

“She has one fatal flaw unless we can help her. She freezes. She covered it like she meant to go still, but it’s real.”

Adrian nodded. “The moments we observed in the QZ?”

“Yeah.” Neil’s voice was more embittered than Adrian had ever heard. “She’s afraid of being hit. She took every shoulder slide with a pinched face and braced feet. I felt so much like *him*, I almost puked.”

“What made you keep going even after you were allowed to send her out?” Adrian led, heart easing.

“The look in her eyes when I started to call it. The disappointment! I had only tapped her twice and I could see her adjusting to it, getting ready for

battle.” Neil sighed. “If you can get rid of her fear of those first few hits, she’ll excel at kai and probably a few other styles we use. It’s like...”

“She was made for it?”

Neil gave him what he needed without knowing it. “More so than even Kyle or Kenn. That’s why I couldn’t stop. She wants this!”

“You’ll use that to train yourself to handle the female lessons.” Adrian sighed as a chilling drizzle started to fall.

“And if I say no?!” Neil was already sure that he wouldn’t.

“Then someone else will give the lessons, probably Seth. You don’t have to be the one doing this, Neil. My word.”

Neil blew out a breath. “It feels bad, wrong.”

Adrian liked Neil even more than he already had. “It’s supposed to. That’s a reminder from your heart that they are women. You’ll train yourself to treat them as Eagles first when it’s called for.”

Neil didn’t answer.

Adrian pinned him with hard truths. “If you can’t, she’ll understand and so will I, but we both know that you can.”

“I don’t like feeling like him!”

“That’s what makes you one of the good guys, Neil.” Adrian finished the lesson. “Kenn enjoyed every blow he ever gave her. That’s the difference.”

Chapter Eight

Fists At Dawn

1

Of the two days Marc had been out of quarantine, one had been spent doing hard labor punishment. The other had been spent sorting trucks and wandering, lost without Angie. He'd tried to work through some of the issues in his mind, but every time he made progress, something else happened to throw him into chaos.

Like Angie training with Neil. He'd been hoping to run into her, but the sound of her being hit had gone through him like bullets. Even now, the urge to strike Neil as he walked by was strong.

“Morning.”

Marc didn't respond to Neil's greeting. It wasn't fair to Neil, who was only doing Adrian's bidding, but there was no erasing the fact that his friend had hurt Angie and Marc had been forced to allow it. That was a kick in the teeth to their relationship. It wouldn't be repaired unless something happened.

Marc spotted Angela in the lengthy line for coffee and forced himself to the end of it, ignoring her and the chilly people studying his bruised profile. He wasn't sure he could talk to her about

any of it yet. He was too confused, too torn by wanting her happy and just plain wanting her. Until he could think clearly, he planned to stay back.

Angela felt Marc's coldness and clamped down on the urge to give in. He'd spent so much of the time here mad. He wanted her to keep her head down and only poke it up when it was time for them to be together, but until he realized that wasn't enough for her, she would give him some space to think.

Nearby, Adrian spotted a setback coming, but chose not to step in front of his furious XO. *It was inevitable for the two men to have it out in public.*

Tension flooded the area when Kenn stomped toward Angie instead of Marc.

Adrian felt the humidity ease...the temperature plummeted until he could almost view his breath. *Someone else is watching this moment too.*

Adrian observed with the rest of the sleepy camp, wondering if he was about to lose his right hand.

Kenn shoved his way in front of Angela, only stopping when their feet were inches apart. He scanned the purple bruises on her shoulder, anger increasing. He couldn't believe she'd passed. "How did you get your schedule changed? Today, you babysit!"

Angela gave him a warning look, ignoring the paper he was shoving her way. "I told the vet I'd help him once a week. He probably told Adrian. You're making a scene over nothing."

“You don’t get to pick and choose!”

Angela eyed Kenn coldly, trying not to shake. “Are you sure?”

“I make those choices!” Kenn snarled at the reminder of Tonya’s warnings. She’d passed Neil’s class. The trooper hit her. *Why is he the only one allowed? Doesn’t Adrian know I have more experience with that?*

Angela had made her decision last night about how she would handle things with Kenn. Now was as good a time as any to strike a match to the fuse. She slowly removed the chain that held the ring he’d given her, drawing the attention of everyone in sight. “It’s over, Kenn. I’m sorry it has to be this way, but it does.”

When she held the necklace out, Kenn snatched it long enough to let it fall to the ground. His heavy boot slammed down on the diamond, crushing the band into the dirt. “Don’t ever go through anyone else for a schedule change!” Unprepared for her fast reaction, Kenn tried to stay on the topic, but the fury was overwhelming. *Angela ended our relationship! Publicly!*

Realizing his control was wavering, she tried to distract, already positive it wouldn’t succeed. “It’s only a few hours. What’s the big deal?”

The line had moved up; she tried to go around.

Kenn slid in front of her again, leaning close. “The deal, you sneaky bitch, is that schedule changes go through me and not your lover!”

Angela's hand inched downward as the camp muttered in surprised disapproval. She knew that tone. He'd gone over the edge.

Everyone held their breath as Marc stepped out of line behind the arguing couple, with clenched fists. "She didn't know anything about it. I told Adrian to change her schedule, and I don't answer to you, *bitch!*"

Kenn swung as he spun, connecting.

Marc stumbled backward, rage flaring to life. *An outlet. Great!* Marc ducked Kenn's next lumbering swing and leaned his weight into a brutal gut shot. He loved Kenn's gasp for air.

Marc landed a fast hit to Kenn's temple and then another to his cheek. "Don't ever...talk to her...that way again!" Marc accented his words with his fists.

Kenn dropped to the ground, blood flying into the dirt. It sprayed over his dusty boots.

Marc stopped, realizing what he'd done. Again. He took a step back, and then another, fighting the urge that had been drilled into him to finish the job.

Kenn stayed down, coughing and spitting blood into the dirt at Marc's feet for the second time in as many days. *Usin' the knife next time.* He was tired of being hit by his old CO.

The people gathered around watched silently, stunned to witness Kenn taken down so fast. What would Adrian do? Everyone listened raptly as he stopped a few feet from the trio.

"Does this settle it?"

There was silence.

Adrian's hard tone hid relief. "Go help with the livestock. *Both* of you."

Marc left quickly, stride stiff.

Kenn followed slowly, ashamed and furious.

Adrian was angry, but he was also satisfied. Kenn's words had been nasty. He'd deserved to be knocked down and Marc had even gotten him to swing first. It would have only been better if Angela had done it herself, but had that happened, Kenn would have hit her back, right in front of a mess full of camp members! This wouldn't be the end of it.

Adrian understood. After watching Angela these last eight days, he doubted he'd find a more perfect female warrior to mold. Once he trained her, she'd be deadly, and she would bring Samantha in with her, without even trying. Others would follow and he would be able to fill out the ranks with an even distribution of compassion, something that had contributed to the downfall of the old world. *Without temperance, without caring, a leader is only a clever tyrant wrapped in a ruler's cloak.*

Hoping the rest of the day would be more peaceful, Adrian entered the dank spruce trees that lined the self-defense area, where Samantha was now set up in a canvas covered truck, weather tracking. Only a few of the Eagles knew where she was. Adrian planned to keep her there even during the meeting tonight. Her ballot would be cast absentee.

The training tent was crowded with the top three levels of Eagles; their voices carried as they competed and worked out. Even over the howling wind, it was a constant noise on days they didn't travel. For it to go silent, was more than unusual.

Having forgone her coffee due to the stares, Angela paused inside the flap at the reaction, waiting. Adrian hadn't given her an answer yet, and to these sweaty men, she had no permission to be here. On the other hand, he'd said free rein and after the scene with Kenn, she needed a workout.

Steeling her nerves, Angela moved toward a far corner. She didn't feel confident enough to jump right in, but if she hung around, maybe one of them would—

“Over there.” Told to expect her, Doug jerked a big thumb at the game area.

She smiled her thanks, changing direction.

Despite the sticky weather, the temperature of the tent went from cool to ice.

Angela slid into the first empty seat and pretended they had all returned to what they were doing, instead of staring at her with expressions ranging from hostile to wary, with a few leers to even things out.

“Only level one. Keep repeating it.”

Angela hit the button at Jeff's words, grateful there hadn't been anything said in protest yet. “Thanks.”

“Uh-huh.” Seth's right-hand man moved away.

Angela began firing the orange gun. Duck Hunt was one of her favorites.

After twenty minutes, she had cleared the level so many times that everyone was tired of the annoying buzzer; she looked at Jeff before anyone could complain. "Permission to play through? Please?"

The guard didn't sigh in relief like he wanted to. "One set. At the first *game over*, you're back to reps."

Angela grinned, hitting the restart button. *That might be a while. I had a long warmup.*

She didn't advance to the next part of the workout and neither did any of the men. When the hour call came, Angela was on one of the highest levels any of them had seen and a large group was crowded close to watch. Even the men who were adamant about not wanting her here were drawn to the groans and yells of triumph as she cleared another round of disks and got set for the ducks.

A simple game of aim and fire, the ducks' evasions were hard. The Eagles watched her pop the moving targets with admiration.

"Damn!"

"Where'd you learn to shoot?"

"You've played before!"

"She got Seth's record with that!"

They were excited, almost welcoming. Adrian surveyed it from the flap. With all the noise, he had

expected to find a fight. So had Neil, who had stopped behind him in surprise.

“Bonus! Next round. Go!”

An eager silence fell as she went higher. Angela let their hopes feed her determination. Kenn had the current high score and she wanted it!

“Perfect score. Bonus round.”

Disks flew into shards before their odd whining noise could echo; the gun firing with a steady rhythm that was broken only by her fast right click to reload.

“Round cleared. Bonus awarded.”

“That last one was low!”

“I thought it was gone at first!”

“Great shooting. Wait until *she* hits the real targets with us.” Jeff’s tersely spoken comment reminded everyone there was a female among them.

That awkward silence fell again.

Angela hit the button with a snort. “I’m not swingin’ a dick, but I can shoot, right?” She opened fire as the round began, getting more surprised laughs from the crude joke than she’d hoped for.

“Yes, you can.”

Adrian left the tent at Jeff’s confirmation, satisfied she was holding her own. Behind him, that annoyingly wonderful bonus buzzer sounded again; a loud cheer echoed, refilling Safe Haven with brilliant light.

The vet put Kenn and Marc to work without a single question despite the bruised faces. Glad to have the extra hands, he got them worming the camp's stray cats. Abandoned pets had been drawn by the sounds of people, and most of them were in decent shape. Adrian liked having them around to help control the rats and insects. Too bad they were scared of the ants. Other than having the dogs out, Chris didn't have a solution for the rodents yet.

The vet left the men on their own, going on to the animals in the larger pens.

The two Marines labored silently, both knowing they needed to make peace, but neither wanted it. One holding, one shoving the huge pill down the small throat while avoiding claws, they found a rhythm...as they always had on base. When they finished the cats, the vet switched them to pigs, and then the dogs that had to be brought out one by one because even standing was hard in that mass of tails and teeth.

An hour after they had been switched to goats, Angela and Charlie joined them, Dog on their heels. The boy worked beside the tent, where Chris could guide him. Angela was left to her own devices after being shown what the vet wanted. She didn't talk to the laboring males; she tried not to even look their way unless she had to. She didn't want to make things worse. The time went by slowly.

Well after lunch mess had come and gone, Kyle entered their line of sight, drawing frowns from both sweaty Marines.

“He wants you on the trucks now.” Kyle ignored the other bruised man dripping sweat.

Marc grunted, not sure if he cared what Adrian wanted. He slowly exited the vet area with steps that said to leave him be. He didn’t glance at Angela as he went.

The wolf fell in on Marc’s right, shaking his coat. They traveled through the camp with no signs they noticed the whispers.

Unable to ignore Adrian’s order, Marc went to the line of trucks that had come in without acknowledging Neil’s second friendly greeting of the day.

Eager to be clean, Kenn left as soon as Marc and Kyle were out of sight. If Marc didn’t have to do this shit, then neither did he.

When Kenn came from the shower camper, Adrian was standing nearby. “People pickup, asap, Zack has the details. After the meeting tomorrow night, slaver recon.”

Kenn winced when Adrian turned from him, but he clamped his mouth shut. A recon mission would supply time to make new plans and be away from Marc’s face for a while. He’d make sure Jeff and Allan, two of Zack’s friends, knew to keep track of Marc, then he would climb in his Bronco and get the hell out of here.

Kenn's chin lifted. *Maybe I'll keep going.* He had no doubts about his own survival in this new world.

Kenn's shoulders drooped. Even if he found another camp, there was only one Adrian and he was here.

4

Neil saw Marc stalking toward the parking area and gestured, hoping Marc had begun to understand, but he received no response. Marc was still hot. Neil had witnessed the fight. He wanted to tell Marc he'd done exactly right, but it wouldn't matter. Their fast friendship might already be over.

Neil was bothered by the thought. During his life, he hadn't made any real friends until coming to Safe Haven and he still valued each one. Plus, he honestly liked Marc.

Neil bypassed the training area, going to the hooch they had set up behind a few trucks to give their new storm tracker a private place to work. The sky held that pale pink tone that said to watch out, but most of the camp was oblivious, thanks to the morning's distraction. People were already laying bets on how long it might be before Kenn snapped for real. It was a matter of...*Damn!*

Stretched out on the hood of a dented car, Samantha looked up at Neil's intake of breath, smiling. "I wondered if he forgot about me."

Neil forced himself to act as if he wasn't drowning in an unexpected wave of need. Her body was laid out in a way that called to him. He tried to keep it from his voice. "You have a radio?"

Samantha held up the hand that had been out of his view, showing her set. "Nothing to call about yet."

Neil went to the bumper, fighting the urge to ogle her like a horny teen. *I'll go take a shower after this.* "He said to tell you it's too soon."

Sam smiled, glad of the comfort.

When she shut her eyes, Neil let his go up her jean-clad legs and over her sweater covered chest. *Nice.* He tore his hot gaze away. "Let me know if you need anything."

He faded into the lightly swaying trees with a frown, unaware of anything but his reaction to the new woman. *What is it about Samantha that draws me so hard?*

On guard duty over Samantha, Jeremy chose not to tell Neil he had a tail. Neil had just felt something with Samantha. Jeremy was sure of it. He hoped little Becky would now prove herself too young.

Neil heard the female steps behind him and turned around. "Samantha, can I ask you—"

Becky pressed her body against Neil's in abandon, pushing her lips to his.

His mouth slanted over hers with a snarl of need that made her tremble and then he was gone.

“Damn kid!” Neil was unable to disguise his disappointment. “With anyone else, you’d be on your back right now!” He moved away from her, hard body under rigid control. “Get inside the tape!”

Startled by his anger, and frustrated by the age difference, Becky scooped up a thick handful of mud and let it fly.

Neil sensed something coming and ducked before realizing who had stepped in front of him.

Adrian stiffened in surprise as the glop hit him in the face and slopped over the front of his jacket in thick clumps.

Everyone froze.

Taking in a tight, calming breath, Adrian slowly used his clean hands to clear his eyes. “Neil?”

Horried... “Yeah?” Neil didn’t care that the girl was now shedding tears. *Damn kid!*

“Make sure Becky pitches in the next baseball game.”

They both stared stupidly at him.

Adrian turned toward camp, noting Jeremy’s satisfied chuckles through mud-streaked lashes.

“I’ll be in the shower.” Adrian slung another handful of mud to the ground. “Maybe I’ll practice ducking while I’m there...”

Not sure what he might say to the crying girl, Neil headed for the training tent, leaving Becky alone.

Drawn by the sound of her name, Samantha had witnessed most of it. “You okay?”

Becky stiffened in embarrassment. It just kept getting better. “Fine!”

Sam shrugged. “Just thought I’d ask. He was kinda rough on you, kid.”

Becky didn’t want the older woman’s pity. “Slam you!”

The teenager fled.

Samantha returned to her area with a smile and a feeling she refused to name. *I’m not happy that Neil refused the reckless girl. Not one bit.*

5

Before Adrian made it to the shower, he was distracted by the sight of Dog sitting alone near the supply trucks. Not sure why, he joined the wolf.

Dog’s eyes lightened to a warm shade of golden amusement. *It seems we’ve had the same kind of day.*

Adrian felt his mind try to resist and locked down on it. He kept his steps even but stopped the friendly rub he’d been about to greet the wolf with.

“What kind?”

Use the talk of thoughts so they’ll stop staring. Dog hated communicating across species at all. It felt wrong.

Adrian gaped in surprise. *Was I just mocked by a wolf?* Adrian noticed the wolf had thick clumps of mud in his fur and understood he had been on duty, running off ants.

There is trouble coming.

Adrian knelt down, pulling a snack from his pocket. *Do you like these?*

No. They taste like feet smell. The wolf obediently took the lint covered treat from Adrian's fingers anyway and snapped it down. *The others around here, like me, are dangerous. You shouldn't linger.*

Adrian hid his worry. Not ants. Wolves. *Thank you.*

Dog sniffed his outstretched palm gently and licked away the crumbs. *I watch over the herd; I work again. It is my honor.*

Adrian watched the wolf pad toward the perimeter. Fate was giving him all he'd begged for and more.

Now I just have to bring them all together.

Chapter Nine

Camp Meeting

1

“**G**et set folks. This one’s gonna take a bit.”

Adrian opened his notebook, freshly showered and standing by his usual table.

The crowded mess quieted down. They had finished the evening meal; people were smoking, chatting, waiting.

The center fire popped as the wind blew sticky hair from sweaty skin when it gusted. The temperatures were getting odder. It was the second week in April, but they were sweating. *What’s next? Rain for a month?* Adrian scanned his flock, aware of bug zappers buzzing and guards circling. *They’re nervous.* Nervous and ready to run. The sniper attack had them spooked. *Good thing I’m ready to sing.* “This is the fourth mandatory meeting of Safe Haven. We are now two-hundred strong.”

There were murmurs at the substantial number.

Marc took the moment to do a fast check. He noted things that made him unhappy, but they were minor, like a sentry out of place, leaving a corner uncovered. He would keep track of them. The camp thought the twins had acted alone, but the Eagles

now knew otherwise. They were more alert than when he and Angie had first made it here. When the twins didn't return, the slavers would come looking for them...if they weren't here already.

"We'll start with health." Adrian's face tightened a bit, telling them he wasn't happy about something. "Not everyone has been by for the basic tests. If even one person has a disease, we all have it. Get tested. Get current on your shots. We can't handle an epidemic."

There were surprised glances at Adrian admitting there was something he couldn't do.

Adrian drove in the point. "I'm not a doctor and even if I were, it wouldn't save everyone." He looked around. "I know you're scared. I am too each time they stick me with a needle to find out, but I go, and I do it. You need to do the same." He beckoned to the cook.

Maria and her teenage helpers, Zack's boys, passed out popcorn and apple juice.

"Next are new people." Adrian gestured at one of the full tables. "These seniors from the Rapid City airport have majors from psychology to engineering. We'll all get a chance to learn their names while they help us make things better."

Adrian gestured to the benches behind them. "We also have a second doctor now. Stand up and say something nice, Angie."

Face painted with vivid eyes and even brighter cheeks, Marc was impressed with her calm tone.

“Hi, ladies, come visit me. No paper gowns, cold exam rooms, or roaming fingers, I swear.” Angela delivered a sexy smile. “Can’t make any promises for the guys.”

She sat down with the laughter echoing.

Adrian nodded to John. “Let’s have our medical report.”

The doctor stood, paper in one hand, gently smoking pipe in the other. “Things are okay with the people here, for the most part. I’ve found no signs of radiation sickness yet, and nothing contagious is going around. We’ve removed some odd moles and warts in the last weeks. Might be the start of something though, so everyone needs to watch for changes in those things and come to me right away so I can take care of it.” John paused. “I have a suggestion and a request.”

When Adrian indicated he should, the doctor went on. “We need to up our iodine intake for when we do get around the bad places. It will help keep us stronger against the war’s effects.”

“That sounds reasonable. What’s the request?”

John was careful not to let his discomfort show. The pain had gotten as bad as it had ever been last night, and though it had eased off around dawn, he was extremely sore. “We need help. I’d like two full time students who would take over if anything happened to us.” He motioned to Angela to show his faith in her.

“I’m...I was a nursing assistant.” It was one of the college kids.

Adrian took back over, wondering if Angela had felt their value as much as their need for rescue. “Let’s have a quick show of hands. Those interested?” Half a dozen hands went up.

Adrian voiced his approval. “Great idea. We’ll get a signup list posted. John will do interviews.”

He glanced down at the notebook he had open on the center table. “Next are the monthly updates.”

Kenn stood, feeling both the welcome of the camp and the coldness of the highest Eagles. “We’re good on water and fuel for a couple weeks, and two months on food. As of tonight, the supply trucks will be locked from midnight to dawn. Only the boss and duty man on point will have access. You will now sign out anything you take, and how much of it, so we can keep track of how much we’ll need to get us through when we settle somewhere.”

There will be no limits. Adrian knows we don’t have greedy people here.

Kenn’s anger flared at Angela’s voice in his head, but he still repeated it. “There won’t be limits. Adrian knows we don’t have greed here.” Kenn flipped the page in his own book, aware of Adrian’s approval of the neat information transfer. “We have openings in this month’s self-defense and kai classes, and I need six FND workers for third shift duty. See me after this meeting.”

There was more *Foot in Door* work than he and Marc could handle even if they fought every day. Kenn snapped his book shut. His tone was harder than most of them were used to. “Last thing.

Anyone caught feeding the working dogs will take their place for a week. They are in training, the same as the Eagles. You wouldn't hand a person a slice of meatloaf five minutes before they work out, and you can't do it with an animal either." He threw in a grin he knew his boss would like. "That's the workers. The breeders are fair game. The fatter the mom, the healthier the pups."

Kenn ignored Angela's look of respect as he sat down.

Adrian took back over. *I'll have Kenn MC the next meeting.* "Next are changes and improvements." He felt their need for more hope and was able to answer it. "We live like gypsies. No homes or any of the things that come with them. No curtains blowing in the breeze, just annoying tent flaps slapping you awake at odd hours. No light on over the sink, just a candle that burns too fast and too dim. No mattress, no kitchens, no walls." His face glowed with happiness. "That way of living is almost over for us. It will never be the way it was, especially not for those here and those still on their way to us, but we'll take back what we can. Over the next months, we're going to trade in all these canvas homes for RVs."

A loud cheer swelled into the night.

During the happiness, apple juice ended up spilling on people in the rear, namely Matt and Charlie.

Only two of the Eagles noticed. Zack, who grinned, and Billy, who thought it was about time Zack's bully prone boys were taught a lesson.

"We have a great idea for getting water quicker. If it pans out, we can all use campers." Adrian kept singing to the herd. "Men will be three to a tin can. Women need a bit more room."

Gaffs and snorts echoed at this, but it died down as the wind increased.

"There will be two people in a camper. Women and elderly will get them first, as with anything here, by alphabetic last name."

Adrian waited for them to settle down before continuing. "We're also putting awnings over most of the areas so there will be no more waiting in the rain for bathrooms or mess."

As if on cue, thunder cracked in the distance. Two shoe-sized ants raiding the garbage dove for cover unobserved.

Adrian chuckled through his sudden tension. "We'll hurry up on that one." He scanned Rick, noticed him glaring at someone in the rear of the crowd. He stored it for later. "Our population has increased. I'm working on a better schedule setup. Only those who have duty that week will be given a copy." He cracked a grin. "Scheduling for two-hundred people twice a month sucks. Kenn and I are working on a quicker system."

While Adrian was talking, Doug had been installing a large whiteboard onto the hard side of

the mess truck. There were smiles and whispered repeats of what he wrote on it.

Point: *The Boss!*

The Irishman drew a quick US flag in the far corner.

Angela noticed his slight shake as he wrote.

“We’re starting a fire crew, a garden, a newspaper, and a radio station. That last one will be called After War Airwaves and I’d prefer people with experience, even if it’s just the basics.” Adrian sighed, voice resigned. “Now, for the part we all hate—a rule change.”

Tension flew through the crowd.

“We agreed every able person would pull four, six hour shifts a month, but it’s not enough to cover us. Our size keeps growing and people already have their time in by twenty-six days, which leaves almost a week where we have to run a light patrol or hope for volunteers.” Adrian flipped the page. “We came up with three solutions. First, we raise it to five shifts and maybe even six if our population keeps expanding. I honestly hate that idea. I want the number of shifts to go lower as we get more people, not higher.”

The groans and complaints became agreement.

“Our second way is to change the structure a little. Everyone who passes a class has to take a week at helping teach it. That would free up enough Eagles to cover those extra days even when we have a double watch posted.” His tone grew cold. “The last way is to do nothing and hope we have a full

shift on duty if something happens. I won't vote for that."

"Neither will I." Kenn spoke up, doing his job this time without being guided. "I'd rather do an extra shift or teach a class to know I'm safe when I sleep."

He didn't look at the smoldering man sitting across from him, positive Marc was thinking something ugly at the remark.

"Agreed. Okay, we'll be voting on shift change or teaching change, and also on some places to go next since nearly all the reports of mutations are north. You'll notice I favored dropping down the way we came in. To the east are Badlands and open country, nothing we need. If we get down into Nebraska, we might find more farms, maybe even a field with corn ready to be smeared with butter."

That drew more smiles. Corn, other than canned, was a thing of the past for most of the country.

"I also included a short list of places to spend the winter. It's not the final vote, but it will give us an idea of the supplies we'll need then, so we can start gathering now. I left an empty line for other ideas." Adrian glanced around. "All right. Any new business before we spend some time on the slavers and our defenses?"

There was a tense quiet while he closed his book and waited. He couldn't tell them they were safe here, but he had to make them feel it anyway. Some of Cesar's refugees had recognized Rick. There was

no avoiding the topic; he had chosen to handle it as openly as he could. “They’re still in northeastern Wyoming, as far as we know. The radio has been quiet, but we’ve all seen the smoke trails and damage they leave, even if we weren’t in one of the towns they attacked. They’re moving along Interstate 25 and east of it, so I’ve only included places that are south.” Adrian swept his uneasy people. “Eventually, they’ll catch up or we’ll have a delay, and we’ll have to make a choice. That’s later. For right now, here’s what we’ve been doing: Marc, Neil, Kyle.”

There were frowns at the order of the names, most people understanding it wasn’t random.

Marc steeled himself as Neil and Kyle held up a drawing so good that they’d made Neil sign his name to it. “We made up some emergency plans.” Marc started with the one labeled: While Camped–Day.

“He thought; I drew.” Neil grinned. “Kyle made fun of us in support.”

During the laughter, Marc saw Adrian give Seth a pointed nod that said Neil had just demonstrated the proper time for running off at the mouth. “If we’re camped, the guards will sound the alarm that we hooked up.” Marc gestured to Kenn, who angrily hit a button on his wrist band.

“Incoming! Seek shelter! Incoming!” The horribly loud alarm blared from all corners of the dark camp around them. Everyone was glad when Kenn slapped another button and made it stop.

Marc wiggled a finger in his ear. “Okay, since we’ll all be deaf from the alarm, pay attention to where you should be.”

He began to explain, leaving Adrian free to judge the reactions of his herd. The leader was hoping this would be enough to temporarily ease the quiet worry he saw lurking.

“We’re steel-plating things—Neil will get into that.” Marc pointed. “All these semis here will be nearly bullet proof. If the alarm goes off, get to the mess or one of these trucks. They have multiple drivers assigned at all times and supplies inside in case you get pinned down or want to make a run for it.” His tone said he wouldn’t. “How you know which truck to go to, will be covered in a minute. The plan would be to circle around the mess and make our stand if we were out in the open or move into a nearby building and defend it. If we’re on the road, it’s a little more complicated.”

Marc waited for the two Eagles to flip the picture over to the side labeled: On the Road. “We’ll be practicing during travel time, so you’ll get the hang of it. Basically, the lead semi will pull across the road and each of the cars behind will pull all the way up to form a barrier wall on each side. Pull in with a hard right or left; leave your doors open. Line up nice and tight. We’ll be steel-plating car doors too, so you’ll have cover if you stay low. Go to the mess and help each other.” Almost finished and glad, Marc motioned. “Copies of what to do are

being put into each glovebox. Now, for a nighttime attack, Neil's gonna fill you in."

Marc switched places with Neil, grateful his tongue and brain had stayed on the same page.

Neil switched to the last drawing: While Camped-Night. "After listening to the stories, we think it will be a night attack, so we based most of our plans on that. When the sirens go off, the trucks you should go to will light up—headlights, signals, etc. The highest levels of Eagles will escort the kids; the next two will clear the tent areas. The next will sweep the showers, bathrooms, and parking areas. Rookies will help with livestock." Neil held up his arm to show a shiny new wristwatch. "You'll know the Eagles by these. They flash red, white, and blue. For a day attack, the plan is the same, except you'll know the right trucks by the red cross on them." Neil started to take Kyle's end of the picture, then stopped, removing a pencil from behind his ear. He carefully erased a smudge from the picture, then replaced it.

Neil reddened as he realized everyone was staring at him. "Sorry."

Kyle snickered, trading places. "Perfectionist."

Neil snorted. "Super-trooper."

"You know it."

The crowd laughed at their teasing.

Adrian gave a subtle nod to Kyle that Marc wondered about. *Is the joking staged too?*

"Okay, details. We're keeping boxes of vests and supplies around the camp at all times. We're

also doubling the number of sentries on supply runs, so that means we need more Eagles. We have nine places open. The signup sheet will be posted. We're also going to train a little harder, so when you hear all the noise in the tents, you know it's us." Kyle was ready to hand over control.

Adrian had other plans. "Kyle can handle questions now."

Voices and hands went up as Neil and Marc sat down, leaving the level six Eagle to fend for himself.

"So, we're going to fight?"

"When are they coming?"

"Shouldn't we run?"

"Maybe we should think about their deal."

"We do not negotiate with killers!" Kyle's snap caused the crowd to fall silent. "We don't hide, and we don't hand over our people. We're Americans!"

"Americans have been doing it since this country was formed!"

"Better a few than all of us!"

Kyle got hotter at their shouts, but he lowered his voice. "It's better to face them now than during the winter, when we can't get away if we need to."

The mess filled with protests and shouts but quieted as soon as Adrian stood.

Kyle was quick to find his seat, heart worried. *They're so fast to be cowards, with no thought of being heroes.*

Adrian studied his people. “You’re afraid; you have every right to be. The gangs are the worst of the old ways. So, what should we do?”

There was an uneasy silence while Adrian made his point. “There will come a time in every person’s life when they must choose to stand and fight, and maybe die for what they believe in, or run and live and lose it all anyway through shame and guilt.” He gestured, making sure everyone was included. “You’ve got your lives. That’s a lot now, and you’re stronger. You might hole up somewhere and survive for a while alone, but you’ll have destroyed the future we’re building here. It’s not just one life in this camp, it’s all life...and alone, Safe Haven *will* die.” Adrian saw faces that wanted him to fix it, or make it go away. “I don’t want another useless war. No more bloodshed! Life matters more than it ever has and I’m so sick of death I could puke, but I’ve made my choice. When that time comes for us, I won’t run with you. I’ll stand.”

“Kick their asses, man!”

Mitch’s drunken slur was followed by an immediate chorus of agreement that allowed Adrian’s closest men and women to breathe easier.

“Kill ‘em all!”

“We’ll show ‘em!”

“We’re with ya!”

Adrian grinned in relief as if he’d been worried about losing leadership. Those who knew the truth held still, trusting Adrian to find them all a way out.

For the next few minutes, he and his men answered dozens of questions. It was loud and serious. Angela was encouraged. Adrian's words were flawless.

"So, let's do some voting and go get some of you going on new classes. I personally can't wait to attend a kai class where Neil and Hilda are in the cage."

There was a lot of laughter at that.

Adrian let them go for a minute with the remarks. Humor had a way of clearing fear. "Kenn and Seth will pass around the slips. Marc and Neil have the pens. Kyle and Jeremy are the counters and as usual, I expect you to watch the totals. Also, there's a blank space at the end and I read each one, so if there's something you need to tell me, that's a good way to do it."

Marc was impressed with the official looking ballot. He made his own choices quickly, but it was clear Adrian didn't mind people talking about it. Most of the camp hadn't gotten through more than the first couple items yet, too busy listening to those around them talk about volunteering to take Neil's lessons too. It was a wise man who knew you didn't get anywhere with Americans by pushing them around. The more they talked and agreed, the more likely it was that the votes would go in Adrian's favor.

Smart, Marc thought, and sneaky. Marc reread number five, where to check next for authority. Neil had said it wasn't because they wanted the

government, that any organized group could fill that hole. *So why are they all military choices? Why not try the city shelters and colleges?*

Because those places and people are long gone, and really, you know that.

Marc wiped his face of emotion as Angela and Samantha stepped by on the way to put their votes in the barrel. Her hair was down and blowing wildly; wearing jeans and a sweat stained tank top, she was so sexy his breath caught.

Angela couldn't stop a smile or the spark that flew between them. *Sorry.*

Marc returned her welcome openly despite Kenn's hot gaze already being on them. *Don't be. In here it's like we're alone again.* He was amazed at how easy it was. The bond was stronger because she'd saved his life, he guessed. *Does he know for sure those places are empty?*

Yes. His dreams are full of it, but it's also his back trail. He's been checking much more than what these people have been told.

He keeps a lot of secrets. Marc pulled up Adrian's words about Tonya.

That's another line he's walking. The camp would be upset to find out he's been sleeping with her.

Marc didn't shrug, feeling more than Kenn monitoring them now. *It's his business as far as I'm concerned, but it makes me leery, too.*

Tonya earned her punishments. She's lucky he didn't have her banished.

Adrian caught bits and pieces of their exchange. It amused him to see Angela and Marc ignoring everything going on, as if they'd known all about the inner details of the meeting. They hadn't, but they had added to it. The emergency plan and almost all the new defenses had come from Marc and the need to protect Angela. Even Samantha had influenced the topics, quietly. They'd only been here a little over a week, but already, substantial changes were coming from it. They were definitely his. "We're going to start counting now, so come on up and make sure it's right."

Most of the camp moved that way. Marc waited until Angie and Samantha had gone by before taking his own ballot up. He dropped it in the voting barrel, then gravitated toward Neil, who was in the rear of the mess. *So, why is he checking bases and compounds, if he's not actually searching for authority?*

Angela met Marc's gaze this time, drawing a frown from Kenn.

Eagles gritted their teeth in frustration.

Because he knows that's where average people will go. He's gathering his herd.

She looked away suddenly, like someone had said something sharp. Marc scowled. *Can Kenn hear us?*

No. The bond I have with Kenn is limited because I've always known what he'd do with it. It's much weaker. ...Adrian probably can.

That told him a lot. Marc studied Adrian as he explained something to a large group of single females. *He's trying extremely hard to give me reasons to stay... When we're alone.*

You're still thinking of leaving?

Marc could feel her pain. *I won't.*

For how long?

He shrugged, turning toward beckoning rookies who'd tried to give him team lead despite Kenn's words at the level test. *When they've gotten things down better.*

Angela watched him go with pain in her heart, but she didn't stop him or make any promises. The line they were walking had thinned.

The vote went Adrian's way on everything; a light drizzle began to fall as the meeting broke up. The wind gusted, putting guards on edge. No one lingered. When the thick, white mist rolled in, everyone except the Eagles took to their tents and shut them up tight.

2

The fog came in fast, curling around their vehicles and weaving its way through the camp. It was waist high in places. Eagles sat in jeeps and trucks, scrutinizing the foreign landscape around them as it became distant, then submerged in rolling white clouds.

Angela was in her tent; Charlie was spending the night with Matt. Her focus was on the open

window, where stray threads of fog wound through the screen, but her mind was on Marc. He was so unhappy. All he wanted was to be around her, talk to her, laugh the way they had on the trip here. His loneliness was clear, making her own needs hard to keep in line as the camp around her became too muffled to be a distraction anymore. Marc hated the idea of her being an Eagle. Can I change that? Things would be much easier if she had his support.

Half an hour later, most of the tents around Angela were dark, the noises of camp hushed. She slowly slipped out. The fog was over her head, damp and thick.

Angie stayed still, calming the part of her that would always hate the dark. She pushed away the sour smell and concentrated. *Where is he?*

Angela found Marc by his isolated thoughts. She had to track him that way. It was almost impossible to see through the layers of swirling white. She was careful not to bump into anything and alert her tent guard to her absence. She wanted a real Marc moment, on her terms, and she moved his way, not sending any thoughts, just tracking his.

Marc sat in Angie's Blazer and smoked, watching the camp disappear. He wasn't scheduled for duty, but he'd come anyway, unable to fight the feeling in his gut that something was about to happen. Subdued sounds of the camp came to him—tent flaps rustling, footsteps, dogs padding around.

He wondered if Angela was also watching and waiting for dawn.

Marc's fingers tightened on his smoke as a wolf or coyote sounded in the near distance. He swept the area when Dog jumped from the hood, perhaps to give his answer in person. The big animal was gone a second later, the white mist barely disturbed.

Marc hoped none of Kenn's men would shoot him and claim it had been an accident. The thick fog would be a good excuse. Marc thought maybe the wolf knew and would stay away from camp tonight.

Marc understood more when the strange howl came again and Dog answered, clear and sharp even through the fog. *A mating call.* Marc got out of the Blazer to try catching a glimpse of the female.

The fog was damp, unpleasant. Marc sighed deeply, sweeping the moving whiteness. It was so hard to labor all day and stay in his tent all night. He used to enjoy being solitary, but his time with Angie had thawed that layer of ice, leaving him lost without a shield. She was perfect for him. *Why didn't she call me? We were in love! Why did she feel like she couldn't call me?*

It was my pride at first. I thought you'd sold me out.

Marc swung around eagerly. *Where are you?*

By the time I had Charlie, I realized they'd tricked you too, but it was too late by then.

You could have run, after a while.

It was finally time for the truths he'd avoided. Angela didn't censor her words, as she had during

the trip here. *You've seen firsthand how determined Kenny is to own me. Is there any place I could have gone, that he wouldn't have followed?*

No. He's obsessed. If we left now, he and a dozen or so would come after us. Even Adrian wouldn't be able to stop them. Marc watched the fog, hating the ugly place they were in. Here, where she was already starting to outgrow him, she was safe. Out there, where she'd love him and only him, her life would always be in danger.

We walk a thin line. Our son on one side...

Marc finished the thought. *And my love on the other.*

There was a silence where he could feel her pausing to let people go by before moving closer.

A feeling I'll return openly if you can wait for me.

He saw the fog part near the rear of the Blazer. *Angie!* Her hair was loose, floating on the mist; her glowing blue eyes beckoned. He moved toward her, feeling as if they were surrounded by his dreams. He needed to hold her. *Will you let me?*

"Yes. I need that too."

Magic flowed between them. Sharp and sweet, the hunger and need rose up together to steal her breath. *I've missed being with him!*

Marc could feel her need. There were small flecks of desire in her face, but it was the greedy hunger lurking beneath the surface that he responded to. They'd hidden these feelings for too long.

Angela still flinched when his arms slid around her.

Marc pulled her up tight against his hard, warm body. He rested his head against hers and waited, knowing she'd relax when she reminded herself who he was.

"I have." Her arms went around his neck, sliding deliciously up his chest to get there. She nestled closer at his small intake of air. "I haven't given up hope for us, Marc."

He leaned back to gaze at her. "I'd understand if you had. The things you're being offered are... I wouldn't refuse him either."

"It's not one or the other, it's just one at a time." Angela tried not to feel awful at her next lie. "You're second because we're stuck waiting on Kenn. For the rest, if I wait, we miss survivors. I just can't live with that."

Marc wanted to believe her. He let a small smile reach his face. "I'm sorry."

She leaned in. "Wait for me, Marc?"

"My whole life if that's what it takes." His eyes slipped to her lips. *Will she...*

Angela sealed their mouths with a hunger that took her by surprise. She felt him tense, before he crushed her close, taking control. There was no more holding back or being careful. He kissed her like he used to—until she was trembling and melting against him.

Their breath mingled, harsh and fierce in the charged air. The spark caught fire as he slid a hand to her hip and deepened the kiss.

“Angela?”

They broke apart fast, flushed.

“Over here.” Angela hoped her guard would think it was the fog making her sound so winded. That had been the old Marc, the one she loved without reservation. It was hard to think through the memories.

Seth found Angela sitting on the hood of the Blazer and Marc standing stiffly nearby. “Good, you weren’t alone.”

Seth started to take up a post in the shadows, but she stopped him. “I might be able to sleep now.”

Angela didn’t look at Marc as she walked by, but he saw her small smile of satisfaction. His ego was soothed. In those few seconds, she’d wanted him every bit as much as he’d wanted her and there hadn’t been a witch anywhere in the background. *She does want me. I needed that.*

3

“Eagle One to the livestock truck. No rush.”

Adrian pushed the button on the mike, nerves already on edge without the code that meant the exact opposite. “Copy. When is Eagle Two due?”

“One hour.”

“Copy, out.”

If Samantha was calling for him, she'd seen something. This was it; the slavers and the severe weather were coming at the same time.

The wind pushed against him as the front rolled in; the drizzle was icy compared to the muggy fog. *Tornado weather*. Adrian's gut tightened. Another of those he'd needed was about to be proven.

Samantha was leaning against the grill of a nearby semi, head back. Adrian called out softly, trying to avoid scaring her. "You wanted me?"

She motioned at the angry sky, sitting up. "It's closer now. Should all be over after dawn." Samantha fought the attraction as Adrian stared at her. She didn't intend to become camp whore number two.

Samantha sighed. It was easy to understand why her body called out to his, though. Adrian was proud. It blared from him like an alarm some days, almost blinding in its intensity and lethal in its power. When Adrian was proud, he was happy, and that golden light was enough to lift the two-hundred people here off their feet. He flashed straight, white teeth through full, sexy lips, and women felt their pulse speed up. When his scent blew over them, the urge to run rough, feverish fingers through his golden spikes was nearly overwhelming.

"We've picked a place close by that meets your requirements. You're sure about the safety zone?"

"As sure as anyone can be." Samantha didn't look at him. "Some places don't get tornadoes or

bad flooding. Not whole states of course, but small areas inside them. We're on the edge of one now."

"Pack it up. You'll ride with Hilda and the others."

Samantha swallowed a protest. *Lovely.*

Adrian continued to the main camp, arriving in time to catch a conversation between his Eagles and Marc.

"Will he stay or go?" Marc was guessing they'd go. Most of the camp was still up despite the late hour. Adrian had been making rounds, talking to people, telling them to be ready just in case.

Kyle did a fast sweep of the muggy darkness. "Go, probably. He hates to take chances."

No sooner had the mobster spoken then Adrian joined them, lighting a smoke. "Gather the boys and get us loaded up. Yellow slickers are in truck six. Mandatory."

Adrian noticed Doug loitering nearby to break up any possible trouble between Marc and Kenn. The Eagles were determined not to let him provoke Marc into another fight. "I'm sending the camp on. You're driving my semi. We'll cover our absence. Have every Eagle, level three and up, involved. Tell them to make excuses and fall behind."

Doug and Kyle hurried off.

Adrian lingered with Marc, finishing his cigarette. It would be the last he got for a while, maybe the last period if things went badly.

"Are they that close?"

Adrian's voice was hard. "Yes. They've left us no choice but to react. We'll do the best we can to kill them all."

Marc was for it. "I'm all in."

Men were coming from every direction now. They'd clearly done this before. The camp started getting set to leave.

"I need you on this one, as tight to Kenn as it takes to get the job done."

Marc grunted. "Mission first, all that other shit later."

"All that other shit is in your mind." Adrian spun toward his people; voice now a sharp tone of command that garnered instant responses. "Prepare for travel, people! Get it loaded up! This is a Bugout!"

Chapter Ten

Liquid Steel

Near Howes, South Dakota
April 10th

1

“Eagle Two just rolled in.”

“Copy.” Adrian moved through the rain, following the headlights to get the report himself. He couldn’t wait for it to be delivered.

Kenn’s fearful expression wasn’t a comfort as he climbed from the truck.

“Hundreds of them. They’ll be here before dawn.” Kenn glanced around, spooked. “Good thing you’ve got the herd ready to roll.” Kenn spotted Angela in a yellow slicker like the men, leaning against her Blazer. Half a dozen Eagles were patrolling the shadows around her. He glared. “She should be with the camp! What the hell is she doing here?!”

“Her duty.” Lightning flashed as Adrian pinned him with a hard look. “Do yours.”

Kenn flushed, trying to ignore the rage he hadn’t found an outlet for yet. “What’s the plan?”

“We’re working on that now. Come on. You’re riding with a rookie for cover.”

The gear they were taking had been loaded into trucks; they were set to go. Adrian waited until the check in had accounted for everyone in Safe Haven before keying his mike. "Go slow and stay together. Keep the radio clear unless there's a problem."

They only traveled for a few minutes before the long convoy was short vehicles. Men slipped out of place, driving without their lights as they rolled alongside supply and livestock trucks to keep themselves hidden until they could pull behind homes and signs. All through the convoy, men also dove from vehicles.

Adrian grunted as he hit the dirt and rolled, swiftly taking himself out of view of the cars now rounding the curve in his blind spot. It bothered the leader to hide as the rest of his herd went by, but he held himself in place. *This has to happen!*

As the second half of the vehicles rolled by, Angela's Blazer came into view.

Adrian forced himself not to shout as she opened her door and rolled roughly down the embankment toward him.

Only her driver, Kevin, saw her exit.

Adrian glared at the man as he went by. *Door locks, rookie!* "What the hell are you doing?"

Angela had landed in a painful pile at his feet. She gave him a muddy grimace. "You would have said no."

Adrian was aware of the last jeep circling for him. He said nothing as the Eagle picked them up. There wasn't time to argue. The men Kenn had left

to spy on the slavers had sent a clicked message telling them the guerrillas were coming their way. They would only have an hour to set a trap.

Thirty-five men were waiting for them inside a training canvas when they pulled back up to the empty campsite. Every one of their profiles tightened when they saw Angela in the jeep.

“What’s she doing here?! Take her back!” Marc stomped toward her. “Have one of them take you back!”

Angela had only said one thing to Adrian in the jeep, but it had been powerful to someone who had already asked so much of her.

You’ll need me to bargain with if it all goes bad.

Now, after being around her two overprotective men, Adrian found himself agreeing. The slavers wouldn’t attack right away if they thought he would negotiate, and surrounded by these men, she was safer here than miles away in camp.

Marc had turned to Neil. “Will you take her?”

“I’m staying!”

Both of her Marines tried again to shut it down.

“No, you’re not.”

“We don’t need the distraction.”

Instead of arguing, Angela met the unreadable gaze of their leader.

Adrian responded as if she were any other man in his army, but he used the moment to help them understand she felt the same way they did. “Tell me why.”

“It’s my duty, too. And you might need me.”

Now glad that she’d shown up, Adrian gestured toward the black rig he was set to drive. “You don’t leave that truck.”

“Unless needed?”

Adrian frowned coldly. “You won’t be.”

Satisfied, she ignored Kenn to handle Marc. Their words were silent and emotional, but after a moment, came her firm denial of his demands. “I’m staying!”

She spun toward the truck to discover Adrian holding the door open. She took the vest from him with an eyeroll. “If I’m not getting out, why do I need a vest?”

Her mutter was only meant for his ears, but Adrian didn’t lower his voice when he scolded her. “Because it’s a hard new world that you’re so eager to be a part of. What we’re about to do will ensure that the slavers never stop, never give up, until we are dead, and you are under their control. We’re already taking too many chances.”

Chastened, Angela let out a tired sigh. “I need to go, too. I have to *see* them.”

Adrian waited for her to climb in, then he shut the door. He met two angry faces in the darkness when he turned around. His own expression told them it wasn’t their choice to make. Adrian moved toward Kyle with an aloofness he didn’t feel. Getting her accepted as an Eagle had officially begun, adding yet another layer of deceptions and

manipulations that brought guilt, but also pride. He too was getting stronger.

Marc moved to the window and waited for her to roll it down. He tried to be careful, but he already knew it wouldn't matter. She'd made up her mind. "You're going to get hurt if you don't slow down."

Angela's chin lifted. "I've survived so far."

His face twisted, mouth opening.

She yelled at him for the first time. "You have to stop now, Marc! It's different."

"Because you think you're gonna be an Eagle and you can do it all." Marc wanted to pull it back, but it was much too late for that as her chin flattened into that familiar, unarguable line.

"I will be an Eagle." Her tone was full of warning. "Don't make me choose between you and the new life I'm trying to build here. You won't like the decision I'll make if you can't wait for me." She rolled up the window so she didn't have to see his pain.

Marc moved away.

Angela knew she had hurt him, but he had to understand he had no more right to control her than Kenn did. *I am my own!*

Adrian started the engine as the cool shield of battle settled over his nerves. *We'll do this and do it right.*

The small convoy didn't go far. Once out of sight, Adrian took them through Howes proper, and then up a road that ran directly behind the small South Dakota town that had bodies hanging from the windows, porches, and abandoned semis.

Adrian used his hands against the howl of the storm to direct their vehicles into a three-sided box, with only a small gap not protected from the rain. After Kyle and his team got a tarp over it, they had a dry place to plan from as the storm drummed against the trucks and thunder rolled.

The sudden sound of running feet had men reaching for their weapons.

"Battlefields of gold." Cleared by the password, Zack burst into the area and went straight to Adrian, spraying cold drops. "The lookouts spotted a second group with heavy hardware advancing on Howes from the east. They have a big carrier with a fucking tank!"

The men went silent, stunned.

"Coming through here?" Adrian was also shocked.

"Yes." Zack had calculated it. "The camp is already out of range, but we'll be trapped if we stay too long."

Adrian thought fast. *We have nothing to stand against a tank, do we?*

The Eagles realized it was Angela's metal monster.

"There's only two ways to get a transport carrier close enough to hit our camp." Kenn subtly directed

Lee and Zack toward Angela. His gesture said to keep her from doing anything stupid, like being a hero.

“Everyone says they surrounded the towns.” Neil slid closer to Angela.

“They’ll come in from at least two sides and try to squeeze us.” Marc was sure. *That’s what I would do.*

“Rolling or carrying?” Adrian clearly put stock in Marc’s opinion.

“Carrying.”

Adrian peered at the devastated town below them, standing pat against the wind gusts. “Where is the best place to hit them?”

“No time for a pit.” Kenn liked using those.

Adrian waved a hand. “Someone get me a channel so I can listen.”

Angela was aware of Kenn’s allies staying close, but unless she was needed, she had every intention of doing what she was told. If Adrian’s plan failed, *then* she would try to save them all.

Marc helped Kenn with the radio, their time together before the war making it smooth, but he scanned regularly to verify Angela’s safety. When this was over, if they weren’t dead, he had some things to say to her.

“Channel 83.” Adrian waved at Kenn to stay in control of the portable radio.

Marc flanked Angela.

They only listened to the static for a moment before the radio lit up.

“Nos va a venir a través Howes en una hora...”

“They’ll be coming through Howes in an hour,” Kenn translated.

“Excelente.”

“Cuándo vamos a atacar?”

“When do we attack?” Kenn repeated, heart thumping. *We’re about to go to war. I can’t wait.*

“En el trazo de dos.”

“At the stroke of two.” Kenn scanned his digital watch. It was 1:07am.

Now holding a very slim advantage, Adrian motioned Kenn to shut it off. He knelt before his army, K-Bar flashing through the damp dirt. “They’ll come through the main road of Howes. We cleared it yesterday, over six hours. The other streets were worse. They can’t roll over it all because of the noise, so when they come to the main intersection, they’ll take the cleared path.” Adrian was busy mapping out the small town.

Kenn joined him, working on the outline of their camp.

“We assume the main group will wait over the hill, out of sight, so they’ll come in here.” Adrian pointed.

Neil bent down to draw a Mexican flag there.

“They won’t have a clear view without coming over the hill, so they’ll wait for the tank crew to call and say they’re in position.” Adrian hoped.

Kenn added a tank to their most vulnerable side.

“When the call comes, he’ll tell them to open fire. As soon as the first hit lands, they’ll know

we've moved." Adrian's heart thumped. "They'll catch up to Safe Haven right about the time they settle down from the storm."

Marc grunted. "He's dangerous."

"No shit!" Kenn hated it that Marc was here. "How about one of the ass-savers you used to come up with? Got anything now?"

The men around them frowned.

Marc was already busy studying the map. *Adrian said they'd spent all day yesterday clearing the roads...* He surveyed their leader with only a touch of bitterness. "What do you think the weight limit is on that bridge we crossed to get up here?"

Adrian saw it right away. That bridge was the only cleared way across the Cheyenne River within a hundred miles. If they took it out, not a single shot would be fired, and the slavers would be trapped on the opposite side of that churning mass. "Won't matter if we help it along."

"It'll take them more than a week to go around. None of the other bridges we checked around here were intact." Kyle liked the plan. That heavy sense of doom eased.

Men flashed smiles at Marc.

Kenn swallowed a growl of frustration. *That backfired.*

Adrian stood, wiping dirt from his hands. "We have about forty minutes. Let's get it set up."

It took them almost that entire time to get the bridge rigged.

Adrian wasn't taking any chances the bridge would hold, and that meant climbing down the sides with ropes attached to keep the brave men from being lost in the intense winds battering them. The Eagles on those ropes chopped and sawed through the support beams. The slow, noisy work kept everyone on edge. They were trapped between the two groups now, in plain sight by anyone who arrived.

"I'm swinging!" Marc shouted up. "Hold my damn feet!"

"Same here!" Kenn echoed, hanging upside down with a saw while rain pelted his face.

Kyle and his team tried to keep the ropes from blowing so much, but the height of the storm was here. There was only so much they could do.

"Almost through!"

"Same here!" Marc called, swarmed with Déjà vu from their last mission against Mexicans. They'd done much this same job on a bridge that a known drug lord was about to travel through. It hadn't gone well. Marc hauled himself upright. He could feel Kenn's bad karma surrounding them now, as it had then. "You through?"

"We're good!" Kenn tried not to think about his previous mistake of not cutting deep enough to topple the post.

Groan... Creak...

Adrian heard the sound he'd been waiting for and gave the signal. "Pack it up!"

The sense of death being around the corner was thickening again, tightening around them as the rain poured. Adrian was eager to get out of sight.

Kyle's team hauled the two men up with fast jerks and low grunts of pain. Neither man was light.

The bridge swayed uneasily at a harsh blast of wind as they were pulled up, sending all of the men running for the muddy ground.

Adrian was satisfied that anything more than a jeep would topple it. *The rest is up to fate.*

4

"Here they come."

Up on the hill above their laboring crew, Angela's words echoed in the damp truck, making men tense. The cutting team was still out in the open.

Against her single protest, Adrian had put her in the rear of his semi with half a dozen resentful sentries. It was the first time she'd spoken.

"Less than a minute." She kept scanning the future. "Tell them to get under cover!"

Neil hesitated, torn. That was Adrian down there, should he—

"Do something!" When Neil still didn't move, Angela shoved him aside, grabbing the Maglite from his belt. She slapped it into Jeremy's hands,

unsure of the code. “Get them under cover and do it now!”

Jeremy was also reluctant to disturb the cutting team, but her tone of command was impossible to ignore. He sent the message with a worried heart. Adrian would be pissed if she was wrong.

All of them were relieved to see the cutting team truck pull onto a crowded sideroad near the bridge and steer the front of the semi so that it appeared nearly jackknifed. Parked next to several buildings, once the slavers went by, the men could abandon the truck and escape.

“There’s the tank!” Neil realized they might be discovered at the first swing of headlights. “Everyone hit the deck!”

There was a scramble to get down as the sounds of engines came through the heavy rain. Inside the vulnerable semi, Eagles also ducked out of sight.

“When the bridge goes, they’ll be trapped down there.” Angela wished she’d spoken up sooner.

“Adrian isn’t trapped anywhere.” Jeremy patted her wrist. “He’ll bring all of them home.” Grateful she had warned them, he gave her a nod of respect. “It’s the way he trains us and that’s the way we’ll train you.”

All around her, men stiffened in surprise at Jeremy’s acceptance. He was Neil’s XO, highly respected, and he’d just given his support.

A second later, Angela got a rainy view of the terror stalking her; she was glad Marc had left Dog

with Charlie. The wolf would be one last defense if evil succeeded tonight.

The trailer carrying the tank rolled over the rain-slicked pavement with a single jeep in front of it and a cluster behind. More than fifty armed men travelled toward the bridge, already on the same street as Adrian's semi.

Everyone held their breath as the slavers began to roll by that truck, hoping the Eagles inside were well hidden.

The group went slowly, it seemed to those watching. Each shadowy pistol and rifle was a reminder of how close they were to the boss.

"Someone's coming fast." Angela tensed. "Up here."

Instead of the tension she expected, relief filled the truck. The men were positive it was Adrian.

Adrian and Kenn were first through the muddy woods, with Marc right behind them.

Angela couldn't stop the small smile of welcome when their eyes met.

Marc sighed, anger fading. *Why am I always so lost with her?*

Kenn also felt emotions at her response, but with Adrian so close, he was forced to swallow it.

After verifying everyone was accounted for, Adrian made hand motions to push the remaining truck over the hill in neutral until they were far enough to avoid being heard.

Those inside made room for all but a few of the returning team, while Kenn went to tell the driver.

Those leaving would take shifts pushing, while those staying would follow on foot.

Able to feel Neil's longing to stay, it matched her own, Angela carefully slid from the truck and joined Adrian.

Two men jumped down behind her.

She moved faster to avoid another argument with Marc. She didn't have to ask him. He wasn't in charge.

Angela's gaze kept being pulled from the muddy ground to the line of jeeps and one transport truck now approaching the bridge. They had a clear view from up here.

Adrian stared at her for a long moment, then went back to observing the enemy. The tank would go down with the bridge and that meant the forty-odd men trapped on this side with them might have to be handled.

"What's that sound?"

They stilled at her question, able to feel it under their feet, even so far above the town. It echoed hungrily, bearing down on Howes like a missile.

"What is it?"

No one answered her. They couldn't, too astonished by the sight of death rushing toward the unsuspecting group of killers.

The transport truck was the next to cross, with one jeep already waiting on the opposite bank. None of the Mexicans detected the louder roar or the echoes under their tires. In the town, the storm was raging.

The wall of debris laden water swept downstream, wider than the bank as it slammed into the first bridge pillar with no mercy. The jeep on the opposite bank vanished under the flood and didn't surface.

The bridge trembled, swaying as the sabotaged beams gave way; the transport carrier tilted precariously over the new abyss. The wall of water snagged the front bumper, ripping it free of the dock, and the entire load of truck, tank, and bridge fell into the churning waves.

Behind it, the slavers tried to reverse, but most were too slow to avoid being swept away. Only the two rear jeeps were spared.

As if sensing survivors, the torrent of water spilt between the dock and street, roaring through the narrow road in pursuit.

Adrian's semi was pulled out by the waves...

The slower of the two jeeps swerved sharply to the right to miss crashing into it. Taillights flashed as the driver tried to stop, but it was too late. The jeep went over the side of the dock. A huge spray rose in its wake.

The second jeep was gaining ground on the water, staying ahead. Adrian grabbed his rifle.

"Follow my lead." He got set.

Kenn and Marc did the same on either side of him.

Neil was almost whining with frustration from not being in on the action, but he knew better than

to shirk his duty to protect Angela right now. He stayed within a foot of her.

Adrian braced as the jeep charged up the hill they were on. “Now!” Adrian saw it go perfectly in his mind, and then fired.

His shot punched into the windshield, spraying the inside with scarlet gore.

The jeep veered violently to the left.

The two men inside scrambling for the wheel jerked simultaneously as two more shots tore into the vehicle.

Out of control, the jeep rammed a downed tree, and lifted off the ground. It slammed to the earth in a loud, metal-spraying crash, landing on its top.

The flattened vehicle rolled once, this time ending up in the mud-slickened grass.

It began to flip down the hill, scattering debris. The Eagles watched in shock as it hit the flooded main street and sank into the merciless waves still thundering through the town.

Overhead, the storm abated.

Adrian forced himself to dismiss the death, refusing to shoulder it yet. There would be more of that. “Next time, we’ll take them all.”

He slapped Kenn and Marc on the shoulder, then moved toward Angela, shouldering his weapon as the two Marines did the same. “Let’s get home. Mission accomplished.”

Angela fell in between him and Marc at Kenn’s wave, and tried to prepare herself for a short,

miserably happy walk to catch up with the others. They were safe again for a little while.

And next time? the witch asked curiously. *What then?*

Next time, I'll do my part, and no one will hold me back.

5

Doug had done an excellent job of covering for their absence. By the time the team arrived, the big Irishman had Safe Haven set up in the basement of a steel distributor. Happily exploring the undamaged factory, most of the people thought Adrian was helping with outside patrols until the men with car trouble could catch up.

When Adrian finally slipped inside, soaked, and red eyed, no one questioned. It was the same for the Eagles. The camp would sleep easier believing all those high-level men had been watching out for them. Even Angela's absence was covered with a few words about being on duty.

The only members not fooled were Cynthia and Rick. Both of them had been wandering during the lack of leadership. They knew Adrian hadn't been in camp. The reporter assumed it was another of Adrian's private training sessions.

Rick wondered if it had been more. He had seen the small convoy arrive; the traitor knew what the crash after a battle was like. Had Adrian foiled

Cesar's plans somehow? If so, it had been without the notice of anyone else in Safe Haven.

Rick decided he would have to make contact as soon as Adrian lifted the blackout. He knew something wasn't right, but he couldn't verify it unless he found a guard with a loose tongue. If he was now on his own, that was a valuable piece of information to have.

Things had worked out even better than Adrian had hoped. Unlike the slavers, he and his army knew how to use the tools of the government. One of their trucks held a pontoon setup. They would double back and avoid the badlands meeting that Cesar was sure to be hoping for now. It would put weeks of distance between the two groups, and if the slavers went far enough north, the radiation zones might even take care of the problem for them.

Adrian went to his camp with none of it showing. He was adept at hiding the truth. He'd learned that skill from his father.

6

"Why have we stopped?" Dean shouted to be heard over the wind.

The angry Mexicans around him scowled but didn't interfere. The black man had lost track of Safe Haven in the storm and wanted to keep following, even though there was no longer a bridge to cross. He didn't care that the tank team still

wasn't answering their calls or that it appeared a battle had happened at this crossing recently. All he cared about was revenge.

“Hey!”

José stepped in front of Dean before he could grab Cesar's arm. “Stop shouting!”

Dean gave the scarred man a hard shove. “Move!”

Not expecting it, José toppled backward into the mud.

The men all laughed.

Dean stomped toward Cesar again.

José picked himself up with cold fury, drenched in brown muck.

The remaining twin heard him coming and spun around, swinging from the hip.

José hit the ground again with a wet slap.

The laughter increased.

“Stay down, *Josey!*” Dean stomped toward the Mexican leader who had finally rotated to see what was causing the laughter.

Humiliated, José's hand went for his pistol.

The laughter stopped.

Dean lunged for the muddy ground as he fired; the slug pinged harmlessly off Cesar's hood.

Up in an instant, Dean stalked the younger man with no sign he feared the weapon still aimed at him.

José panicked, pulling the trigger again.

Men ducked as the shot went wild.

Dean hit the mud again for the third bullet, rolling to avoid a fourth, and then he was on his feet and coming in at a fast run.

José screamed in rage and fear, firing again. A wild slug hit the furious devil flying his way, but it didn't stop him!

Dean half spun as the bullet tore through his upper arm. He rolled as José fired a last time.

He dove at the ugly fighter, twisting to miss the knife as he hit José.

Cesar reluctantly saved his cousin's life. He had no doubts José was after command, but he wasn't through with the youngster yet. When he was, the real lesson would be taught, and it wouldn't come from this angry soldier. Cesar stepped over to Dean with a fast lunge that his men both admired and feared, and wrapped Dean up tightly. "His life is mine. So is yours!"

Dean struggled against the blade for only a minute, the words sinking in.

Cesar tossed him roughly away.

The men surrounding them had their weapons pointed at Dean before he gained his feet.

Some of Dean's anger was eased by the sight of the blood José was spitting at his boots. There would be more of that.

"We stop when I say, go when I say." José had pushed himself up, hand inching toward his spare gun. Cesar delivered a brutal kick to his ribs that sent him rolling into the crowd, where he was stomped on when he tried to get to his feet.

“Stay down! I will deal with you!” The leader swiveled to discover Dean grinning. The guerrilla surveyed the black man. “His pain makes you happy?”

Dean nodded. “It’s second only to hers.”

Cesar’s gold tooth glinted. “I have promised you her death. Do not make me kill you before I can keep my word.”

“Don’t underestimate them, Cesar.” Dean tried to reason with the slaver, calmer with so many guns pointed his way. “Hit them now, while they’re on the road.”

“With what?” Cesar waved. “Our tank and team are missing, and there is no bridge to cross! We will have to go around and these men desire a break.”

There were mutters of agreement that told the evil leader he’d made the right choice. Passing that town, sparing those survivors so he could get close enough to attack Safe Haven, had been a mistake, but he would fix it right now. “We will go back to where they were hiding in the church and spend a few days teaching them *our* religion.”

The slaver waited for the cheers to die down. The unrest of his men had caused him to consider their wants. Now that he had, Cesar liked his new plan better. “I will have them, but it does not have to be tonight señor. We have nothing but time now, si? Time while Richard throws them into chaos.”

Dean’s growl was the only protest he made.

Cesar pointed. “You will go find them and keep me informed.”

Dean stalked off without another word.

Cesar wondered if he would do it. There was a stiffness to his stride that said he wasn't coming back without a good reason. Not that it mattered. Once these men had been rested, Cesar would get them back on the trail. He'd rushed them and made a foolish choice that he couldn't afford to repeat unless he wanted to be taking his cousin's orders. The men didn't like José, but that didn't mean they wouldn't follow him if his deal was better. At some point, José would have to be eliminated.

Chapter Eleven

The Madness Spreads

April 11th
Pitcairn Island

1

They need you...

The words flew through the fog, stealing Kendle's breath.

You have to go back!

She jerked upright, startled from her nightmare by the sound of it.

Kendle shivered in the darkness, trying to make herself remember exactly who (*what!*) had been speaking to her from the mist.

She glanced at the dim firelight and the cabin door. Everything was in its place.

She listened for the sound of Luke's breathing below her. It was even, calm, and Kendle forced herself to lie down.

Just a dream, she told herself, over and over until her lids began to droop and she yawned. "Just a dream."

They need you!

Her lids flew open to discover Ethan's leering face inches from hers.

You have to go home!

He lunged for her throat, infected fingers reaching out.

Kendle screamed, waking herself up.

Luke flew from the top bunk and pulled her into his arms an instant later.

Kendle clung to him, knuckles in her mouth to stifle a second scream.

Luke rocked her as best he could. When she shuddered, he gently pulled her into his big arms and proceeded to the chair, dragging her quilt along.

She melted into his lap as he settled in the recliner, a huddling ball of live nerves. He rubbed her arm as he got them rocking. “Shhh.”

Kendle sucked in a tortured breath, keeping her hand near her mouth. Not the worst by far, it was still among her least favorite of repeat dreams and she tried to concentrate on the steady beat of Luke’s heart under her cheek.

Luke wanted to tell her she could talk about it, but didn’t, certain she wasn’t the kind to do that anymore than he was. Some things you had to suffer on your own. Her nightmares came often, though most didn’t end with a shriek. He hated feeling helpless, but didn’t know what else he could do for her. Their garden was full of half-foot high seedlings in uneven rows that they tended daily. They were shopping with the crazy woman across the creek so they didn’t have to have fish every night. Other than that, it was just them, alone together.

Luke shifted at that thought. She hadn't come to him yet, but the light was growing. Soon, he would make her his, and then things would get complicated. Because once she regained her self-confidence, she'd want to go home and he would never be able to let her do that alone.

Kendle felt the warm comfort of his big body and the soothing motions of the chair, but the fear had caused a desperate worry. She'd had the Ethan dream for last three nights and though Luke thought it was just her mind mixing things together, Kendle wasn't sure. The island Playboy hadn't even spoken to her again after telling her she should be with her own kind, but twice yesterday, she was positive she was being observed as they worked on the garden. After so much time alone, it was a feeling that was impossible to miss and she worried things weren't over with the Kraft heir.

Speaking of Kraft heirs, she thought, picturing the Sheriff in her mind. It hadn't occurred to her while they were there, but if Jenna was the Mayor's daughter, then Cole was his grandson. The sheriff was also a Kraft and therefore, couldn't be trusted. There was a lot going on here that Luke didn't want to talk about, didn't want her to become a part of, but Kendle feared their involvement might be mandatory.

Then, there was the stress of her new obsession. Finding a way home was something she'd begun to worry over. She hadn't talked to Luke about it yet, but was sure he suspected why she now insisted

they spend every free moment working out or running through the jungles. She was slowly getting stronger and he had to know it was coming.

“You want a pill?”

Kendle’s grip on him tightened. “No.”

Luke shifted again; he rocked them, lids shut. The feel of her in his arms was wonderful. She smelled so good! Like ripe berries in the sun that needed to be picked and he let his mind wander their previous kisses. Any day now, she’d be his and for a little while, he would be happy.

“Are you worried?” he asked suddenly.

She didn’t lie. “A bit.”

The town was gathering for a meeting about the lack of contact with the outside world, and Luke planned to voice his own theories, no matter how unpopular. There were less than a hundred people here, but that didn’t mean they were helpless. If war had destroyed their homelands, didn’t that give them a duty to offer shelter to those left?

That was a question most of Pitcairn had been pondering since Mayor Kraft called the town meeting. They were gathering in the side yard of his estate and that was the part Kendle was dreading the most. After the nightmares, it didn’t matter if Ethan never leered at her again. She wanted nothing to do with him and that included being on his property.

“I’ll be watching after you while we’re there. Try not to get out of my sight.”

She was relieved to know Luke had felt the same menace from their hand-delivered invitation.

The sight of those three green-eyed men on muddy dirt bikes had sent a chill into Kendle and she had instinctively retreated from the doorway to let Luke handle it.

“Unless you’d rather I stayed away from you while people are around.”

Kendle’s mouth opened in shock. “I’d never treat you that—”

Luke sealed their lips at her denial. When she tightened her grip, he deepened their kiss. *I want her so much!*

Kendle felt the shudder of need run through him and moaned, pressing her body to his. With that big hand tangled in her spikes and the other crushing her close, she couldn’t go far and was glad when he retreated and let her breathe. As soon as she could, she assaulted him the same way, not letting him pull away until she was full of his taste.

Luke grinned as they broke apart, painfully hard against her thigh. “Still worried?”

She leaned down to place a kiss at the base of his throat. “I don’t want to hide this, when we go.”

Before he could protest, she used her tongue to taste his throat, and felt him tense under her. “I mean it, Luke.”

“The people here like to gossip.”

She smiled softly. “Let’s give ‘em a reason. We’ll be nothing more or less than what we are.”

Luke both loved and hated the image. “Not a good idea, darling. These people can be cruel.”

“Do we need them for anything?”

Luke considered that question carefully, wanting to be open about their growing relationship as much as she did. "I'm not sure..."

"I am."

He studied her intently, seeing the rings of contentment around her pupils and the dilation from hormonal responses, and still shook his head. "It'll hurt you later, if we're wrong about the war."

"We're not and it wouldn't matter anyway. You say no because of your past, not my future."

She left his arms and went toward her own bed. "And I won't give myself to a man who makes me hide our love in public."

"What did you say?"

Kendle wasn't certain of his mood now, she'd never been sharp with him before, and she kept walking without answering.

"Kendle."

He was right over her shoulder, steps silent in the dark, and she stopped, but didn't turn.

"Did you say...love?"

She was saved from answering by a knock at the door and Luke spun toward it, ready to growl at whoever had interrupted them.

He jerked the door open to find Ethan Kraft standing at the base of the stairs, where his slick eyes were able to go over Luke and most of the living quarters.

Ethan instantly detected Kendle standing with her blanket in her hand, pointed *back* to her bed.

Well, that makes the choice then, doesn't it, Luke thought, and pulled out the fierce grin of male pride that he had been saving for this moment.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Ethan. Not sure what he wants yet. Don’t think he can talk now that he’s discovered our secret.”

Kendle reluctantly came to the door, wrapping the blanket around her bare legs.

Even in his shock, Ethan’s slimy gaze crawled over the skin showing from under her tank top. He had honestly believed her when she’d said there was nothing going on with her and Luke.

She lied to me!

Anger slowly bled into Ethan’s sickly expression and Kendle allowed Luke to slide an arm around her tense shoulders and tug into his warmth. “He’ll tell us in a minute I guess. Brace for it.”

Luke’s tone was so happy that Kendle had to smile, feeling this moment was the least she could do to repay him for all the trouble she’d been. “If he’s going to be a while, I’ll go get some coffee on.”

She leaned into him, placing a soft kiss to his jaw. “We’ll pick up where we left off when he leaves.”

Murder flashed across Ethan’s face and he spun toward the jungle. He kept walking, not stopping to deliver any of the other reminders he’d been sent out to give. He also didn’t travel toward the family estate, where some of the townspeople were already gathering. His pace was jagged, uneven, and he

swayed against the jungle like a sick animal. *She lied to me!*

They watched for a long minute, even after he was out of sight. The wick was now lit. Would it simply burn out over time or explode?

“Sorry.”

“I enjoyed it too.”

Very aware of her warm body against his, Luke glanced down at her. “Coffee?”

“No. Just me.”

Luke swept her up into his arms, loving her ring of laughter. “That’ll do fine. You say when.”

Kendle nuzzled his jaw, finally feeling like the world might stand a chance after all. “Now.”

Luke’s grip tightened. “We’ll skip the meeting.”

Brought to reality, Kendle gave a disappointed sigh. “Guess it’ll have to wait until after.”

“One more to hold me over then.”

Kendle obediently tilted her lips up for his kiss.

2

“I think she’s lying.” Mary Jo stood spitefully with the Mayor. “I ain’t putting up anything without knowing for sure.”

“And how should we find out for certain? By waiting?” Luke snorted angrily. “We all know something’s wrong. The question is, what should we do about it?”

The small crowd muttered and called unhelpful answers that made the Mayor’s green orbs glow

brighter. The timid man they'd met on their trip to the creek was gone and in his place was the lord of Kraft Manor.

"I don't care either way and I think most folks here feel the same," the Mayor said firmly and was rewarded with quiet.

The well-dressed snob also stood to get his share of the attention, earning a frown from Luke that Kendle hoped he might hide. Most of the people here had green eyes. Had he noticed that? And not the normal color, but glowing. They were infected with something and Kendle didn't think Jenna's ghost story explained even half of it.

"We don't want the outside world to come here, not even a small part of it, and we don't need anything from there, so why should we risk our lives to go back?"

Wanting to help, Kendle forced herself to remain silent, knowing Luke's cautions on the way here were right. She was an outsider and anything she might add would be instantly rejected. She subtly searched the shadows, wondering where the Mayor had shipped Ethan off to for this meeting.

"And I say that's a shitty attitude toward your fellow man. What kind of person only thinks of themselves at a time like this?" Luke sneered. "Wait, I know. The rich kind, who've never cared about anything but themselves. That was the whole problem with the world that made most of us come here in the first place."

Mayor Kraft shrugged off the words with a wave of his gloved hand. “We’ve already voted no, and besides, over two thirds of this group are among that population you’ve so clearly dismissed. And that means you’ll not need anything from us, *the problem.*”

The Man veered toward his Villa. “Please leave this property at once.”

Luke stared in shock as the pristine yard emptied, not understanding he had pushed things too far. *Where is their honor?*

Kendle was glad to see a few people remain. They were grouped together by the gate, staring at her with normal, though cool eyes, and Kendle joined them.

If she could sway enough of the townspeople, maybe they could still get a search party together without the Mayor and his rich friends. Drawing on her nerves, she smiled. “Hi. I don’t think we’ve met yet.”

She extended her hand. “I’m—”

“We know who you are,” the woman in the middle spat, ugliness in her tone. Her jeans and top hung on a thin, grieving frame and her lashes were wet with unshed tears. “We heard when your plane went down. My boy was your cameraman.”

Kendle blanched. Mac had been the only one who hadn’t survived, and Kendle instinctively braced herself.

“I’m so sorr...”

Slap!

Kendle's head rocked to the side.

"Couldn't even come to his funeral!" she shouted, hatred lining her aged profile. "*He's* got a lot of nerve, bringing you here!"

"It was an accident that Mac died, Ms. Webster. The rope broke and we both fell fifty feet. I was in the hospital when he was buried," Kendle told the woman stiffly.

"I never believed that excuse! Cursed!" Ms. Webster screeched, hand raising.

"I'm giving you a pass because of your grief, but don't ever put a finger on me again!"

Kendle jerked on the edge of her jeans, lifting them to uncover an ugly scar. "I was in surgery."

Kendle waited, furious enough to fight back if the woman attacked her again, but the sight of the scar had an effect and the slow lights of regret began sparking.

"You both fell?"

"Mac landed wrong and it broke his neck. I only had my ankle snap in five places."

The mother's mouth opened, but Kendle didn't give her a chance to respond. She spun out of the yard with Luke at her heels, still full of shame that she wasn't sure she should be carrying over the crash.

They'd been on a deadline and hadn't stopped for the last fill up. When their pilot had gotten lost, the lack of fuel sent them down before they could find a clear place to land. The private jet had ended up in the canopy, over a hundred feet up and they'd

been climbing down when the rope she and Mac were on broke.

Kendle didn't stop until they were almost to his cabin, her steps short and fast, and Luke stayed with her. The people here had always been cruel to him, but he'd thought she would be safe unless they flaunted their relationship. Today, they'd been hand-in-hand most of the time and gotten a few glowers, but it was still the past causing trouble. Didn't the mistakes ever let go?

As the cabin came into view, the surf crashed loudly onto the shore, and Luke was surprised when Kendle bypassed their dark home and proceeded toward the water.

The sinking sun was beautiful, full of colors that didn't belong, and it seduced them repeatedly with vivid shades of purple and red. Gulls swooped over the beach where crabs crawled among the soggy grains and the castaway stared at the waves with horror. It should have been her and not Mac—would have been if he'd been the star and not her.

Luke hung back, letting her tackle her demons, but he was ready to intercede if she got too upset. One wrong move and he would grab her.

"I wasn't supposed to survive the crash or the fall." Her voice was like the waves—angry. "And I should have died out there, too!"

Kendle took another step, letting the cold saltwater brush her toes each time the ripples rushed toward shore. "Sometimes, I wish I had."

She was crying now and Luke gently wrapped his big arms around her shaking body, hoping this would help set her free. Facing the pain was hard, but it was also healing. “Come on, let’s go.”

Kendle’s voice wasn’t quite under control. “I want to spend the night on the beach.”

Luke was surprised, but understood she was trying to banish her nightmares, and he decided to let her.

“We’ll need a few things.”

Kendle tried not to let the sound of the ocean get to her, or ruin this. “I’ll stay here and gather driftwood while you get the bedrolls and some food.”

Luke studied the red handprint on her peeling cheek, not liking the idea. “You sure?”

She sighed deeply, feeling drained. “Yes. I’ll be right here.”

Uneasy, he shifted toward the cabin. With this new tension on the island, maybe it was time to get his guns out of storage.

“Help! Luke!”

Kendle’s shout sent terror through Luke’s mind and he flew back through the jungle with his machete in hand.

She was standing on the beach near where he’d left her, hands curled over her mouth as if to stifle another piercing shriek, and Luke followed her line of sight to the rushing waves of high tide.

What he saw had him quickly ushering her toward the cabin and his dirt bike. Mora wasn't missing anymore and with all that blood, her death had only come minutes before they'd arrived. There was a serial killer on Pitcairn Island and they were in the middle of his hunting ground.

Chapter Twelve

That's A Pass

Paralleling 73 near Buffalo Gap, SD
April 12th

1

“He’s going to have to turn around. This is a dead end.”

Kyle picked up the mike at Angela’s words, not questioning her. “Four to base. I suggest a new check of the map.”

“Copy.” Adrian’s tone gave nothing away.

They were on 61, traveling toward Martin, South Dakota. The dreary landscape gave little comfort. Instead of being burnt, it was covered in mud. Even the road was splashed with gritty debris they drove carefully over and around, all thinking about the deer.

Minutes later, the convoy changed direction, using an alternate route Angela fed to Kyle. The camp wouldn’t know she had saved them hours of extra travel time, but Adrian did. Did he also know she was searching for people around them while they traveled? Unsure, Angela focused on the semi in front of her instead of the cemetery they were passing, not wanting the stacks of rotting corpses to

be burned in her memory. She already had too many of those memories.

It still felt odd to be a part of so many people. She and Marc had spent weeks at a time without running across another person. She wondered if he had adjusted yet or if he still felt crowded and lost in the din.

“You feel like talking?”

Angela glanced at Neil in the mirror. “Depends on the subject.”

He frowned. “About becoming an Eagle and what it means to Adrian.”

There was a note of warning in his answer that she understood. Neil had been nothing but ice toward her since the tank was destroyed, since she’d made him look bad again by being right. “You want to be sure I’m the real deal before throwing in your support. Always protect your own ass first, huh, Neil?” She snapped her gaze to Kyle before the trooper could respond. “What about you?”

After hearing her ask Adrian to join the Eagles, both Marc and Neil were stewing on how to stop it. Kyle recognized the battle that had begun for this quiet female. She would have to prove herself to all the men. No one would just accept this.

“They’ll adjust.”

Instead of being upset that she was catching some of his thoughts, Kyle grinned, loving the way she felt like Adrian.

“I am not him.”

Kyle shrugged. “You could be, with our help.”

Angela was surprised and leery. “He can put me where he wants me, but I don’t need that kind of power.”

Neil raised a brow, thinking Kyle had things to fill him in on. “Then why be an Eagle?”

Unwilling to share her personal demons, she gave half of the truth. “Because he needs it and I can do it.”

Both men were quiet.

She listened to their thoughts. Many people had been fooled by Kenn...and she’d spent years with him, picking up his habits. They wanted to be sure that she wasn’t the same. She would have to let these two in a bit. “I’ve spent my entire life a victim. Until the war, I had no defenses and he... I was isolated, without my abilities. I let myself be abused in the old world. That will never happen again. Adrian is offering me a way to be stronger than I ever have and to help others who need it.” Her voice became a low mutter of determination. “I’ll give him the female army he secretly hopes for.”

“Can you?” Neil asked bluntly.

The awful memory of Versailles flashed through her mind. “Yes. I’m able to do everything you can. I only lack the training.”

“That’s a lot of power to hand over to a stranger who claims not to want any.” Neil was one of the men who wouldn’t just accept it.

Angela smiled coldly. “You mean to a woman.”

“Both.” Neil tried to even out his tone. “And then there’s the things you can do. How do we know you aren’t telling us what we need to hear?”

Angela had expected these questions from Adrian a week ago, when she’d brought Marc back from the edge of death. “If I was that kind of person, do you think Kenn would still be alive?”

There was silence as both men saw that as the truth. With her gifts, if she were bad at all, the Marine would have been another body on the side of a road somewhere.

“To help Adrian and to be stronger?” Kyle clarified.

Guilt rolled from her. The observant men noticed the change.

“I also atone, as does Adrian.” Angela peered out the window and had to steel herself against the sight of small skeletons lying on a playground. The number of kids lost in the war was worse than the adults in every place that she’d been. Abandoned, left to fend for themselves, lost, taken. It was beyond awful. It was haunting. “Some sins cannot be forgiven. But I’ll spend my life trying anyway.”

There was another uneasy silence.

She blew out a frustrated breath. “I don’t know what you expect, but if it’s a confession or an oath of loyalty, I won’t give it. Neither of you guys are Adrian!”

Angela didn’t say another word, even when they pulled into the new parking area. They were right to question those who joined Safe Haven’s leadership,

but she had no answers for them. That was Adrian's job.

2

Hours after a fast meal in the crowded mess, Angela left the training area with an angry pace. Everyone below a level four had been told to leave. Restless, and not certain she had the patience to pretend for a crowd, she left the noise, stepping over part of a rotting Christmas tree still wrapped in shredded red garland. The Eagles were gearing up for a mission and she was missing it. She hadn't expected to like the danger, only the safety and confidence that came with it, but the feeling of being left out was undeniable. *I want to go!*

"You can."

Angela fumbled briefly and then her weapon was in her hand and she was spinning to face the threat.

Adrian stayed still, waiting for her to adjust.

She saw his muscles through the shirt. *He's braced to take a hit.* "Testing me without a vest? Not wise."

Adrian shrugged. "It's the way things are done now, how trust is built."

Angela put her gun away, not taking her eyes from his. He needed something from her.

"Why do you want to go so much?"

She concentrated, determined to give the right answers. "I feel...abandoned, like everyone was

invited to a party, but me.” She held up a hand to stop his harsh words. “I know it’s not, and I know I’m not good enough yet. That doesn’t stop me from wanting it now.”

Adrian gestured toward where his men were preparing their transportation and trying not to be caught eavesdropping. “I’ll take you along tonight. If you still give me the same answer come dawn, then I have a place for you.”

Angela pushed away the nagging voice saying neither of her men would like this. “I’ll be ready when you are.”

“Ten minutes; cover your exit. I’ll be driving the black truck.” Adrian felt some of his tension fade. The slavers were a hundred miles away now, maybe even more. She would be as safe as any of his people ever were in this new world.

Angela’s heart eased. “Thank you.”

Adrian blinked away the urge to respond. That grateful tone had sent a flash of need deep into his gut. “Don’t forget your vest.”

Angela hurried. The clothes and gear from her days in the quarantine zone were easy to put on under her doctor’s coat. She felt pride at the surprise on Adrian’s face when he opened his truck door to find her lying down to stay below the windows. She’d beaten him there.

Adrian recovered quickly and climbed in with a smile.

Angela stared. His happiness was stunning.

Neither of them spoke as he got set and the sound of engines came. The Eagles were leaving.

Adrian shifted into drive and rolled along behind the two full teams. He fell back slowly, until there were only two protective jeeps in sight. "You can sit up now."

Angela stretched with a soft yawn, the comforting motion of the ride sending her thoughts to the last weeks with Marc, where they'd been alternating driving to save gas. For a moment, Angela felt naked without his protection. Every rotation of the tires took her farther from him.

She shifted toward the dangerous darkness they were rolling through, not wanting Adrian to see her unease.

"I can take you back."

His tone said he understood. Angela shook her head. "Please don't. I need this as much as you do."

Adrian was proud of her for facing her fears. "Tell me when it's too much and we'll go home. My word."

"I will." He was warning her it would get ugly.

Adrian snorted. "Liar."

She smiled a bit. "Maybe."

Angela didn't ask where they were going or what was happening, content to experience it at all. His offer had calmed her down. Adrian was a comfort to a woman. Against her will, Angela began to accept that Marc wasn't the only man who could make her feel safe. Safe Haven's leader also had that power and it was a bit disconcerting to discover

after believing for so long that Marc was the only man she would ever trust. *Safe Haven is rebuilding my faith in people. I love it here.*

3

“I think I hate this.”

“We had no choice.”

Adrian’s tone was miserable, full of a self-loathing that had Angela’s compassion warring with her outrage as they observed the assault. It was a side of him that she was positive the camp and his Eagles never saw.

The gang didn’t stand a chance. Two teams of Eagles rushed in from all sides, opening fire on both armed and unarmed alike. Awake, asleep, fleeing, none of the gang was spared.

The gunfire echoed heavily at first, then died down to sporadic shots as the Eagles picked off those faking death or hiding.

“They were gearing up to attack a group of refugees near here.”

Angela said nothing as she watched through his binoculars; the entire show was lit by the gang’s bonfire. Bodies were everywhere. The flames flickered with armed shadows and in the middle of it all, was Kyle. Leading and directing, he was also checking that the dead were indeed gone...by putting a bullet into the brain of every corpse with his Glock.

It was gruesome. Adrian resisted the urge to censor it. This part of being an Eagle was uglier than most women would be able to accept.

Angela reluctantly absorbed the lesson.

When the bodies were thrown on the fire, her expression didn't change, but Adrian could feel her mental battle to understand why he had ordered this.

A bit later, all that remained of the gang was in the fire. Angela jumped as the radio crackled.

"5-by. Movin' on."

Adrian clicked his button in response to Kyle's call.

When he shifted into drive, Angela assumed they were going back to camp. Instead, he steered them toward the glowing brightness that the Eagles were now leaving. Angela realized the lesson wasn't over.

The closer they got to the fire, the harder her stomach twisted. The bodies were charring, stinking despite the windows being up. She clamped down on her guts, as well as her heart, as he drove slowly by. *This is war...*

Adrian rolled them into the cool darkness, sensitive to her tension. He had to let her deal with it like one of the men, but the urge to comfort her was hard to fight as the Eagles came into sight and she stiffened, expecting more of the same. "We'll observe for a minute."

The exact words that had begun the gang's demise made her heart thump. Angela forced herself

to watch as his top two teams once again rushed from their vehicles.

This time, Kyle's men carried boxes, and their guns were holstered as they approached the moldy shed. Neil's team provided a careful guard.

After setting the items near the crooked door, the entire patrol then retreated.

Confused, Angela waited, glad there hadn't been any more deaths. She was hoping Adrian could justify his actions. If not, this was the end of the path for his plans. She felt the wrongness of the gang, but she had only his word about their intended crimes. For someone so against killing, he was extremely fast to be the cause of it. She had to know why he'd decided those men should be handled that way before she agreed to be his warrior by day and his sorceress by night.

The shed was big, faded, and decrepit, with a wide crack near the bottom of the doors that revealed only darkness, but clearly, there were people inside. *The refugees Adrian said the gang was about to attack?*

One of those doors slowly opened to show the black and white clothes of old-world religion. Three nuns appeared. They carried the supplies inside, each of them doing panicked scans of the darkness around them.

"All women. Some are Black, Mexican, Indian. They tried to stay low, but the gang saw them and followed." Adrian felt his men waiting for his call. The top guys knew what he was planning here.

Angela pulled the rest of it on her own. The nun's thoughts were full of the gang who'd been stalking them, hurting them. They weren't sure if the boxes might be a trap from those men.

"We watched the gang do a dry run last night. They were neat, smooth. It wasn't their first assault."

"And you couldn't let them do it even one more time."

Adrian lit a cigarette. *No, I couldn't.* The Eagles were good. They'd begun to rescue and dole out justice not that long ago, but each man in his army was already lethal.

"When will you invite them to join Safe Haven?"

"Just did. Waiting for an answer."

"Notes with the supplies?"

"Yes, but they've been hiding so long that it's begun to feel normal."

Angela heard his need and rose to it without hesitation. "I might be able to tell you what's going on in there."

Adrian saw the mission Eagles fall in behind the two jeeps that were providing his guard. "Can I help?"

She hesitated. "I haven't...slept well. If I get tired, I may need energy."

Adrian laid his big hand on the seat between them. His tone dropped to the intimate draw he sometimes used on the camp's women when the

loneliness became too much. “Whatever you need, Angie.”

He hadn’t planned to encourage anything, but her smell! Inside the closed-up cabin, the scent was winding through him like flames.

Angela flushed, slamming her lids shut. For a minute there was only the sound of their breathing and the stillness of the night around the truck. Concentrating, she narrowed in on the shed.

Adrian made a motion to Kyle, who had pulled into the bodyguard’s place.

The mobster relayed the message. *Radio silence.*

Angela frowned, struggling. The minds of the truly religious were foreign, hard to read; she slid her hand onto the wrist waiting on the seat.

Adrian’s quick intake of air echoed in the silence, and then she was in their thoughts and talking to him with that voice of the dead that his men hadn’t quite been able to describe.

“They don’t want to, but one of them is sick...” Understanding fell into her tone, along with anger. “Your note mentioned a doctor.”

“Can you get them—?”

“Already too late.” She let go of his hot skin. “They see only men.”

Adrian considered. Would he be doing what he would kill one of his men for? It didn’t matter until she grew the courage to ask aloud, but he didn’t doubt that she would.

“Here they come. The answer is no.” Angela tried to be patient while he mulled her unspoken suggestion.

The doors opened, revealing the same three women who had carried the boxes inside. Their nervous attitudes and shaky behavior sent Angela right back to her times of abuse. Men had hurt these women. That insight made her search deeper, determined to find a way to get them to join the flock.

Adrian waited now. Like Mitch, he could also feel when something was coming.

“Raped, not sick.” Her voice was cold. “By some of the gang your Eagles eliminated. They left her for dead.” She regarded Adrian angrily. “I’ll go bring them in.”

Adrian was always amazed at how these plans fell into place with only the barest of setup on his part.

Angela took his silence for hesitation. “I could just be one of the doctors for this run, Boss.”

He motioned to the jeeps, pleased at how natural those words sounded coming from a female soldier calling him the boss. “If you need anything, Kyle is your right hand.”

She wondered how Kyle would feel about that order. “Should I put on my white coat to give that old feeling of comfort?”

Adrian stared, almost speechless. Now he understood what Kyle had tried so hard to make clear in his report. “Wear it.”

Angela heard the admiration but stored it for later as she got ready. The airfield had been a spur of the moment thing. This time, as far as she was concerned, she was going in as an official member of Adrian's rescue team. It was a moment she would remember forever.

There were a dozen things Adrian wanted to tell her, to warn her about, but he didn't, needing to see for himself how she handled tense situations. Did she know to ask questions? His men hadn't when they'd first come to him. For her, there was only one that mattered anyway.

They emerged into the chilly night, flanked by Kyle and his team.

Angela met his eye. "On my own?"

He swept the area again, not distracting her with his approval. "Yes. Unless she's needed, the witch should stay hidden. The rest of us are at your disposal."

A bit nervous, Angela dropped behind him and the group of eleven men slowly approached the shed.

Those inside were now casting furious shadows of fear. Angela felt their tension as Adrian held up a finger, signaling the Eagles to stay where they were. He slowed down to let Angela fill the place on his right. "Anything jump out at you?"

Angela stepped over a large piece of rusted fence buried in the ground. "Graves to the right, oil drums to the left, leaking what might be water.

Lined garbage cans..." She paused. "A lot of scat. Too much, and it's recent."

Adrian kept teaching where it was needed. "Sometimes you need what the people will tell you, but always gather your own report as you go, from what's not said."

With Adrian's gaze to lead her around the area, it was easy to see what he did. The roof was covered in droppings and there was wire over the single front window. There was also a truck up against a side door and a stack of rocks blocking what was probably a cellar door.

"They barricaded themselves in. They were under attack."

Adrian was proud of her. "Yes, but by?"

Angela struggled to identify all the prints and scratch marks on the debris. "Dogs, raccoons, wolves, bear."

"Also gator." He motioned to a wide drag mark.

She frowned. "They don't come this far north."

"They do now. And they have the exact opposite goal as us. On their own, these people..."

"Won't survive."

Adrian's voice was haunted. "I'd not leave them to this fate!"

Angela snapped her eyes shut at the plea, unable to stand his pain. She listened to the witch. *Only one of their own might succeed here.*

Angela drew in a breath, suddenly sure that she could do this. "You'll have to surrender control of the mission."

Adrian pushed the button on the mike, not giving away his flood of triumph. "We are Code Raven."

"Copy that, Boss."

There was no worry in Neil's answering tone because Adrian was by her side.

Angela drew in a steadying breath. "Stay here."

It was odd to be telling him what to do, but she didn't let that distract her as she rotated toward the scared women. "Hi! I'm Angie. I'm a doctor from Safe Haven refugee camp. We've come to find out if we can help you."

Adrian casually got closer to her as she got farther from the Eagles. He swept the shed and the shadows around it, while listening to her tell the three nuns exactly what they needed to hear.

"I'd be happy to treat your injured people while we talk." She patted her medical bag.

The tallest nun frowned. "How much?"

Angela smiled again. "For free."

"Nothin's free in After World."

Angela raised a brow at the mutter from the eldest appearing of the trio. "Is that where we are?"

The nun's gray head flopped furiously in the cool wind. "The unworthy have been cast into the Lake of Fire. We're all burnin' now."

The other two women rolled their eyes, telling Angela the older woman had suffered too much.

"Don't mind Harriet. The Last Days have been hard on her."

Angela let out a sigh laced with tight pain. “On all of us sinners.”

Three faces cracked with the tiniest glimpse of hope.

“You’re Believers?”

Angela shrugged at Harriet’s question. “Of many things. Those who don’t, will not cast stones. Not after all that’s happened.”

The youngest of the trio had stayed partially behind the doors. She came forward now. “And yet, the Devil lurks everywhere. How can we be sure you mean no harm?”

Angela motioned two of the nearest Eagles forward with a quick gesture she hoped was right. “In this new world, in our world, women command as much respect as the men. They do what I tell them and that should be proof enough.”

The two younger women were reluctant, but the older nun appeared shocked by the immediate presence of the two darkly dressed men Angela had called forward.

“Making them come over to you is hardly proof they follow your lead,” a fourth voice called.

This female was so young Angela winced, but she knew how to handle it. “And if I ordered them to storm this shed and drag you all to *my* camp, would that be proof that they do what I say?”

The three nuns recoiled in fear, pushing to get back inside the door.

“Still yourselves, Sisters!” That fourth voice cracked out like a whip. The door swung open to

reveal a heavily pregnant teenager in all black, pointing a shotgun. "State your business!"

"I already have." Angela waved the advancing Eagles back. None of them liked a weapon being pointed at her, not even Neil.

"Get lost! We don't need you." Clearly in charge, the others slid behind the pregnant girl.

A fast evaluation revealed Angela's next course of action. *Blunt honesty*. "True. You need an undertaker. The slavers are coming this way."

She rotated toward Adrian, ignoring the Eagles waiting for her to disappoint him so they could return to the way things had been before she came. "From the tracks, I'd say you'll experience all kinds of hell before you die." Angela spun a finger in the air, voice brutal. "They said they don't need us. Draft a future burial crew, mark the spot on the map, and let's go."

To their credit, each of the surprised Eagles responded immediately. Kyle even took out his notebook to record her orders.

Angela marched toward the vehicles, delivering the final blow. "Keep the supplies. The burial crew will pick up what's left when they take care of your remains."

"Wait, please."

Angela held up a hand and the men stopped.

Adrian stayed alert. The moment of truth was nearing. Around them, shadowy forms edged closer.

“We’ll let you check out Sister Missa.” The teenager lowered the gun, shoulders slumping. “She needs help.”

Still tuning out everything else, Angela started the bonds of honesty. “If it’s bad, there’s not much I can do here. Once I decide what she needs, we’ll take her back to our camp, even without your permission.”

She waited for the teenager to choose; the entire team was poised to leave.

The weary girl nodded once. “You can’t be as bad as what she’s already been through.”

Angela smiled. “We’re the future, Beth—yours and theirs.”

Not responding to the instant mistrust at the personal knowledge, Angela entered the sweltering barn with Adrian and Kyle on her heels. Adrian’s herd, when it was trained, would be incomparable to even the armed forces of ancient history. Refugees had been straggling into Safe Haven since she’d joined, but these mental map pickups he’d chosen were special. “Where is she?”

Beth pointed. “In the corner, by the heat.”

The seven nuns living in the barn shrank from them but didn’t run.

Adrian was encouraged as he swept the warm living quarters. Safe Haven needed what these strong women had to offer. There was a single bed for warmth, a small stove, oddly shaped with vents that ran underground to hide the smoke, and a homemade distillery. The last pickup Angela had

done blood work on were three women who'd survived a crash by squeezing themselves between stacks of luggage, creating a rubber shield. They were builders, designers, and the future would see them used well. Now, these nuns were possibly inventors. The mental map locations he'd memorized had been the right ones, and he had Angela to thank for it.

As soon as Angela spotted the woman wrapped in blankets in the corner, she went that way with a grimace. "She needs John. I'm no surgeon."

Ignoring the nervous mutters coming from the nuns and the shotgun wielding teenager, Adrian gestured to Kyle. "Get us a litter."

Kyle went outside, but before Adrian could take a post at her unprotected back, Angela knelt down and opened her doctor's bag. "They're no threat to me. Assist."

Trusting her judgment, Adrian did as he was told. Holding, handing, following simple instructions, they both felt the tension in the room ease a bit at another sign she was really in charge.

"What's her name?"

Beth hovered, hoping she'd made the right choice. "Missa."

"Missa? Missa, can you hear me?" Angela gave the feverish Indian woman an injection, but she didn't even try to peel up the blood-crusted blankets. She wasn't surprised when there was no response to her voice or the needle. "How long has she been like this?"

Adrian could feel her anger, her need to stop this from happening to the rest of them. It matched his.

The oldest woman grunted. “Been two days now. They caught us gatherin’ wood and chased me off. When I snuck back, they’d all been at her.”

Angela used her penlight to check the woman’s pupils. “Any fresh blood?”

Beth shook her head, shotgun still in her tight grip. “Not today.”

“She been awake at all since it happened?”

“Only while I was draggin’ her home.” Harriet’s voice lowered. “She cried.”

Angela stood up, removing her gloves. “She has internal injuries that need more care than I can give her here.” Angela’s gaze swung around the cluttered room. “You can visit her, and she can leave as soon as she’s able, but we’d rather help all of you.” She pointed at the unconscious woman. “That *never* happens at Safe Haven because we’ll kill the man who does it.”

Angela strode toward the door, so furious she was almost shaking. “Make your choice and do it fast. My men are eager to be back with their families.”

Leaving them staring at each other, Angela and Adrian stepped out into the wonderfully cool air. She waved Kyle over, glad the stretcher was padded with blankets. “Try not to jar her any more than you have to.”

The mobster was glad for his training since shock had him speechless. He waved Cris and Daryl over to help.

“We’ve made our choice.” Beth stared at Angela’s white coat. “We’ll go, but we leave when we want to.”

“Agreed.” Angela motioned Kyle to go ahead. “The men can bring heavier things out for you after we load Missa.” Angela took a step closer to the girl who still had the shotgun clutched in a tight grip. “You can listen to your baby’s heartbeat while they do it.” Angela held out her stethoscope.

The teenager’s smile was huge. She rushed off to share the joy with her packing family, tool of life in one hand, instrument of death in the other.

“Perfectly done.”

Adrian’s whisper drenched her in pride. Angela felt the last of that outsider shell shatter at his feet. Like the rest of those under his care, there wasn’t anything he asked of her now that she wouldn’t try to give him for more of this feeling.

Neil’s team loaded the nuns into one vehicle and their belongings into another, talking with the jumpy women. More observant people might have realized Adrian was important by the way the rest of the guards stayed so close to him, but Angela’s show had been convincing enough to make the nuns believe she was Safe Haven’s leader. It was that weight that tipped the choice for them. Missa was nearly dead now; she didn’t have to suffer anymore as far as they were concerned. But for the future, to

think a woman could lead these hard men, meant there was a new chance to be taken.

When Angela sent this to Adrian, he gave her a gesture his men couldn't mistake. "Right now, you are."

Angela frowned. "Of this mission, not the camp."

Adrian said nothing, aware that at least two of his men had heard.

Angela felt the ring to his unspoken words.

Of it all.

"That's not what I wa—"

"Are you sure?" Adrian cut her off. "Don't refuse destiny. Sometimes, you only get one knock." He rounded the driver's side of the vehicle.

The air went cold, plunging Eagles into instant alertness.

Angela blanched as a wave of panic swept over her.

Your gun! the witch ordered sharply.

"Boss, watch out!" Kyle's hand dropped for the Glock, already knowing he couldn't make the shot from where he stood.

Bang!

The single shot seemed to echo forever.

All of them, except Adrian, spun to discover where it had come from.

Adrian surveyed the dead rattlesnake by his tire, listening to its tail twitch. The attempts on his life would increase now.

The Eagles around them stilled, waiting to discover if Angela would be treated the same as one of the men. When they saved someone's life, Adrian gave a free pass on something, or offered a rank they'd been shooting for. What would he give Angela?

Adrian stared at her. "You have one request."

Angela holstered. "I've already asked it."

Adrian's tone remained neutral, but his expression was intense. "Why do you want to be an Eagle in my army?"

Heart in her throat, she gave him the answer she'd kept from Marc. "Because without it, a woman can't lead... And I do want that."

Adrian smiled. "You'll learn my ways, follow them?"

She nodded. "I'll live by them until I'm dead."

"Then I accept you in my army."

"And you'll train me to the best of your ability, no matter your personal feelings or limits?" she challenged.

"With everything that I am." Lightning flashed. Adrian felt magic rising up around them to form a future that finally included hope. "Let's go."

His call was short, a leader back in command. Angela followed him gratefully. He was right. She was different, and because of the witch, more equipped to do the things he needed. *The life he's offering me!*

Angela lit a smoke and rested her head against the seat, considering. The witch had been right

there, waiting to help, but she hadn't needed it thanks to the psychological games she'd played for so many years with Kenn and as a doctor. *Did I forget anything? Was there anything I could have done better? If Adrian had been bitten, would I have been able to save him?* She stared at the dark, corn-filled landscape through the window, but didn't really see the moldy stalks. Her mind kept clips of his death running. She was glad for the first time to be without Marc by her side. He wouldn't understand this fast bond between her and Safe Haven's very capable leader. He wouldn't care for what had happened tonight either.

Angela sighed. If it had been up to Marc, she would have missed this feeling. He hated the idea of her joining the Eagles and bitterness would come next. After that, he'd stay angry all the time until she gave in or he left. Marc would deny her this way of atoning, but because of her, these women had been spared death. There was no way she would withdraw now. Parts of it had been ugly, but the rest of it was salvation to her tortured soul.

Speeding them up, Adrian handed out a bit of extra praise, unable to wait for her to speak. "You were amazing for not being trained. They'll come around faster now."

She raised a brow. "You're happy, not for the shot, but for proving myself to them?"

"I'm grateful for your aim too, don't doubt it, but yes. Now the Eagles will genuinely accept you."

Angela knew he wasn't assuming too much. She was already sensing different thoughts from those with them. Word would spread and there would be more friendship gestures. *Like he was hoping*, she realized. "Did you set this up? Did you know about the snake?"

Adrian didn't think of lying. "Yes. This mission played out in my dreams last night."

She was quiet for a minute as she ran through what that meant. "Were there any differences?"

He held out his pack of smokes when she crumbled her empty one. "It was daytime. I couldn't hit it from that angle. Woke up at the gunshot."

Her voice was as angry as shocked. "Then why walk by it? You could have been killed!"

His answer was one she didn't expect.

"I never try to change what I foresee, only prepare or adjust for the consequences."

"What?" She frowned. "Karma?"

"Destiny. If I was meant to die and escaped it, death would come later and not take just me, but anyone in the way... My people."

"And you'd rather it be just you."

Adrian swept the darkness before answering. "Knowing what's coming, even if it's bad, is a comfort. You can change your actions and words, and try to make up for the past, but you cannot avoid the future."

Chapter Thirteen

We Pick Ourselves

1

“**M**aybe she knew and...set it up?” Riding point in front of Adrian’s truck, Neil’s voice held none of the usual suspicious razors bent on drawing blood. He was too busy being glad of her aim to put any real heat into it.

“Do you think so?” Kyle opened his window so his cigar smoke wouldn’t annoy the trooper.

Neil sighed. “No. I was watching her, trying to figure out what he’d warned her of. She panicked at first.”

Kyle shrugged. “What about him? He’s pushing this female Eagle thing real hard with the boys right now. Good show for ‘em.”

Neil didn’t bother with the normal scold. It wasn’t required with Kyle. He and the mobster understood what Adrian was. Some of it was harsh, but all of it was useful. “Maybe.”

“He does usually come to me or Cris for that.” Kyle swung it the other way. He didn’t need convincing. Adrian knew he would sway Neil.

“He’s trying to convince us too, this time.” Neil wasn’t sure now, about either side.

“It’s not like with Kenn.” Kyle knew the real problem. “There’s no stink of something being wrong.”

“There is to the camp.”

“That’s ‘cause she can’t do...her things around them. They realize she’s hiding something.” Kyle steered them firmly toward the bright lights now beckoning in the distance. “Even if it was a setup, did you catch that shot? Around the corner of a bumper! Seth might have made that, but no one lower. She’ll be hell on the records.”

Neil was saved a response by the radio lighting up.

“You are entering an American Military Refugee camp. Identify yourself!”

Matt’s voice sounded older than the fifteen he’d just turned, but not by much.

Kyle keyed the mike. “Purple Mountains.”

Adrian’s voice in contrast was a hard, raspy rock that was timeless. “Welcome home, Eagle One.”

The team leaders were silent as they rolled in without headlights through side paths, to the rear of camp.

As they gathered their gear, Neil said what they were both thinking. “I owe her an apology.”

Kyle chuckled. “Yep. You’ll still be begging long after I’m in the clear.”

Neil snorted at the half joke, half warning. “I was a little rough.”

Kyle grew serious. “Not near what Kenn’s gonna be with her in the levels. Can you imagine that cage match?”

“No, and neither can the others. If there was a way around that, most of the men probably wouldn’t be so against it.”

“They’ll have help in that feeling.”

Neil sighed unhappily, sliding his hat up. “From both of her men. Marc won’t like this either.”

“Can you talk to him, tell him how good she might be, and how much Adrian needs it?”

Neil shrugged. “Not if we have to do all this in secret. Marc hates liars. It would be easier if we can talk about it.”

Kyle opened his door. “I’ll mention it to the boss. We need freedom on this one. Adrian wants it and if she’s good enough...”

Neil’s voice was regretful. “Yeah, I almost choked when she said she can do what we do, but now...”

“Now?” Kyle pushed gently.

Neil grunted. “Maybe she can.”

2

Seth met Adrian as he put it in park.

Adrian rolled the window down as he gathered his things, sure it was about Kenn or Marc.

“Kenn switched off point, and both of them have been asking. She covered her absence, but they

sent Charlie in to check her tent.” Seth was furious with Kenn for shirking his duty.

“She’s been in the quarantine zone, helping prepare for new arrivals.” Adrian got out of the truck.

Seth’s curious gaze went over dark clothes under the white coat, then her beautiful, battle glazed eyes. “John’s already in the QZ. Send him out?”

“No. Tell him to prep for surgery—internal bleeding.” Angela shrugged at Seth’s frown. Why should their wounded woman have to wait because of two men with bad attitudes?

Adrian motioned. “Code Raven for check in.”

Seth moved toward Angela’s door, opening his notebook.

Angela gaped at Adrian. “What?”

When he ignored her and strode to Kyle, both she and Seth stared with open mouths. He wasn’t even going to listen and make sure she got it right?

Angela shook her head at a searching glance from Seth. “I don’t know either, but it’s what he wants, so let’s get it done.” She drew in a lungful of air. “Seven females, plus one injured woman who may not live through the surgery. Split ‘em between two tents and give them access to showers, a hot meal, and clean clothes. John will be busy for a while, so I’ll handle testing Adrian and the Eagles first.”

She paused, able to feel the raw emotions of the two men waiting on the other side of the caution

tape. Kenn and Marc were standing a few feet apart, waiting with hard profiles for her to finish giving Seth the instructions.

“Let the women know this group is terrified of men. Have them send in the den mothers and someone to run errands, Becky maybe. If she makes a mess on one of the nuns, they’ll only forgive her for it.” Angela rotated toward the tape, where four shadows now waited. “And have him check it. Feels like I forgot something.”

Angela stopped a few feet away from the tape as Seth followed her orders and went straight to Adrian. “John’s needed, so I’ll be staying here until he’s free.”

Kenn studied her coldly, picking out details. “Don’t let her lie, Marc. She went, without telling you.” Kenn faded into the shadows. He couldn’t control himself if he stayed.

Angela waited coolly.

Charlie smiled at her. “I just wanted to know you were okay.”

Angela smiled back. “I’m helping.”

The boy faded into the darkness, followed by Dog.

Angela greeted Marc with a raised brow. “What?”

Marc read fresh knowledge of life and death on her. “I wouldn’t have told you no.”

“I didn’t know I needed to ask.” Angela left, ending the fight before it could start.

Marc let her go, understanding she was wound up. From her tones, and Adrian's expression, he assumed she'd done well. Marc wasn't surprised. She really would have made a good Marine. Now, Adrian was giving her the chance to be one. Marc had little doubt she'd take it.

Full of thoughts he was afraid to face, Marc went to his tent to toss and grumble before his shift as her morning shadow.

3

Hours later, all the Eagles were out of the QZ, including Angela. John had cleared her right after them, claiming they needed to have a doctor on that side of the tape too. She hadn't argued.

After a shower and a fast meal, Angela found herself drawn to the off-limits area. She was allowed to be there now, but if it was crowded, she planned to keep going.

The training tent was indeed full of Eagles.

Angela darted behind it and scaled the nearest moldy tree, finally stopping when she had a clear view of not only the area below her, but also the sprawling refugee camp. Her actions tonight had her seeking isolation so she could think; she'd had no trouble evading her rookie guard.

Angela inhaled deeply of the night air, pushing away the urge to try again to make Marc understand how badly she needed this. *Eventually, he'll accept it, right?* If he could hang on a bit longer, they could

be together. That thought sent chills into her stomach.

Her anger faded back into the calm peace that had come after proving herself to Adrian.

The sky above her was endless black, the grit almost impossible to view against it. She studied the camp from her vantage point. Some of their magic had begun to create a thin bubble of protection that dimmed and glowed according to the mood of the people...of their leader. It was fascinating. She wondered if anyone else could see it.

The dome flashed suddenly with bright red streaks, making her frown. Was something wrong? She hadn't matched all the colors to the emotions yet, though bright shades were definitely better than dark. Right now, half the bubble had crimson streaks moving toward where she was, but there wasn't an alarm.

Magic flashed out, a green and gold that was spellbinding. It calmed the crimson into a pale orange.

Angela shivered. It was so vivid, so real!

He shrinks it tightly around you.

You spend too much time in his dreams, Angela told the witch sharply.

And what dreams. How high he'd place you!

Stop.

The witch fell silent.

Angela was glad. Mental arguments were distracting, and she wanted to figure out a color or two if she could. She already knew three. Light blue

was calm and peaceful, content. Red was a problem or worry. And that crimson-killing green and gold? *That's Adrian.*

“Right about here...” The three guards on the ground were rookies-in-training, her real protection detail now settled into their own hiding places.

Angela kept quiet. She didn't feel the need to add to the trouble they were already in for losing sight of her by calling attention to their lack of awareness. All they had to do was follow the training she was certain included the perimeter above them.

“Sometimes, a lady wants to be alone, guys.”

Samantha's voice so nearby startled Angela into drawing her gun.

Her finger let go of the trigger with not much room to spare.

Angela forced herself to put the .357 back in its holster, heart thumping. “Clearly, I didn't see you.”

Samantha's expression said she was impressed, but also uneasy about a woman being so fast with a gun.

Sam gave a weak smile. “Sorry. I sort of thought you might...already know I was here.”

“Try looking up next time, rookie! You ever spot a Raven on the ground?” The senior males below faded into the darkness, muttering, and hiding snickers.

The two women let the silence hang for a bit, sharing smiles each time one of the bewildered

rookies below craned their heads up to verify they were okay.

Samantha hadn't planned to be in the training area. She'd been having the feeling of someone staring at her and climbed up to spy on those below in an attempt to verify that impression. No one had shown themselves, but once she was high enough, the vivid colors of the camp had kept her mesmerized.

"He's very protective." Samantha pointed at two more rookies joining the patrol below.

"Good reason to be." Needing the woman to know she understood, Angela let a bit of her own worries out. "They're coming soon. We have to help him."

Samantha was glad to have someone who understood her terror. "I want to, but other than...some forewarnings, I can't do what you're doing."

Angela raised a brow. "Bull. You and I both know there's more to your skills than have been used."

Sam flushed, but didn't deny it. "If they find out..." Her whisper was laced with bitterness and longing in equal amounts. "I want it too, but they'll burn us. This herd will panic, and we'll be caught in the stampede."

"So you worry about getting hurt again?" Angela was sure Samantha had been through the same hells and worse.

“No.” Samantha’s voice was broken. “I worry I’ll get these people hurt.”

Angela shrugged. “That’s a worthy argument, but don’t forget to weigh in how much difference we can make when he has all of this in place.”

“I have. And I’m paying attention, identifying areas where I can help.”

“Me too. The Eagles are another way to do that, you know.”

Samantha snorted. “Me? Just can’t imagine that happening.”

“But you’ve thought about it or you’d be hiding in a tree somewhere else. Like the rest of us, you’re drawn to it.”

“Yes. I want what you’re building, what he’s about to offer to all the women here.”

“Good. Watch what I have to go through and get ready for it. Jeremy and Neil will help you.”

“And Adrian? Won’t he want to handpick the females who do this?”

“We pick ourselves, Sam. If you want it, grab it. Let him know you’re ready for the chance and he’ll handle it personally.”

The man now standing below them pushed the button on his mike. “All levels to the tent.” Adrian faded into the background, able to feel her indecision. Would she show?

“They don’t want you there, right? Because you’re female?” Samantha had felt the coldness.

“Yes. They see only my weaknesses, but that will change.” Angela was emboldened by Adrian’s

presence. She climbed down the tree and stiffly entered the training tent, flanked by Kyle and then Neil.

The crash of silence was instant.

Adrian came in behind them, walking toward the front of the tent. It was all part of the plan. “Come morning, I’m opening Eagle tryouts to females.”

There were hardening faces, but no response. He motioned toward the rear of the tent. “My first female rookie has been chosen.”

Angela flushed under all the appraising, hostile glares, and lifted her chin. *How many of them could have made that shot tonight?*

“Those who would speak against it, I’d hear now.”

Nearly every head turned toward Kenn, who had fallen into his customary spot on Adrian’s right. Only Angela noticed Marc’s grimace from the corner.

Kenn wanted to speak up, but his place would be gone the second he opened his mouth. The Marine stared impassively while horrible thoughts crashed like waves.

Adrian softened his tone. “Imagine the camp’s women armed and sure of how to use those weapons.”

There were a few snorts.

Adrian let a grin crack his hard face. “Yes, pissing them off might have dire consequences.”

Laughter broke more of the tension.

Adrian used his magic, pushing it out. “We need them trained and ready to fight alongside us.” He looked at Angela again. “You’ll start with her.”

Flushing darker, Angela unknowingly sent out her own wave when she smiled. “I’m all yours, gentlemen.”

There were more snorts and snickers, but no one spoke against it. What Adrian wanted, he would get.

4

“I won’t do it.” Zack’s voice was loud and whiny. “I don’t care how good she shoots. I ain’t helping with no lesson that she’s a part of.”

The men were in the training tent an hour later; roughly half the Eagles were still here getting things set up for the next scheduled events.

“Not even if it’s what your boss wants?” Seth was always hoping for an excuse to get the trucker tossed out of the Eagles. He didn’t like Zack or his sons.

“My boss says she belongs in the mess or babysitting!”

Zack’s retort drew protests from everyone listening.

“Kenn is not in charge here!” Neil came through the tent flap for a check in. “In fact, he may not even be a member of this camp much longer, so be sure and tell him *that* while you’re filling him in later.” The trooper moved toward the hay room. “I suggest

switching your loyalties, Zack, or maybe you'll be with Kenn when he goes."

Zack's face tightened. "I don't take orders from you, Neil. I won't do it. Someone trade me?"

Many of the men wanted to, not eager to have any woman under Zack's thumb for a lesson.

"I'll do it if you're so worried about serving with a female." Marc's voice echoed from the far corner, dripping contempt. "Some Eagle."

Zack spun around, but stopped at the sight of Marc standing up, hoping he'd drawn a reaction.

"She doesn't belong here!" Zack expected a few of the men to agree, but there was only silence.

"Neither do you, shithead." Marc was tense, ready for the fight.

Zack flushed, but didn't push. After Marc taking Kenn out so easily, the trucker wasn't about to issue a challenge. "I won't do it."

Neil interrupted, trying to keep Marc from another day of punishment labor. "It's probably for the best anyway, Zack. She'd feel bad for killing you."

The tent exploded with laughter.

Marc motioned to Kyle as he appeared in the flap. "The coward here just switched me for tomorrow's gun class."

Kyle nodded as he stepped inside. "I'll let the boss know."

Zack paled, despite his brave words of only following Kenn.

The men grinned. Word would get back to Adrian and there would be a punishment for the trucker, even if it was one that he didn't recognize as a correction. He'd probably end up babysitting or escorting the elderly.

"Yeah, run to Adrian whenever something doesn't go your way." Zack hoped Lee or Jeff would come in and support him. Both those men were in training with Neil right now.

One of those men was close enough to do so, but Lee was too distracted by the thoughts that had been running in his head for the last few days. They were about his missing wife and Angela's abilities.

"I'm covered." Zack continued to show loyalty to Kenn. "I ain't switched shifts with anyone the whole time I've been here. Fairly sure that'll give me the right."

The trucker's boast was true, but none of the hard profiles glowering at him relented.

"If you don't think Adrian will know the real reason, you're dumber than you look." Kyle's eyes narrowed. "And if you think he won't make you pay for it, then you're too stupid to be one of us."

Zack reddened in anger at Kyle's unforgiving words.

Kyle veered toward the hay ring, where Neil was lounging in the doorway. "Come on, guys. Let's get things set up for tomorrow."

They ignored Zack's protests, moving around him to unpack the gear.

Tension grew when Kenn entered the tent a minute later.

Kenn had been around the side, listening the whole time, but his blank expression indicated otherwise.

Zack got the hint to make his report later. Zack and Kenn hadn't known the others had discovered he was spying for the camp XO.

"What's being set up in here?" Kenn studied his clipboard. He already knew by the size of the crates they were opening, but he'd wanted to make sure Angela wasn't in here celebrating.

"Field Trip Day." Neil waved at the smaller beams and mats.

After a fast look around the canvas, Kenn checked it off his list and exited the tent. As he let the flap drop behind him, the real hatred was visible to those on duty. Kenn's face said he was planning something Adrian wouldn't like.

5

By 2 am, the camp was silent. The new arrivals were settled and waiting for word on Missa, who had survived the operation by a thread. The Eagles were also settling for the night.

Adrian was making rounds of the QZ, listening to thoughts on the mission. He wasn't disappointed. When he finished there, he went to Angela's newest hiding place with a feeling of peace that was rare for him.

Angela peered down, holding out the smoldering joint. "I thought you'd be by."

She sounds like John. Adrian took the weed without touching her. She was in the shadows of the medical tent, reclined in the low fork of a tree. He studied her, thinking about how each day now started with a fast search for her, then normal rounds. It was so different...so excitingly miserable.

Angela was walled-in by her experience. The guilt-relieving rescue was fully under her evaluation now.

Adrian let her go over it while he waited.

"They wouldn't have come if I hadn't been there. What about the next run?"

Adrian was impressed again. He had been expecting a complaint, or doubts about her actions, not considerations of the future. "We've had to face it a few times, leave people behind. The war has caused trust to be given only under dire circumstances."

"I'd go on them all!"

"It's not our duty to save them all." Adrian shrugged at her look. "*You* told me that."

Angela sighed, hating it. "I know, but what can we do about it?"

The pain in her voice called to him. Adrian allowed his own horror at the situation to bleed through as he answered. "Keep trying and keep losing those who won't trust."

Angela's heart clenched. *So many!*

Knowing there was finally someone who felt it the way he did caused Adrian to give her more openness than he ever did the others. “It’s them I dream of at night.” His voice lowered into despair. “Sometimes I send the Eagles back anyway.”

“And they’re dead?” It was easy to guess from the sadness that engulfed him.

“Always.” Adrian drew air into a chest that felt like it was made of lead. “Their ghosts haunt me. They say I should have dragged them here against their will. Most of them would have stayed.”

“But you didn’t, because you believe in freedom too strongly.” She stubbed out the roach on the tree. Her witch was awful to hear and yet right, too.

Those people wouldn’t have survived anyway, be it here or alone. Fear rules them, not change. Those who are here deserve to be.

Picking up the observation, Adrian shelved his true feelings. “Yes, *they* do.” He moved toward the communication truck with a lighter pace.

Angela realized it was true. They would save as many as they could. *And that number will increase now that I’m in his army.*

The guilt faded, letting successes rise again. He’d known exactly what she needed—a moment of personal trust. America’s survival meant more to him than successful leadership. It was everything he was now. If this camp fell, Adrian would likely join the other relics of the old world.

Her instant scowl at the thought had guards in the area sweeping for trouble. Learning to use her

like an alarm was already becoming a habit for them.

Adrian's death couldn't be allowed to happen. Angela vowed to do whatever she could to stop his fall.

Even when his secret comes out? the witch asked ominously.

Yes. If he falls, we all fall.

The witch's tone was curious. *Such a fast bond with this man. Perhaps that should be examined as well.*

Those whispered words were ignored.

6

"You look as tired as we feel." Neil and Kyle joined Angela.

Angela didn't open her eyes, still in the shadows of the medical tent. She had mentioned to Charlie that she'd been officially accepted into the Eagles. Instead of the support she'd been counting on, her son had blown up and stomped off. She'd spent the hours since rethinking, being certain she had the strength to do this. "Have a seat."

The two Eagles picked branches, exchanging glances.

"He knew it was there." Angela gave them what she thought they'd come for. "I didn't save his life."

Neither of them spoke. Adrian knowing didn't matter. It had happened in front of the Eagles. That did.

Angela sighed. "How much will this change?"

"A lot." Neil settled into the fork carefully. Using trees for cover was something they'd been doing for a while, but as seats or sentry spots had only begun recently, when two of their members had started climbing them for privacy and unknowingly rubbed it off. "The camp will be converted, minus a few."

"The Eagles too, the ones who understand Adrian's dream." Kyle scanned for trouble.

Angela sighed tiredly. "But not enough, right?"

"No." Kyle's tone wasn't firm. "It will buy some time, weeks if we're careful with it, and then they'll call his bluff."

"He's not bluffing." Neil frowned at her. "And it'll cost him everything if you can't keep up."

There was a thick silence where they could feel her determination to prevent that from happening.

"Work me hard?"

They both nodded.

Neil met her eye with a sincerity she understood to be an apology. "Sometimes, if the people are determined enough, Adrian will give special lessons."

Angela frowned. "Didn't he agree to give me that?"

Neil shook his head. "He agreed to treat you like one of the men."

"Good."

Kyle leaned in, his branch almost even with hers. “Other lessons go on here, out of the camp’s view. You know that.”

She nodded. “Like my kai lesson that has Marc so pissed.”

Neil grimaced. Marc would be even more upset when he found out they’d given her this added information. “Exactly, except Adrian’s lessons usually handle a direct problem the person has.”

“Or a fear.” Kyle gave her a pointed look.

Angela got it. “How does a person go about that? Just ask?”

“It has to be suggested by senior level men.”

Angela’s interest was replaced with bitter exhaustion at Neil’s words. “And will it be if I want it? Have I proven myself enough or is there some other trick you guys want me to do?”

Kyle and Neil both laughed, much to her surprise.

“That’s part of why, too. Not even Seth had that much fire.” Kyle spoke to Neil.

“I agree.”

“It’s unanimous, then.”

Understanding they were razzing her like a rookie, Angela immediately set out to please them so they really would talk to Adrian. “I’m restless when I get off third shift duty. When you can, will you both schedule me an extra hour then? Help me catch up?”

Surprised, they gave short nods and silence.

She dropped from the tree, trying to hide her soreness. "Thank you. Good night."

She left.

Kyle lit a smoke before speaking. *What she needs is someone who will hit her.* "Kenn."

"We can't let that happen." Neil gestured. "If he ever does it here, for any reason, this camp will change. We'll lose everything we've worked for."

Kyle let the note of self-preservation pass to get an answer instead of an argument. "What if she can win?"

Neil snorted, mouth opening, but he stopped, not sure what to say. She was good for a female. Marc had gotten the basics down with her and she was quick on the pickup. Being able to read what was coming was an amazing ability all the Eagles wished they had... And Kenn would never expect her to fight back. "I don't know."

Kyle was encouraged. He'd expected a set denial. "You'll think on it?"

"Of course." Neil was loyal to Adrian's dreams. "If she could back Kenn down in front of the camp, the way would be clear for her and the others Adrian wants."

"Others we need. There are too many sheep. We'll lose a cut and that'll kill Adrian some more. We have a long way to go in this new world. We need more fighters for the battles that are coming."

"We need more like her." Neil declared his own loyalty reluctantly.

"And for Marc to get on board."

Neil nodded. “He’ll miss her first course workout. He’s scheduled for duty over the opposite end of camp.”

“Adrian is smart to separate them for it.”

Neil surveyed the darkness. *Clear.* “I’ll let Marc know where you’re taking her for the sets, but I doubt it will matter. When she rolls in, he’ll blow up like her boy did earlier. None of our rookies ever come back in the same condition as they go out.”

“Yeah. Wish those three grunts would grow up or get out.”

Kenn overheard the comment as he went by them but didn’t stop. He was meeting Tonya outside the taped perimeter and he wanted that conversation more than he wanted to pay Kyle back for the threat.

Finding the sloppy setup not far into the darkness, Kenn tapped lightly on the tent flap, and ducked inside at a giddy call.

The first hour was spent in an amazing wash of pleasure and pain.

As they lounged on her bedroll in the aftermath, Tonya’s voice rose and fell, telling him everything she’d observed over the last few days. She was quite the able spy and he had no problem using her as such now that he knew her for what she was—a genius with an Adrian obsession.

“That’s most of the gossip. Nothing unusual among the camp, but the guards will keep talking about it, so I’m sure the herd will know soon.”

Tonya sat up, sore and sated. “Neil’s team made some schedule change with that blonde woman, and the new guy, Rick, might be following her around. He’s slick, so I’m not sure.”

Kenn stored both of those and waited. Once Tonya got rolling, she made connections fast.

“Hilda said the new women, the nuns, all think Angela’s in charge! Can you imagine?”

“Yes.” Kenn’s beefy hands clenched. “Yes, I can.”

Tonya winced, patting his hand. “The men won’t stand for it, you know that. They don’t want any woman in the Eagles, no matter how well she shoots.”

“But they will, once he lets her show what she can do.”

“You think he’ll take that risk?”

“I know it. He’s already planning the steps in which to reveal it so the camp will accept it.”

Tonya gasped. “Tell the herd? They’d kill her!”

“Not if they love her first.” Kenn faced his own demons with the words. “If she gets them to like her, if she helps them like he has, they’ll accept it. Especially if they find out she might have saved him tonight. Heroes are what they live for now.”

“And they have that in Adrian.” Tonya was horrified. “But they don’t have a female equivalent.”

Kenn thought of the warning that had gotten the cutting crew out of sight. That story was flying through the levels. “They didn’t...”

Tonya suggested something she knew he was capable of. “Then you need to make them aware of the fact that she’s a weak female. If she flunks out in her first days, it’ll be a long time until they’ll let another woman try.”

Kenn grunted. “I have some things planned.”

“Are they bad?” Tonya squealed. “Tell me all of it!”

Chapter Fourteen

Welcome To My Army

SD National Grasslands
April 13th

1

“I think I understand now.”

Adrian peered at the teenager over the engine they were filling with fluids. “Understand what?”

Charlie motioned to a pair of shepherd pups nearby that Matt was walking on short leads. “Why my job matters. They’re a warning. You knew from the dogs that someone had messed with our water.”

Adrian dumped in the oil. “And?”

“They’re a tool. Without knowing how to handle them, you wouldn’t have known when they were acting differently. We might have lost people.”

Adrian was pleased and a bit surprised the teenager had gotten it right. “Very good. Now, I have an important question. Do you trust me?”

“Absolutely.”

“And if I asked you to do things? Things the rest of them can’t?”

Charlie’s expression betrayed his youth, but his tone was even. “I’d say yes, with conditions.”

“So, you don’t trust me.”

“I don’t trust them! If they ever found out...”

Adrian shrugged. “I’m not asking yet, but your awareness made the question necessary.”

Charlie was relieved. “I’m loyal too. If my mom hadn’t made it here, I’d be your witch.”

Shadows not made by his army padded behind the dead corn as Adrian pushed their conversation into the direction he needed. “You’ve got her courage, and your dad’s. It takes a lot of guts to stay someplace you’re not wanted.”

Charlie recovered quickly from the knowledge that Adrian knew about Marc. “She wants him. He won’t leave with an invitation like that hanging.”

Adrian’s sigh was resigned. “Yes, she does. What about you?”

The teenager tensed.

Dog came from his place in the dim sun to heel at Charlie’s ankle.

“I don’t even know him.”

There was silence for a minute.

Adrian put a hand on the boy’s arm. “Maybe you should correct that. He got her here alive and made her stronger. We both owe him a large debt. Let me know. I’ll arrange some downtime.” Adrian moved toward the next stop on his rounds—Angela’s first training set in public.

Angela nodded at Daryl's lowly spoken question. It was her first official session with them as a team. Their tension threatened to ignite her own bubbling emotions. The workout was being supervised by Kenn, against the schedule Adrian had planned for her. The others didn't know yet that he had switched shifts.

The men walking through the dim dawn around her felt her pause as Kenn came into sight. Determined to succeed, Angela steeled herself, and advanced.

"He's not on until tomorrow!" Cris pointed angrily.

"He knows I'm off then." Angela wanted them to know the truth. "He switched with Jeff or Lee, not sure which."

"I'll find out." Kyle had access to those papers.

Angela frowned. "Don't do that. I'll earn my place here with him as well. He can't accept me as anything else yet. When I can match him in the cage, everything will change."

There was a thoughtful silence instead of the immediate protest she would have gotten from any of the other levels at that goal.

Kyle scanned his team, his thoughts mirrored on their faces. More than appreciation for her good reflexes and aim, she'd given Adrian exactly what he wanted. Being able to get the nuns to join them was something that had taken their leader's coming depression and changed it into joy. For that, these

nine men were now firmly in her corner. “We’ll help you with it.”

Angela gave them all a quick glance, sharing her goal. “I hate how this feels. I never want to be afraid of him again.”

There were immediate offers for personal, private training; she accepted each one gracefully.

Angela didn’t see Adrian during her subtle manipulations, but she felt his observant eyes following her progress. She also knew when he realized who would be the training guard today and understood he had a tough time making himself turn away instead of interrupting. Adrian had to play fair, but Kenn didn’t and he wouldn’t.

“Course is set. Rookie goes first.”

Kenn’s gloating call had Angela waving off Kyle’s protest. “I have to be the one to do this.” Trembling, she stepped to the front of the line and started her first run as an Eagle in Adrian’s army.

3

“Ugg!”

Losing her grip on the slick cord, Angela hit the jagged edged rocks under the rope with a second surprised grunt but managed to keep from the groan Kenn had been hoping for at the pain. She picked herself up, not bothering to wipe at the layer of the dust she was coated in.

Required to repeat it until she got through it, the Eagles in line around her also swallowed their

unhappiness, knowing special treatment would not get her accepted with the other levels who were training in the field next to them. Or at least they had been, until she'd stepped to the front of the line. Now, even the instructors were watching Angela's first attempts.

"Go." Kenn's voice was a hard smirk.

Angela knelt down instead of doing the run again. She'd fallen twice from the slick ropes she was supposed to swing on, and she wasn't about to hit those rocks a third time. She ignored the stares and mutters of the small crowd lined up on the far side of the tape. She shoved large handfuls of the dusty earth into both her jacket pockets.

When she stood, her team was grinning and Kenn's face had tightened, all recognizing that she'd found the solution.

Angela used her dirt-coated hands to get a better grip on the greased ropes. It still wasn't easy to dip her hands into her pockets between swings, but she was able to finish the course on her third attempt.

"Pass." Kenn made the call grudgingly.

The level six men watched Angela go toward Kenn with a swagger as she hit her feet. Each of them tensed to go to her aide if it was needed.

Sure of how far Kenn could be pushed in public, Angela took her time dumping the dirt out of her pockets onto the ground at his boots. As she did it, her eyes burned into his.

When her pockets were empty, she gave him a hard glare, ignoring the blood trickling down her leg

from one of the falls. “You can’t make me quit. If you waste your time trying, you *will* lose everything you’ve built.” She spun away.

Kyle’s Eagles laughed at his fury, impressed again.

4

“Lovely.” Samantha swallowed a second groan as she reread her schedule.

Babysitting? I don’t even like kids. She hadn’t been around many and they intimidated her a little. *What am I supposed to do with them?*

Determined not to whine, Samantha got a mug of tea from the crowded mess and headed for the children’s area. Still feeling awkward, she only gave a short nod to those who called greetings.

When she saw which team of Eagles was waiting at the campers, she tripped, sloshing steaming liquid over her injured hand. “Damn it!”

Jeremy spun to yell at whoever was cursing by the kid’s area. He exchanged the reprimand for a smile of welcome instead. He had personally asked Adrian to assign the blonde woman here today. One of Adrian’s simplest tools to test new people was to put them around the elderly or the kids. It never failed to reveal their true nature. “We’re waiting on a few others and then we’ll leave.”

A bit surprised the sentry was talking to her—she’d thought they were strictly protection—Samantha pushed. “Where to?”

Jeremy smiled. “It’s field trip day. This time, we’re hitting the town.”

Confused, but not wanting to seem clueless, Samantha waited patiently. She was glad of Jeremy lingering by her when Neil came through the shadows a minute later.

As soon as he spotted them, instant questions popped into his eyes, hard ones that she didn’t want to answer.

“There they are.”

Sam rotated at Jeremy’s words and braced herself for a long shift. A line of kids, with adults in the front and rear, came toward them.

Cynthia was walking next to Anne and Peggy, asking things she shouldn’t, Samantha assumed when Peggy’s profile tightened. Didn’t the reporter realize she was trying to pry information from a convert? Even if Peggy knew something about Adrian, she wouldn’t tell.

“Hey, Neil.”

Neil nodded to the woman. “Ms. Kelly.”

“Peggy.”

Neil flushed at the tone. It said *When you marry my daughter, you’ll call me mom*. He flicked a fast glance toward Samantha.

The camper door opened. Excited voices of more young children drew their attention away from the sparks.

“All right. Each chaperone will handle two children. The kids get to pick.”

Sam sighed at Peggy's words, viewing the sticky-fingered offspring with trepidation. *Some days are hell.*

It took a while for Anne and Peggy to get the kids settled with their chaperones. Samantha tried not to make contact with the man waiting patiently near the camper door. She envied Neil's coolness in the face of battle.

Samantha smiled uneasily when a girl with short brown spikes pointed her way. The child appeared to be about twelve and was sporting a signature covered cast on her wrist. Next to her was another girl of roughly the same age. This one was so thin Samantha's heart clenched. They'd known hardships she hadn't.

Both girls came her way with giggles.

Each one wanted her hand.

Sam reluctantly surrendered her tea mug to let them hold onto her. Sticky and warm, she waited with them as everyone got set, trying not to be caught staring at Neil. She'd been happy the trooper refused little Becky, but the idea that he was willing had to have come from somewhere.

"What's your name?" The thin girl's expression was hopeful that she would be liked.

The storm tracker put her thoughts away. "Sam."

The girls giggled again. "That's a boy's name!"

Not offended, Samantha grinned at short spikes girl. "I've heard that."

“Why do you have a boy’s name?”

“Is it a shortner?”

Confused by the garbled word, Samantha shrugged. “My mom wanted a girl, Samantha. My dad wanted a boy, Sam. This way, they both got their wish.”

They laughed harder. “That’s silly.”

Samantha nodded. Until they made it here, there probably hadn’t been much for the girls to be happy about.

She saw Neil get chosen by two very energetic boys in roughly the same age group as her charges. The kids were bouncing, excited; she realized field trip day must be something special. The rest of the time, Adrian probably kept them isolated for safety, so these moments out of their area were rare.

The lives of these kids had been flipped around too. Samantha felt the need to give them a good day. They were also war orphans. The bond she suddenly felt was something she wouldn’t tell anyone about, but it was there. She’d also lost her roots, along with everything else she had leaned on for stability, sanity. They deserved a fun day. She would be proud to help give it to them.

“Everyone ready?”

A loud cheer echoed at Peggy’s question.

“All right, a quick reminder to the chaperones about the wild dog sightings. Keep your kids close.” Peggy led the way. “Okay, our first stop is...Safe Haven’s secret hideout!”

This cheer was twice as loud.

Samantha let the girls lead her through the slowly waking refugees. They were right behind Peggy and her group of five tweens. Sam didn't envy the woman her sulky 12-year-old charges as she listened to them complain about someone's snoring.

The line walked across the camp, drawing attention from those who were up.

Everyone waved. Kids roaming the streets before the war were a sight to be avoided or ignored for their poverty. Here, children were rare and welcome, no matter their condition.

"Must be Field Trip day." Seth stopped in front of the group as they came to the training tent. "Unless you guys snuck out?"

There were giggles all around.

"We didn't escape." One of Peggy's girls tossed a dark braid over her shoulder. "And you know it. So come on and let us in!"

Samantha was surprised at the rudeness, but she saw the guard, and Neil, smile at the spunk.

"But I don't know for sure." Seth shrugged. "Bad guys can look like anyone, right?"

The younger kids tensed at their own mental horrors, faces tightening.

"Yes." The girl stared at Seth. "Even like you and Adrian."

"Exactly." Seth smiled. "That's why I have to ask every time anyone comes through."

"Kids can't be bad guys."

This came from another of Peggy's group.

Again, Samantha was glad of the two calmly listening kids holding her hands.

“Yes, they can!” Neil’s hard voice snapped attention to him. “They don’t always know because grownups are sneaky. Sometimes they ask kids to do things that are wrong.”

“And do you banish them, too?” one of his little boys asked, clinging to his arm.

“Never.” Neil smiled at the boy. “It’s not a kid’s fault when a grownup makes them do bad things.”

“The grownup should be punished.” Braid swinging girl glared. “Not us!”

“Yes. If a grownup tries to get you to do things you think are bad, say you will and then come tell Adrian.” Seth looked around. “Okay?”

Listening as closely as the kids, Samantha realized this was also a training session.

Seth checked his watch and did a fast sweep while pretending to be confused. “I wonder where he is this time?”

The kids all let out another loud cheer, startling Samantha as they darted around. *Hide-n-seek?*

“There he is!” Ponytail girl pointed.

The kids clustered around the trunk of the tree Adrian was in.

“What’s the password?” Adrian barked at them, making Sam jump.

“We love America!” they all responded together.

Adrian snapped a salute. “You may enter!”

He jumped down and was immediately smothered by little bodies hugging, tackling, and wrestling him to the ground.

Samantha was surprised that Adrian would take the time for this, and amazed that he was so popular with the kids. It spoke of his inner person being as good as the one they saw daily.

She started to get closer, worried about the little girl with the broken wrist.

Neil caught her attention. "He's got them."

And he did. From tickling and chasing, to a quick hug, it was clear the kids adored Safe Haven's leader.

"How are you?"

Samantha was aware of more than one set of ears listening for her answer.

"Adjusting." She raised a brow, unable to resist even though she had serious doubts about his sense of humor. "Did he get all the mud off his jacket?"

Neil's cheeks went red. "I was afraid to ask."

"I'm sure he's had worse." She chuckled as Adrian started a game of tag.

"You two ready for some coffee?" Peggy called with a friendly tone.

"No, thanks." Neil didn't need more stomach burn.

Samantha wanted a cup; she needed the caffeine rush to fully wake, that or danger. She was careful to throw out the air that she wasn't to be messed with. "I do."

Samantha saw the woman's expression cool. Good. *If I decide I want that uptight trooper, you and your flirty daughter won't get in my way.*

"Thanks." Samantha hung around her for a moment as she sipped the strong brew, waiting to discover if there might be a threat, but there was only a series of cool looks exchanged. Because Peggy wanted to keep the peace? Becky didn't care about the rules, so why would her mother? From all appearances, Peggy wanted Neil to be her son-in-law, though her daughter was only a 14-year-old kid.

Some mother. Sam moved toward Adrian and the happy orphans. In her mind, Becky was a baby compared to Neil. Did that mean she was attracted to another man with mental problems? *Maybe that's the only kind I can feel ali—*

"Okay kids, line up." Peggy's voice echoed.

All the dusty children flew her way.

"Get with your chaperone and you can go on in."

Samantha's two girls clutched her hands eagerly, almost dragging her forward. "Come on!"

Hilda had said this was where Adrian taught his army to be true men. Samantha entered almost as eagerly as the kids.

Instead of the normal adult setup, the long tent was filled with half size equipment. *Kid size*, she corrected herself, letting the little girls lead her to the circular obstacle course in the middle.

"We hafta warm up."

Samantha surrendered the second hot drink in an hour and helped the girl with the cast remove her shoes and socks.

Thinking she might have to learn their names soon, Samantha paced them as the girls walked the low beam, rolled under empty boxes, and jumped over gaps in the mat. She kept track of the girl in the cast and finally had to call out, “Hey you!” when she leaned too far over the beam. “Be careful... What’s your name?”

The girl hopped down, cast bumping against the hard wood. “Tracy. That’s Leeann.” She pointed. “The rest of them are...”

The recital went on for a while. Sam tried to keep up and still watch out for Leeann.

“Your turn!”

Samantha blinked. *Turn?*

Peggy hefted herself onto the first beam and hurried across before rolling under the boxes in an awkward shove that sent cardboard flying.

The kids giggled hard.

Samantha went to the beam with Tracy now ready to do the paralleling.

“Whenever you’re ready.” The little girl held up her casted wrist.

Sam grimaced. They knew to take her place as a guide. How cute...and terrible that it was necessary.

Sighing, she walked along the wood, trying not to wince at a lance of pain in her old injury that

keeping it straight was causing. If Peggy could do it, so could she.

“You want me to do what?”

Cynthia’s voice drew Samantha as she rolled over the mat. She had mostly forgotten about the reporter. She looked up to find a little boy with a bandage on his hand hopping up and down in protest.

“Run course!”

Cynthia shook her head. “Not me.”

“I can’t, if’n you don’t!”

“Sorry, kid.”

Samantha looked at her girls. “Wanna run the course with him?”

“Yeah!”

They dragged her toward Cynthia.

Samantha snagged the boy’s uninjured hand. “Come on.”

The child lit up while Cynthia stuttered.

“Uh-huh.” Sam didn’t offer more, but her tone said *shame on you!*

Neil felt his respect go up.

Serving as an extra chaperone, Anne enjoyed being with the kids as they played. John had been right to bring them to Safe Haven.

Anne noticed Adrian in the flap and wondered if he knew how lonely he appeared watching his orphans frolic without him. She didn’t see much of him most days. She was either helping John or helping these kids, but soon, she would have to ask him for something. When they’d first come, there

hadn't been any reason to tell the leader here about his cancer. Now, that had changed. One of Adrian's chain of command had abilities that might push her husband's illness into remission and there wasn't anything Anne wouldn't give in exchange for it.

5

Kyle approached the center table in a casual pace that belied his pounding heart. What he was about to do would be hated by the sullen Marine on Adrian's right as much as the morning's start had been. After embarrassing Kenn on the course, Angela had taken a rookie record from Seth and stolen Daniel's high score on a training game. It had been a busy two hours that had allowed some of the other men to see how determined she was to succeed.

Steeling his nerves—It amazed Kyle that he still felt any hesitation at all considering the missions he and his Eagles had completed since the war—Kyle stepped over to Angela's side of the crowded center table.

Doug smiled. “Hey, Kyle. Did you come for coffee? ‘Cause this ain't it!”

Those at the table laughed at his well-used joke.

Kyle grinned too, but his eyes were full of warning that Adrian took note of.

“Me and the boys are leaving. I thought I'd ask the rookie if *she* wants to come along.”

Silence fell over the table and those around them, and then over the entire mess.

“Great idea.” Adrian regarded the blushing female across from him. “Feel like being out of camp for a while?”

Angela could feel his pleasure and Kenn’s fury. It hadn’t been planned. “Sure, when?”

Wanting to be certain those listening understood that he also supported this, Kyle took back over. “Is fifteen minutes enough time for you to get ready?”

Angela stood up. “I’ll be ready in five, like everyone else.”

The pair moved toward the tent area, ignoring the shocked camp around them. There had been rumors and stories, but no actual confirmation, but that had just changed. It was true. She’d been accepted as an Eagle, a woman who had only been here two weeks!

Silence echoed in the mess.

It took Neil’s full control to play his part. He and Kyle had worked it out a little while ago. “Never known a woman who could shoot that well. She hits ninety percent of all targets in level three. That’s the same as Zack.”

Adrian played his own role happily, already in awe. “A few more like that and we’d have enough shooters to keep *any* bad guys off our asses.”

Neil nodded. “It takes guts to join the Eagles. You think there are more women here like that?”

Adrian let his blue gaze sweep the openly listening people, making pointed contact with a few. “Yes, but they’ll come out when it’s their time.”

Adrian returned to his lunch and the camp did the same, muttering and whispering. One of those he’d glanced at was only fourteen!

Adrian gave Neil a subtle nod of approval, then switched them to other business. “All right, the schedules are out. We’ll need...”

6

“He’s very pleased with you.”

Kyle acknowledged the pride he felt at Angela’s words. “Then I’m doing it right.”

“Thank you. I know it’s for him but thank you anyway.”

Kyle raised a bushy brow. “It is for you too. If you didn’t deserve the chance, we wouldn’t be giving it.”

Kyle’s team was loading the Excursion he preferred to travel in because of the huge cargo area. Kyle made a motion to Billy, who relayed it to the others.

Assuming he was telling them how long until he would be there, Angela quickened her step. “I can meet you, if you need to go.”

Kyle swept the area. “My team is your shadow today.”

Realizing what that meant, Angela was still grinning as she ducked into the small tent that never failed to remind her of her lost time with Marc.

“Two minutes.” Kyle liked it that she had insisted on being treated like any other rookie.

Only half of that time had gone by when she emerged from the tent in the rookie gear that had been lying near her flap this morning. It unknowingly made them the center of attention.

Angela belted her sweater over the uniform, hair high and tight under her cap, and slung the small kit over her shoulder, still smiling. No secret guard. She would be away from prying eyes for a few hours. *Finally!*

Kyle didn't need to see her face to know she was as eager as any of his team usually was to escape for a while. He followed her to the vet area. *It's gonna be a good day.*

Angela ducked into the animal tent to find her son and the vet in the middle of feeding the ever-growing zoo. She stayed near the flap, out of their way. “I'll be with Kyle and his team today. Have Mitch call if you need me.”

Unlike after the war, when she'd been weakened by the loss of the baby, she could talk to him over almost any distance now. Charlie was glad she was still being cautious about their gifts, like before. It didn't occur to him that she was supplying cover, as an Eagle would have. “Okay. Be careful.”

Angela tried not to laugh. “I will, *mom.*”

The teenager snickered.

After a quick nod at the unfriendly vet, Angela joined Kyle. "I'm all set."

Kyle glanced at his wrist as he got them moving toward the waiting truck. Less than four minutes, including walk time. It was impressive for the team, but for a female? It was unnerving.

They traveled across the camp in silence. Kyle halted near the bumper. "Let's do the usual check. Weapons?"

The men gathering around him gave her polite nods, but no words of welcome. Each of the nine men checked their guns.

Angela did the same, feeling awkward despite her fingers doing mostly what she wanted them to. The men were securing other weapons too—guns in boots and knives on belts.

Angela did a quick check to make sure her wrist blade was fastened securely. She had picked it up a few days ago from one of the baskets Marc had sorted. He'd been the one to put it in there, she was positive. His scent was on it, even now.

"Communication?"

Each man strapped a stocked tool belt around their hips at Kyle's call, radios dangling.

Angela barely had time to wonder if she should ask for one before it was held out to her. She recognized the simple walkie talkie setup she was given. Angela quickly flipped through the dials to channel 77, then powered it up.

The set crackled to life, blaring static. She flipped the filter switch, then adjusted the volume.

Angela was glad she didn't have to wait for them to show her how to use it, or worse, suffer through a public jolt from the shortwave communication system. She hadn't noticed the silence. "Did he give you the headsets yet? Those are great. They automatically catch the spark and adjust."

The quiet was thick and long now.

Angela glanced up to discover the Eagles sharing scowls. "Did I do something wrong already?"

Kyle glared toward the mess, where Kenn had just joined Adrian at the center table. "Not you."

"He didn't tell you to go to channel 77 first so there's no shock?" Angela snorted when she picked it from their thoughts. "Not on purpose. He didn't want to say he forgot, so he tests it out on the rookies." She shrugged. "That's the Kenny I know."

The Eagles continued to mutter and cast glowers toward the man still sitting stiffly on Adrian's right.

Kyle went on, but his voice wasn't calm anymore. "Gear?"

They began comparing their kits to the sheets of paper from their pockets.

Angela was ready for Kyle this time, going to him for the gear instead of the other way around. She did her check fast and was embarrassed at all the items she didn't have.

"I'm short a canteen."

"I need a battery pack."

Angela steeled her nerves and followed their lead. "I need a complete kit."

Kyle handed her one without giving any of the praise rookies often wanted to hear for an easy guess.

Not sure if her own items were off limits, Angela settled for the three things she used the most and then tossed her kit through the open window of her Blazer.

"All right." Kyle looked around. "Who's the sucker on drive detail?"

"Rookie."

"Rookie."

"Rookie drives."

Angela flushed. "Okay."

Daryl tossed her the keys.

Angela was pointed at as she slid into the driver's seat of Kyle's vehicle. The camp was becoming aware of her new status.

The black Ford Excursion was long, with three rows of seats. Angela had to shift hers all the way up to reach the pedals. She strapped herself in, waiting for Daryl to climb in beside her. "Why is the driver a sucker?"

Daryl exchanged glances with the others getting in, voice amused. "Kyle likes to go where no man has gone before."

Understanding her road skills were about to be tested, Angela grinned. She loved driving.

Kyle paused at the door, scanning the center table. He caught Adrian's nod. It said to do his job. Kyle gave a firm nod in response. *I will.*

Lingering near the showers, Marc watched them roll out with a bit of worry but only a little of the nagging urge to follow that had fallen over him during the airport drama. This time, he knew where she was going and what Kyle had planned.

Marc was glad to know that area had already been scouted, but he couldn't stop the curtness in his tone as the day progressed.

7

Still high on her successes, Angela kept her foot on the brake, letting the Eagles survey the hill they were about to roll down. She got set, listening to them. They were only a few miles from camp, but the feeling of being out with an Eagle team was worlds apart from the training tent.

"You sure, man?"

"Awful steep sides."

"Check out her face. Recognize that?" The team leader reminded his men of their own starts. "We were all rookies once."

Daryl's mind flashed to his own excitement on his first trip. "Those were the days. Rollin' through no man's land while Adrian shot at us. Fun times."

Angela's grin widened as she picked up the dusty images, loving the idea that in time, she too

might be trained that way. “You guys ready, or what?”

Kyle tightened his belt and confidently put his hands behind his neck. Inside, his gut was a churning ball of nerves. *She might kill us all.* “I’m set.”

The others followed his lead, acting excited.

Angela pressed on the accelerator with a bubble of happiness in her chest. She had the start of their trust through saving Adrian and she was an Eagle to them, if only for this minute.

Malevolent attention followed the single vehicle down the steep grade, hoping for a wreck. If Dean followed them, he would be in plain sight. If he went in on foot, he wouldn’t be able to keep up.

The man growled in frustration. They were being too careful, which meant they wouldn’t come back this way to meet up with the camp, so even an ambush was out.

Dean pounded his fist on the wheel; the jeep shook in response. *She will pay!*

Dean slowly retreated, locking his anger away so he could think. If he couldn’t get to her from the outside, then inside was the answer. He would take a line from Cesar and attack under the cover of the next storm. He would have to test their wire before then.

“I’m comin’ for you, baby!” Dean resisted the urge to spin out and kick up telltale dust. *I’ll lie low as long as it takes.*

Angela used the brakes halfway down the hill, no longer hearing the men who yelled for her to go faster. The feeling of menace was consuming. She shut her eyes in concentration.

It would have been natural for the men with her to assume Angela had viewed the next incline and frozen in fear, but Kyle's team had been there for Marc's miracle. Each of them immediately swept for danger.

"Are things 5-by?"

Angela shook her head at Daryl's question. "He's traveling to our camp to test the perimeter, searching for a way in."

"Who is?"

Drawing her courage, Angela grabbed Daryl's wrist, making him jump.

"Sorry." She flushed as the Eagle stiffened in aroused surprise. "The radio isn't a choice. Dean can't know that *I know*." She released Daryl's hand a moment later. "I told Adrian. He's tightening things."

Angela opened her eyes...the feeling of victory returned. It was okay to go on. Adrian had it covered.

Without warning them, she hit the gas.

The full level of Eagles bounced, shouted, and slid to the bottom of the dirt and weed dotted grade that had once been the most challenging ATV trail in the state.

Chapter Fifteen

Rookie Lessons

1

“We’ll use these trips to get you caught up.”

Kyle stayed with Angela while the other Eagles checked the wooded area, verifying their perimeter alarms hadn’t been broken. They also set up a sniper watch.

“We’re doing it this way, so the camp doesn’t know how much work I need, right?”

Kyle chuckled. “It’s the actual training. Camp members wouldn’t understand, but you do. That’s why we’ve set it up this way.”

Angela smiled. “I appreciate the rearranging.”

Kyle shrugged. “It’s all Adrian. He’s handling your schedule personally.”

“He has a lot of dreams.”

Kyle’s curious expression said he was eager to discover if she could fulfill some of them. “Let’s make this happen. You ready?”

She flashed a grin he had to steel himself against.

“You know it.”

“Good.” Kyle led her to the other men. “Take in as much as you can. We’ll cover it all again in the next lessons.”

Angela followed nervously, a bit self-conscious, but determined not to be run out by her own fear.

Kyle got his notebook out. "Rookie lessons, gentlemen. I hope you remember them."

There was a laughing round of groans and good-natured complaints as they all settled into the grass in front of Kyle.

Kyle looked at Angela. "You'll sit on my left, the learning place, until you know the lessons. Right now, you are a rookie. A place with us has to be earned."

Angela quickly sat down, hoping her face wasn't as red as it felt.

Kyle got them rolling. "Go from the very first day, Eagles. We'll start on the right."

Daryl stood; his words carried an instant ring of magic. "Eagles are men and women who care about the future of their country. So much, that they are willing to sacrifice their lives for it. They are not afraid to get involved and can easily tell wrong from right.

"Eagles are not thieves. Some of them may have been in the past, but no longer. An Eagle can now be trusted with a life, the only possession that has any true value.

"Eagles have hope and suspicion in equal amounts. They believe in the truth when it's called for, and silence when it's not. An Eagle helps, plans, searches, and defends without being asked and no

payment will ever be taken. They are strong and loyal defenders of those around them.

“There are a lot of reasons to join my army. Worry over the future, a need to belong to something you can depend on, friendships that will last, but it comes down to a simpler fact. We all want to be better than we are—mentally and physically. Humans are an ever-evolving species. Before the war, you were something else. Now, you’re an Eagle in my army and I’ll accept nothing less than your best.”

As Daryl sat and Cris stood, Angela realized these were the exact words Adrian had spoken to them as Safe Haven’s army was first formed. They’d memorized it word for word.

“There is no room in my army for slacking off. If you can’t cut it, get out now.” Cris paused, as the lesson required, but he suspected laziness wasn’t going to be a problem with Angela. “America comes first with us. Not that shit to enforce laws that hid greed, but for the greater good—the survival of our country. The continuation of America is all I care about and there isn’t anything I won’t do, any one person I won’t sacrifice, to make it happen. Be sure you want this. It may be your life that I take to save theirs.”

Kyle waved. “Two-minute break.”

Understanding they were giving her time to process it, Angela ran through the lesson again. This time, she could hear Adrian’s voice and feel parts of

the magic that must have surrounded them as he accepted the first team of men into his army.

Kyle gestured when the time was up.

Angela listened as Billy spoke next.

“An Eagle is the only line of defense between the camp and this hostile new world. Extreme force is necessary and will be used at my discretion, no matter the age or condition of the threat. Mercy in this new hell comes from death and hardly anything else. Be prepared to not only face it, but to also be the one pulling that trigger. Lives are not to be taken lightly but they *will* be taken.”

The oral lesson went on for almost an hour, with Kyle calling periodic two-minute breaks to keep her from being overwhelmed. Kyle himself went last, voice so similar to Adrian’s that it rang in her head and her heart.

“We’re writing history, here and now. In this new world, we are the first military power. As such, we are duty bound to each other and the lives we come in contact with. *Their* needs are our needs, and we will always take care of them before ourselves. We are guardians, shepherds of the remaining American flock. Everything we do, all that we are, is for them, for *Her*. We will be closer than any army was before, more in tune with each other and the environment. Because of that, we have an edge. Knowing what’s coming will save us.”

Kyle couldn’t help a pause as his mind said Adrian had been thinking of people like Angela

when he'd told them that in Nevada. He'd known she was coming, even then.

The men around him shared the thought.

Angela waited without telling them Adrian hadn't known for sure then that any of the help he had dreamed of would show. These men could never know he had based their new lives on a maybe.

Kyle went on, voice a bit awed. "I'm going to ask you to do things you'll hate me for. Do them anyway. The motions we make now are the waves we'll ride later when there's more of us. You'll have doubts and questions, and moments of weakness when you think you're about to fail and maybe cause the fall of my dream. Accept it as hard duty and learn to live with your demons. Talk to me. I am here for that, but more so, talk to each other. The old saying of not letting one hand know what the other is doing does not hold with us. We will be a family inside the Safe Haven community and there will be none tighter than these first teams. You are more valuable than anyone will realize or give you credit for. If the camp finds out about the things we do on missions, you'll be run out, or worse. You must be sure. There is no going back."

Kyle waited for a moment, studying her for that glint of determination not to be the one who caused the collapse. When it came, he fired the final words that had given his own loyalty to Adrian. "None of you were where you belonged in the old world and you felt it every day. In this new world, in this

moment, you are exactly where you should be, and I need you.” Kyle sat down.

“Whatever you guys need from me to help him, I’ll give it.” Angela wiped at her cheeks; her heart was full of a joy she wished she could carry back to camp. This really was where she was supposed to be. Adrian was right about that. She would give it her all, no matter how much it hurt.

Sensing a good moment for the words she’d chosen, Angela gave the honesty they needed. “If that ends up being me resigning, I’ll do it without a fight and keep my mouth shut about what I’ve learned and heard. It’ll be hard for me to know when it’s enough, because every second I get to spend as an Eagle will teach me and I won’t want that to stop. When it’s a threat to his plans, come to me and I’ll bow out quietly. I’d never get in his way.”

There were nods and relief. Kyle spoke for them all. “We will, but not unless we have to. Adrian wants female Eagles. He always has.” Knowing she needed to be clear on how much Adrian was counting on her, his voice became hard. “Repeat the first sentence Daryl spoke.”

Angela replayed it as quickly as she could, trying not to get flustered at being put on the spot, or distracted by the small pack of mutated ants moving through the knee high weeds by the Excursion. “Eagles are men and women who care about the future...” She trailed off, understanding his point.

“Yes. Men *and* women. He wanted you in his army even before there was one. But you have to *be* one of us for it to work. If you’re holding us up, fighting choices at the wrong time, it will get someone killed. Until we, as a team, give the okay, you won’t go on missions, be a part of live fire exercises, and many other things.” Kyle’s voice hardened. “This is not because you’re a female. It’s because you’re a rookie and the rest of us like breathing.”

Angela was disappointed, but she understood the real okay would come from Adrian, not the Eagles.

Kyle checked his watch... Right on schedule. “Let’s do the rookie sets. Put it in that sunspot. I want a sniper sentry rotation, by two, in the next three minutes.” His tone deepened. “Anyone caught slacking off on that detail will find himself off my team as soon as we hit camp.”

With that warning ringing, they got moving.

“What should I do?”

Kyle waved her toward the 20x20 area that was receiving full sun. “You’re man in the middle now. When you’re ready, join in for a while, then go back to observing.”

Angela felt out of place as she stepped into the circle while they set up an obstacle course like she and Marc had done each morning on their way to Safe Haven. Barrels, crates, and beams on blocks, all subtly taken from camp and stored in the rear of the Excursion made her smirk in amazement as they

continued to pull items out. She snorted as the punch line of a forgotten joke came to mind. *How many clowns can they fit in that car?*

Unaware of being scrutinized, her amusement was a glimpse of perfection; men stumbled, stared.

Kyle gave a short whistle and such a harsh glower that Angela's smile faded. She'd been distracting them. *Sorry.* She pushed it at Kyle absently.

He met her eye for a brief moment before looking at his men, never betraying his shock. *She was just in my mind!* "One every ten, let's go."

The six men lined up at the start of the mostly round course. At Kyle's nod, the first of them took off. Ten seconds later, the next went, and so on, until all of them were flying through the course.

Angela was enthralled as the team leapt from beam to barrel, jumped a high stack of boxes, tucked, and rolled upon landing and then crawled under a stack of crates.

It was a simple, basic run, but six Eagles doing it at the same time was mesmerizing. She rotated in the center, taking it all in.

They'd gone through it more than half a dozen times before she remembered she was supposed to join in. *Can I do that?*

Angela watched them run it again. Yes. She'd probably fall a few dozen times, but after enough practice, she could do what they were doing.

Kyle had been watching her, waiting for the right moment; he gave a short motion.

One by one, the six men finished their run and lined up, making Angela pause. Not sure if she had waited too long, she started to ask and then realized they were all looking at her expectantly.

She flushed, quickly walking to the line she would begin this time. Not a word was spoken while she got set.

Evaluating eyes kept her cheeks red. She knew the first try would be ugly.

Angela did fine on the beam, balance coming as natural to her as dancing, but she landed precariously on the wobbling barrels. Her foot caught the tip of the boxes as she jumped... They toppled, spilling her on the ground in an awkward sprawl. Cheeks a furious red, Angela picked herself up and moved determinedly toward the beginning.

A sharp motion from Kyle was all that had kept the men in line at her fall, but it couldn't stop the help they wanted to give.

“Tuck your feet behind your ass.”

“Get set on the barrels before you jump.”

Glad of the advice, Angela took off again. She remembered to steady herself before the leap of faith, but the stack of boxes was higher than the barrels. Her foot caught them again, sending her back to the ground.

Kyle saw the problem, but his orders were clear. If she wanted to be one of them, she would have to account for her shortcomings and improvise.

Angela wiped the dust from her scraped palms and paced around the stack of boxes, mind working the problem as the Eagles reset them. When she went back to the starting point, even the snipers with their extremely fast glances knew she'd come up with a solution.

Angela got set, tuning out the tense males. When she felt that coolness settle over her nerves, she took off like a shot. Moving twice as fast as the first times, she was over the beam in an instant and leaping forward with all of her body weight. She touched the barrels lightly, just enough to springboard off them. She cleared the boxes by more than a foot as she launched into the air.

Angela automatically crouched for the abrupt landing and rolled under the crates, sending one of them tumbling. She scrambled to her feet with a grin at having done it for the first time and streaked toward the beam.

Her fourth attempt was better. She bounced from the barrels and into the air more easily, controlling her arms and legs. She managed the quick tuck and roll again but went off course and crashed into the crates this time, sending the empty wood flying.

Kyle's motion was ignored.

"I've got this!"

The men rushing to help stopped short at her snap.

Angela stood, blood smeared across her cheek. The Eagles helped her reset the crates, then

retreated as she took her spot and got ready for another run.

Anger was building. *Why can't I do this?*

You can, the witch encouraged. *Concentrate!*

2

By the time the babysitting group left the training tent, all the kids were dirty and happy. When they ducked out of the flap, the little boy they'd taken on the obstacle course stayed with her and the two girls. Samantha didn't complain.

Samantha noticed Neil had Cynthia's other charge and the reporter was nowhere in sight. She motioned to the boy questioningly.

"Some people got it like that." Neil grinned. "And some people want it!"

Samantha laughed, showing a face Neil suddenly thought he could stand to look at for a long time.

Their next stop was bathrooms for a break and washing. Sam tried not to snicker when Cynthia's boy tugged on Neil's sleeve. He had the child tucked firmly along his hip.

Neil glanced down distractedly. "What?"

"I had a accident." The small child grimaced in fear. "On you."

The warm stain spread down his leg. Neil sighed. "One of those days, Bobbie. Don't sweat it." He made arrangements to take the boy to the camper for a change.

While he was gone, Samantha helped keep track of the other boys, occupying them with trying to pick out cloud shapes through the grit. When Peggy called it, they all went to the mess for lunch.

“Get them settled at Adrian’s table.” Peggy pointed. “It’s reserved right now.”

Samantha helped the kids to two middle tables that had been pushed together. When Peggy joined them, she had a stack of covered trays she sat on the edge. “Take one down, pass it around...”

That started a chorus of pass the trays that lasted until everyone had one. Samantha found herself smiling more than she had since the war. It was funny how their happiness was rubbing off, but she was no longer displeased with the duty she’d been given.

Once everyone had a tray, there were contented sounds from the kids and sighs of relief from the adults who surrounded them. It was a rare moment to have them all still and quiet.

“Did you have children? Before?”

Sam hadn’t expected the conversation attempts. “No.”

Peggy helped Bobbie’s younger brother put ketchup on his fries. “You’re doing well.”

Samantha stared, caught off guard. “Thanks.”

“I guess you know I’m Becky’s mom.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Samantha gave the woman a hard gesture. “Go on, get it off your chest.”

The older woman gently wiped the boy's fingers. "There's nothin' to say yet, other than I doubt how serious he is."

Samantha's anger sharpened. "Why would you sink your own daughter?"

Peggy kept her voice low. "Her age mostly, but like I said, he's not serious."

Sam swallowed her questions as Neil and the little boy, both freshly changed, returned.

Neil wondered what had been said as he sat down. Tension hung over the table despite the happy kids. He couldn't stop from searching Samantha's expression for clues. Had Peggy told her more about his fling with Becky? *Does it matter? Do I care?* Come October, he would be dating the teenager openly. That was what he wanted. *Right?* Surely a few odd moments with the battle-scarred woman on his right hadn't changed everything...

Sitting at the table behind Neil and the kids, Marc watched Kyle's truck roll in with relief and a hint of jealousy that quickly became concern when he saw Angela's bloody face, torn clothes, and wild hair.

He started to go that way but stopped when Adrian appeared at the tape. She looked like she'd been attacked. Would Adrian now tell her she couldn't be an Eagle, or would he ignore her injuries and treat her like one of his men?

Adrian nodded at something she said, but he didn't follow her as she walked too carefully to the

rear for her gear. Adrian was going to let her get hurt as much as it took for her to catch up.

Anger seethed in Marc, an impotent rage that had him gritting his teeth in an attempt at control. He wasn't sure why he had thought she would ever be happy with just getting here. He'd known the young girl who swung out over the ravine on a tire rope too frayed for any of the neighborhood kids to be comfortable using. After the war, he'd followed her trail across bridges that shouldn't have held. She was reckless. She needed to be protected. Making her an Eagle was likely to get her killed. Didn't Safe Haven's oh-so-careful leader care about that even a little?

Angela could feel Marc's emotions boiling, but short of dropping out, there was little that would ease his pain. Not being afraid anymore was a part of the second chance that Adrian was offering them all. Even with her many guards, she still didn't feel safe. She had would-be jailers on both sides of the caution tape and only Adrian was keeping them at bay, trying to give her time to grow into this destiny. Without it, she wouldn't survive, but more importantly, this camp wouldn't either. If the slavers managed to grab her and her son, there wasn't anything she wouldn't do to save Charlie. Destroying Safe Haven would be the first order Cesar gave.

Angela glanced longingly toward the training tent; she was already sure she would want another workout after she talked to the angry man studying

her from dusk's orange shadows. Inside that tent, she could be one of the guys for small moments at a time.

Three of Kyle's team ducked into the long canvas. She wondered how that conversation would go. Angela frowned. *I don't have to wonder. I can listen in.* She did, not caring who noticed.

"Not one whine."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. She never even cursed. Just hit the dirt and got back up. Musta run it a dozen times before she got it right and we did our sets."

"Bet that was a mess."

"Not really. By the time Kyle gave us the go, she pretty much had it down. Went slower than usual, but that was it. She put in a great workout."

Kenn left the training tent, unable to listen to the words of the returning Eagles. *That isn't the Angela I know!*

His timid mouse could never have run the rookie course, let alone well enough to be a part of a team doing sets. There was only one way she had done it and using her gifts to become an Eagle was something even Adrian couldn't justify. He would have to—

Kenn stopped at the sight of Angela near the bumper of Kyle's truck. He scanned her bloody, dusty appearance. He watched her tuck a schedule into a pocket and fail to hide a wince at the

movement. *She ran it on her own. My Angie really is a rookie in Adrian's army.*

“Are you okay?” Marc had been waiting.

Angela stopped, hoping he would let it go, but sure he wouldn't. “I have no feeling in my legs, otherwise I'm good.”

“It's not funny!” Marc couldn't shut his mouth after that. “You're hurting yourself for nothing. These men will never accept a female Eagle.”

Silence fell around them.

She raised a brow, aware of how many people could hear. “You think so?”

Marc nodded. “Yes. You should quit now, before something bad happens.”

Tired and sore, Angela let her sarcasm fly. “Sure. I'll go sit quietly in your tent like a good girl until you need me.” She turned toward the shower campers. “Stop pushing, Marc.”

He grunted. “Maybe I should just stop everything.”

Angela swung around. “What's that mean?”

Marc shrugged, heart thumping. *What am I doing?* “My job is done. Get you here, run if we had to. *That's* clearly no longer on the table; there's nothing keeping me here.”

“Nothing?”

“Just a child I can't claim and a woman who doesn't need me.”

Angela sucked in air. *Where is this coming from?* “We’ve only been here a couple weeks. I told you it would take time.”

Anger rose again for Marc. “Time that I didn’t know would be spent doing shit-work while you go off and put yourself in danger whenever you feel like it!”

Angela gestured angrily. “I can’t just be yours. I need more.”

“I need to be certain you’re safe!”

“And I need to do this!”

Their voices grew steadily louder, drawing even more attention.

Kyle shifted closer to Adrian, ignoring the ugly scene.

“How did it go?” Adrian was also keeping track of their fight.

Kyle did a fast scan. “Even better than you hoped for. You get her message?”

“Loud and clear.” Adrian saw Angela’s hand didn’t go anywhere near her gun, despite the loud argument with Marc. *She isn’t afraid of him; it’s not all men. Good to know.* “We’ve expanded the perimeter and doubled the guards. The dogs are running too, along with the wolf.”

Kyle handed him a folder. “It’s all there. You’ll feel like you’re watching it.”

Adrian didn’t want to read Kyle’s summary now. He would wait until he was alone, so he didn’t have to censor his reactions. “Did she give you any details on our intruder?”

Kyle shrugged. "She thinks it was the twin Marc didn't kill. If so, he swam across the Cheyenne River."

"We'll stay alert." Adrian raised an eager brow. "And?"

Kyle smiled. "No need to put her with another level. We'll take her—publicly when you're ready."

"That is not my problem!"

Kyle and Adrian swiveled to survey the arguing couple, as did everyone else in hearing distance. It wasn't the kind, patient voice they had come to expect from her.

Angela realized she was shouting and made an attempt to lower her voice. "I'm trying to find a balance here, Marc, I am, but you have to stop now. You're right, I...I don't need your protection anymore, just your support."

Marc spun away before he could say anything uglier than what he had already let out.

Angela sighed. Kenn didn't want her to be an Eagle because then she could gain real power here. Marc couldn't stand the thought of sharing her with all these people any more than he liked the idea of her getting hurt. The Eagles didn't want her because she was female. It felt like the only ones who did want this were her and Adrian.

Angela went to the showers, wincing at the pain each step was causing. *Adrian's the only one who understands.*

3

Before Angela had done more than wet her filthy hair, the camper door opened. Her hand automatically went to the .357 on the soap shelf.

She saw Hilda step in, Peggy right behind, and picked up the weapon. She rested it on top of the stall door where they could view it, then leaned her weight against the damp wood. She was sore all over. "I'll be out in five."

Both women had stopped at the sight of the gun. "It'll take that long to get all the dirt from your hair." Peggy had no idea if the naked woman scrutinizing her intently would be willing to join their quiet quest, but for the future, she would try.

"What do you guys want?"

"To help."

Angela's mind flew over the possible meanings of Hilda's answer. "With my grooming?"

Peggy smiled tolerantly. "With the Eagles."

Angela lowered the weapon back to the shelf. She didn't mind the women here so far, but she didn't really like them either.

"We have the power to—"

"Sway men's minds, the right men." Angela wasn't worried about these two knowing her secrets. They were also Adrian's soldiers, just in separate ways. She increased the hot water, smothering a moan. "I repeat: What do you want?"

Hilda wasn't used to a female with the courage of a man, but Peggy stepped forward. "We'll help

him anyway, but to further the women of this new world, we would give anything.”

“But we can’t, we’re too old and the younger ones here...” Hilda’s words trailed off.

Angie realized they were seeing her as a champion for women’s rights. She hadn’t considered the camp’s timid women might want liberation. She’d assumed she and Adrian would be tricking or forcing it upon them with careful manipulations. “For the last time, what do you want?”

“For you to succeed!”

Hilda’s shout was unexpected. Angela was surprised at the rare glimpse of fire from the calm woman.

“Yes!” Peggy’s eyes flashed. “Need it or not, Becky should have the same life you now do!”

Angela used a firm tone. “If she wants it.”

Peggy waved it off. “A mother knows.”

“So, you’re here to what? Offer support laced with threats?” Angela hadn’t expected blowback from the females here, or support.

“Advice.”

Angela frowned at Hilda, instantly offended. *I’m doing all the work here; where are your bruises and badges of honor?* “I’m doing something wrong?”

“It’s more a matter of overlooked.” Peggy tried to smooth that over, understanding they wouldn’t be able to ask for anything yet. Angela was so much like the men that it would require a bond first. Just

being another woman wasn't enough. "You can do things. The men will fear it and keep you out."

Hilda gave her a pointed look. "Unless they can do it too."

"Share?" Angela gasped. *Are they crazy?*

No. The witch was immediately against it.

"Yes. He wants an army of special women, like you." Peggy moved toward the door, waving Hilda along. "Share and ensure Adrian's dream through that support. Then all our daughters will have the second chance you're now enjoying."

4

"So, what do we do?" Daryl scanned the other men for possible answers.

Kyle's team had taken over the sauna room, burning off the soreness of the day. Their rapid conversation only covered one topic.

"It was legit. I checked the books." Cris eased back into the water, fresh drink in hand. "We were scheduled for it."

Billy sat his empty cup on the side of the sauna, frowning. "Kenn didn't have to make her go first. He just wanted her to bleed and she did."

"He'll get her hurt, maybe even killed." Daniel had never liked Kenn. "You know how hard he is on Ray."

"Yeah, but that's another one who's tough enough to be one of us." Shawn was almost friends with Ray now. "I thought he'd be gone by now."

“Both of them will be if we don’t do something.” Morgan sipped his drink and enjoyed the hot water, but it didn’t feel right. *We’re not a full team. Angie isn’t here.*

Choices were limited because of who the offender was. Kenn knew how to stay legal, but there was no end to the damage he could do. His methods were often brutal when Adrian wasn’t around, as if he was allowing his true nature free.

“Not much we can do until she’s stronger.” Billy climbed out for a refill, dripping water. “We’ll have to watch out for her.”

“We can bring in most of the Eagles, I think, if she keeps up this pace.” Kyle had been stewing on it. “We’ll let them help us this time.”

“You can also teach her, share your strength.” Adrian was lounging in the corner. None of them had heard him come in. “When she can hold her own, his power over her is gone and then my plans can move forward.”

Kyle sank lower in the soothing water. “We’ve all set up some personal moments with her, but we’d like to give her more than that, Boss. We want to make her dangerous.”

Adrian didn’t tell them he already knew, or that he too would be training her. “Whatever it takes, gentlemen. Make this happen and there will never be a team higher in my army or in my heart.”

It had been a long day for the kids and their chaperones. They'd played football with the Eagles and made headbands with the seniors in the craft tent. There had been a quick trip into the animal area for petting a variety of domestic and wild creatures, and even a simple self-defense lesson from Doug.

Samantha had worried for the kids when she'd spotted the giant in the middle of the hay ring, but as with Adrian, the orphans had mobbed the red vested giant until he was forced to surrender. It was something special to see these grown men being so careful with the camp kids, and also another sign of Adrian's influence. She doubted many of them would have been so open before the war.

To top off their field trip, the kids were now enjoying a movie outside with the camp, after dark. When the younger viewers went back to their area, a more adult movie would be played, but for now, there were snorts and chuckles over Toy Story.

Samantha had been thinking about her day through most of the cartoon. The shift had been up at evening mess, but she'd chosen to stay with the group. Neil had too. They were the only ones who did. She'd heard the trooper say it was his off day and understood he liked kids. Now, that wasn't such a difference anymore. It hadn't been bad at all. Maybe she could learn to like them too if she spent more time with them.

Like kids? Spend more time? Her witch was angry. Are you kidding? When Cesar comes, these kids will be worse off than right after the war.

Samantha cringed. That would be her fault.

Neil studied her with a raised brow. “You okay?”

She shrugged, leaning in. “How about that lesson?”

Neil’s heart thumped. He’d been hoping she would forget. “Sure.”

His voice was uneasy, more than she’d heard all day. She frowned when he didn’t say more. “When and where?”

Neil sighed. “Tomorrow night in the training tent, after the Eagles are finished.”

Sam smiled and tried to enjoy the end of the movie. If she could get stronger, maybe she could help Adrian get rid of Cesar. *And Rick*. That wolf in sheep’s clothing would have to be killed too.

Sam hid the shame from feeling pain at the thought. Right or wrong, theirs was a bond that hadn’t been severed yet.

Rick leaned against the truck holding the projector, not appearing to be aware of Samantha, but he was watching her and Neil with a dangerous hatred. *She’s mine!*

He could do little about it right now. Cesar hadn’t made contact and there was no sign of the Mexicans anywhere. If he was now on his own, and Rick wasn’t sure since the weather could have covered the noises of a battle, then he would have to be even more careful, but it didn’t change his goals.

Rick saw Samantha say something and receive a charming grin from the trooper in response. *One thing is certain. When it all happens, that pig will go down in the first body count.*

Angela glanced around the large crowd at a wave of danger. She found Kenn in the rear of the spread-out people, but not glaring at her for a change. He was staring at the sloppy man lounging against the semi. Though only a few feet apart, Rick hadn't noticed Kenn's attention.

Rick's profile was pointed toward the huge screen. Angela tried to enjoy the show as well, surprised to feel a bit comforted that Kenn was on duty here. She didn't like Rick at all, didn't trust him. She'd come to the conclusion that he was trouble, but with his thoughts so closed off, she wasn't sure if it was serious enough to talk to Adrian about. It was a small relief to know her evil Marine was watching the man too.

And that was about the only relief she had at the moment. Besides the fights with Marc and Kenn, Charlie was spending his nights with Matt. Now, there was this new pressure from the camp's women. Angela sighed, letting her mind return to the bigger problem. *Kenn*. She had to keep training with him as an Eagle. *What other horrors does he have planned?*

Smiling at the screen when those around her laughed, Angela concentrated, trying to pick up

Kenn's thoughts. He was so dark some days that she couldn't find the door to get in.

A minute later, she let go of the connection, stretching her legs out in front of her. The only light inside Kenn right now was bright, blinding rage. There was no way in without being noticed when someone was that ready to fight.

6

A much quieter group brought the kids back to their area. After a quick stop by the bathrooms, all the children were ushered inside the campers and the tired adults were free to go.

Samantha watched the three kids climb into the RV, each with a shy wave to her, and found her mouth opening to volunteer for the next field trip day. Samantha refused to berate herself for being nice to a little kid; she headed toward her tent, eager to get a clean change of clothes and then a shower.

"Hey."

She jumped when Neil fell in step with her. "Damn it!"

He snickered. "Sorry."

"Yeah, I'll bet you are."

Neil studied her profile, still not sure what it was about this hardened woman that he was being drawn to. Some of the camp thought she might still have a flame burning for the man she'd come in with. Neil wondered if that were true.

"You need something?"

Neil opened his mouth to give her honesty, but snapped it shut at the sight of Becky walking their way.

Samantha frowned, also catching sight of the teenager. “Ahh, the forbidden fruit shows itself.” She stopped abruptly, not liking how jealous she had become over a man she’d known for only two weeks. “You know what they used to say about the grass being greener, right?” Sam took the opposite direction, voice carrying over her shoulder. “I wonder if you’ll still want her when she’s legal...”

That thought had also crossed Neil’s mind; he didn’t respond. *I’m not sure.*

Still embarrassed, Becky didn’t talk to Neil as she strode by.

Her unhappiness was a source of guilt. Neil had been flirting and leading the girl on for months, and now, when she was about to be his, he wasn’t sure if he still wanted her. *What has Samantha done to me?*

Becky climbed into the kid’s camper with a feeling of relief. There were so many people watching her these days! Some of those were Adrian’s men, and she liked that part, but the newest groups of people were odd. Like that guy, Rick. He’d been doing no work that she had seen for the whole time he’d been here, but today, she had found him rooting in the sludge behind camp. When she’d asked if he needed help, he’d stared at her in a way that Neil never had. She’d almost run right then. She would have if the man had made a single move

toward her, but he'd only smiled intently and refused her offer.

That feeling of danger had come again later, when she'd asked if he minded her being there, and oh man! the things she could tell he wanted to do to her. Again, he'd only given a short *no*. She had hung around for nearly an hour, studying his body. Every now and then he would glance up at her with that open want, but he hadn't stopped whatever it was he'd been doing.

Becky ignored the worried mother watching her climb into the bunk and increased the volume on her iPod. If not for it getting dark, she probably would have stayed longer. *Who knows what might have happened then?* A shiver of fear went through her stomach.

Rick was dangerous. That was why she liked Neil. Becky had come across him and Adrian once, play fighting with their shirts off. She had been drawn to them both after that. She'd known she had no hopes with their leader, but Neil made her feel all strange inside too, so she'd settled for him. Now, there was another, older woman in that picture. Becky's female heart asked if she wanted to make a switch. *If Neil isn't capable of the emotions I'm searching for, maybe Rick is...*

Charlie gave a short nod to Matt's query. He was ignoring his mom because of it, but guilt was hitting now. *Why can't she be one of them? Because Kenn says so? What right does he have to make the rules?*

Matt slid the bottle closer to Charlie. "Bummer."

"Yeah." But Charlie wasn't sure. *If my mom is an Eagle, Kenn can't hurt us anymore...*

Much like the previous ones, most of the next hour in Matt's tent was spent playing cards and taking short, stomach hurting swigs off the bottle Matt had swiped from his dad. Not as bad yet, Matt still had a problem as far as Charlie was concerned. He usually avoided the drinking, but this time, he was the one who finished off the cheap wine. He'd pay for it in the morning, but tonight it was drowning out his confusion; the teenager went willingly.

"My dad says she won't be a real Eagle."

Charlie frowned, slurring. "Why snot?"

"Because she'll never mak-make it by the cage."

Charlie let his friend ramble on about what it meant, but inside, he grew angrier. While they were apart, he couldn't wait for his mom to get here, but now that she was, where was the happiness? Why couldn't she just be his parent and a doctor?

The semi-adult inside protested, telling him he barely needed her for that now. And if she wanted to be an Eagle, she had every right to try. This was

the new world. Things didn't have to be like they were before. But if that were true, why was everyone upset with her? If it was a good idea, wouldn't his dad be supporting the idea instead of fighting with her?

Full of confusion and anger at the unfairness, Charlie let Matt talk him into sneaking into his dad's tent for a second theft.

Not quite noisy enough to be caught by anyone who would tell on them, the boys shared the bottle and their miseries.

Marc patrolled the male tents, checking for signs of trouble. He'd challenged Zack and Kenn enough times to be watching his back. He was unprepared to hear Charlie's drunken voice calling him a bastard.

"You shouldn't say that!" Matt was horrified. He worshipped his own father.

Charlie glowered at the bottle. "Why not? He's only here for her."

"You don't know that." Matt liked Marc.

Charlie's voice turned ugly. "Has he tried to spend any time with me? No. He just hangs all over her and gets in trouble."

Matt shrugged. "You told him to go to hell, right? Grownups don't like that shit."

Both boys giggled drunkenly at the curses.

Marc hesitated outside the flap. If Angie found out about this, she'd hit the roof. And if he kept it

from her and she found out, their relationship would take another blow. Not sure what to do, Marc stared at the flap. Maybe he wouldn't have to—

“Hey! Let's sneak out of camp, go have an adventure!” Charlie stood, wobbling. “That'll show him I'm a person too!”

“Yeah!” Matt was all for an adventure.

“No.” Marc entered the reeking tent.

Both boys jumped. The half-finished bottle of wine fell to the floor and oozed greenish liquid.

Marc pointed at it. “Matt, get that cleaned up and then go tell your dad what you've been doing.”

The pit marked boy paled. “N-no way!”

“Yes.” Marc gestured at his son. “Charlie, get a shower and then go tell your mom.”

“No.”

“I won't d-do it!”

Both teenagers were drunk and willing to fight. Marc reconsidered. “Maybe I'll go get Adrian. Bet you guys are looking forward to a long day's work with those headaches you'll have.”

“Will you be coming too, *daddy*?” Charlie sneered, pushing himself up off the canvas. “I hear you've been spending a lot of time there.”

Marc jerked the thin boy onto his feet. “Get over here.” Marc shook the teenager once, needing him to know he wouldn't put up with any trouble. He wasn't surprised by the fear in his son's face this time. “Matt, is Mitch gonna beat you or something for this?”

Matt wanted to lie, but he couldn't with Marc's demanding eyes freezing him in place. "Maybe."

Marc sighed. "Then don't let him find out. If I get into a fight with him over this, I'll have a hit or two for you myself."

Matt tried to smile. He dropped to his knees and began cleaning up the mess.

Charlie glared, belching. "What?"

Marc gave the teen an easy shove toward the flap. "Come on, adventure boy. Let's you and I have a man-to-man."

Charlie caught himself before he fell. He stomped out into the cool air with his dad on his heels. "I'm going to the mess for coffee."

Marc neatly wrapped him up under one arm. "You're going to take a cold shower."

Charlie struggled. "Let go of me, you jerk!"

Marc delivered a light slap to the boy's arm with his free hand. "*Mr. Jerk.*"

The teenager found that hilarious. "Mr. Jerk, take a dirk, break my murk, Mr. Jerk!" Laughing, Charlie collapsed onto his knees, dragging Marc down.

The impatient man swung the boy up and over his shoulder. "Come on, before your mom—" Marc groaned as he caught sight of a slender shadow ahead of them; he felt Charlie tense. "Too late, boy. You're in deep shit now."

Marc relaxed at the sight of Samantha coming from the showers, realizing he'd mistaken them.

“Not her, huh?” Charlie muttered, fear bringing him down fast.

Marc took a better grip. “No. Let’s get you—”

Blaaccchhhh!

Marc froze as vomit splashed down his legs.

The blonde walking by flashed him a glance of sympathy. “Some days are hell.”

Marc’s sigh was full of suffering as he walked uncomfortably toward the showers both of them now needed, teenager gagging out nasty wine. “Tell me about it.”

Chapter Sixteen

Snap, Rumble, And Wait

1

“Repeat it back to me.”

Angela struggled to remember everything, not completely awake as they strolled the camp. She had been surprised to have Adrian at her tent flap before dawn; that feeling hadn't worn off yet. “I'm sorry.”

“Anything will spook a large group of people, from strange noises to a tense expression. Keep your face blank. Never let them know how you feel or what you're really thinking.”

Angela nodded distractedly at his repetition, aware of Kenn moving their way with the usual hateful sneer he wore all the time.

“Why?”

Angela blinked at Adrian's question. “Why, what?”

Adrian gestured, trying to be patient. “Why all the precautions? Why not tell them the hard truth and force them to understand they only have one choice, one way? Mine.”

Angela knew this one. “Because they'd lose faith and leave. They want a leader to not only save them, but to also shoulder all the weight that comes

with that. They don't want to hear the wolf is at the door, only that he was sent on his way."

Adrian was impressed. Again. He leaned in. "You had teaching, right? A military family member at least?"

Ignoring Kenn's glower, she shook her head. *Not other than him. Should I be insulted?*

Adrian filled with the relief that still came every time she used her gift in front of him. "No. You're just taking it all in so well."

She smiled, bitter. "For a woman."

Adrian clarified. "For anyone. You're moving up the shooting ranks faster than Seth. Kyle said he'll have to work plans out every night to stay a lesson ahead. It's..."

"Like I've already done it." It was the answer Angela had already given to herself. She was in love with this lifestyle. She loathed the war, but she had found a purpose in helping these people. Not a day was going by now that she didn't do something for him, from searching for hiding survivors to cooking. Her happy mood faded a bit. Cooking with Maria had been an awkward shift where she'd learned nothing of value.

"Angie?"

She shook it off. "Sorry. Something keeps pulling me, about the cook."

Adrian frowned. "She's under guard."

Angela tried to catch him off guard, like he enjoyed doing to her. "Were you a leader before, training soldiers?"

Adrian shut down.

She gave him a cool smile laced with razor sharp edges. “And here I thought we’d become—”

“What are you training her for?”

Adrian looked over at Kenn’s interruption, voice hard. “Can’t you guess?”

Kenn didn’t want to accept defeat. He wanted to fight for his place, but he already knew it was too late to stop whatever Adrian had planned around her. “Never mind.” Kenn stomped off to resume his rounds on point.

Angela stared at Adrian. “Well?”

Adrian grinned, but the smile didn’t reach far. “He thinks it’s to take his place.”

Angela raised a brow. “You know I don’t want his spot, right? I don’t need to be on your right.”

Adrian gave nothing away. “Why don’t you go spend some time on targets? Prove it to the few Eagles who still don’t believe you made that shot.”

Shrugging, Angela did as she was instructed. She didn’t understand everything he had going on, but she did trust him. They had the same goals—survival and rebuilding. With those two things always in the back of her mind, it left little room for anything else.

Adrian was aware of all the attention on her. Everyone was curious. Some people even thought he might have a personal interest. Adrian wished he could say no to that and be telling the truth. Hair now kept pinned under her cap, it was still clear that Angela was a woman, from those slender hips to the

full shirt. It had caused more than one of the men to do a double take upon viewing her in full Eagle gear. Once male brains registered the full chest, it was inevitable for them to study her red lips and pale skin for long moments. *Her high cheekbones and long lashes are wrong to see under that cover,* was a common thought. Only the slightly crooked nose and the scar on her shoulder fit the part.

Adrian veered toward his tent. *Our emotions are nothing compared to all the good she'll do for these people.* This week, it was new refugees, rookie records, fresh supplies, and the start of first aid classes. Next week, who knew?

Adrian ducked inside the spotless canvas, but he only stayed long enough to grab something from a bag Peggy had delivered late last night, and to make a quick radio call to Kyle about shadows in the corn. He'd discovered Dog running the ants off. He wanted their other working animals out there helping too now that it was daylight.

He emerged in dimness, gaze going to the grit layered sky. It appeared clear, but he had a feeling there might be trouble on the way again. Nature had left them alone for too long.

All attention was on Adrian as he strode through camp. The rookie jacket over his arm a clear sign that someone was about to be officially accepted into his army. There was a lot of speculation from both camp and Eagles about who it would be. Adrian had only done this publicly twice; there was

a spring to his step that said neither time had been as important.

Adrian strode toward the firing range as people watched to see what man was in the boss's good graces today.

Angela holstered her reloaded .357, grinning at the surprise of the Eagles around her. She'd just matched a level six shooter on the farthest target they were using today.

"Holy shit!" Billy had the clipboard.

Kyle saw Adrian coming and made sure the boss heard the call. "Rookie record. Put it in the books."

Billy hesitated. "Uh, under female?"

"Just rookie." Adrian stopped near his two highest teams, his most loyal men. "I'd have your vote, here and now."

Like they'd vote no when you're carrying my jacket over your arm! She kept her reddening face blank, sure Adrian had his own way of doing things like this.

"Kyle?"

"Yes."

Adrian lifted a brow. "Why?"

"She keeps up, tries to pull her weight."

"Acts like an Eagle should?"

"As much as any man here, so far."

"And the vote of your team?"

"Aye!"

Adrian regarded Neil. "Your call?"

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because she believes as much as you do. She wants to be one of us, in female form.”

Neil’s words weren’t so firm that those listening couldn’t hear the doubt, but the fact that he was willing to give her a chance meant something to all of them.

“And your team?”

“Aye!”

The responses made it possible for Adrian to hold out the coveted jacket to the flushed warrior woman of his dreams. “Welcome to my army, Angela.”

2

Finally breaking free of his blurry, tropical mystery filled dreams, Charlie groaned. His hands came up to cover his face. *Why is it so bright?*

The teenager rolled over and moaned again as his stomach sloshed. He slowly pushed himself up on one arm, wiping at his eyes with the other.

He recoiled in shock at the pain from his own touch. *What happened last night?*

Charlie wiped at his damp eyes again, this time much more carefully. He and Matt had gotten stinking drunk and... *We were caught!* His dad had dragged him—

“Good morning. *Son.*”

Charlie winced at the lance of pain from the shout. Had he spent the night here? Did Adrian or his mom know? Charlie pried his lids open and slowly swiveled his head.

Marc was sitting on the floor by the flap, covered with his long leather jacket. “How ya feelin’?”

Charlie clamped down on the waves of nausea to answer. “Like a coyote ate me and crapped me off a cliff.”

Marc chuckled at the joke from last night’s adult film, Purgatory. It was circling the camp. “Been there.”

Charlie raised a brow, too miserable to fight. “What makes it go away?”

“Time, mostly.”

The boy shook his head and immediately cradled it in his hands. “What else? I have to work today.”

Marc studied him. “You’re going to work like that?”

The hungover teen remembered not to move. “I never miss. They’ll check me out.”

“I already cleared you for the day. After that, you’re on your own with the lies.”

Charlie wanted to be furious at the possible betrayal, but snotty was the best he could manage. “Did you tell on me?”

“Nope.”

“You going to?”

“No, I thought I’d hold it over you until you do something I want.”

Charlie opened his eyes a little wider. “What?”

“Listen.”

Charlie tried to sneer, but he was sure it came out as a grimace. His stomach was cramping, needing release again, maybe. “Little late for a father-son moment.”

“It’s never too late, smartass.”

The blunt words helped Charlie come closer to being fully awake. He glared at his dad. “Why don’t you get the hell out? No one wants you here.”

Marc didn’t respond. Hurt or not, there were other hard truths to be tackled today.

Sensing a weakness, the teenager pushed harder. “Not even my mom anymore, you know? She just wants to be an Eagle.”

Marc didn’t react to the searching blow.

The teenager glared in frustration. “What the fuck do you want?!”

Marc grinned. The boy woke up fighting, like his mother. “Peace on earth, immortality—the usual things.”

Charlie was unwilling to snort at the unexpected joke. “Funny.” He pushed himself onto his feet, swaying. Pale, he moved for the flap.

“Come right back.”

Charlie didn’t answer.

Marc’s voice followed him out into the chilly fog. “Ten minutes and then I’ll come and get you, and I won’t care who sees.”

3

Angela was distracted by the sight of Charlie stumbling into the men's shower without clothes or a towel. *He looks sick or something...*

Her witch grunted. *Or something.*

Angela frowned.

Neil, still trying to make amends, rushed to make her happy. "I'd like to make a recommendation."

"I second that, Boss."

Angela turned back to Adrian, attention torn.

Adrian raised a brow, still playing his part. "After only one day?"

"Yes." Neil wasn't as sure as Kyle, but he trusted Adrian. What he'd told Marc on his second day here about doubting Kenn, but never their leader, flashed in his mind. Neil added more than he'd planned to. "In time, she'll lead here."

Sharp attention went over Angela from hair to boot, pinning her in place.

"This rookie?"

Neil let Kyle handle it from there. Adrian and the mobster put in more hours together than anyone else.

"We recommend the personal time you gave us."

"That's a lot to ask."

"She'll earn it, boss."

Angela was aware of them trying to give her what she wanted, but the sight of her boy still had half her focus. She didn't realize she was supposed to do anything until she felt the three men staring at her expectantly. She flushed again, trying to replay their words.

Kyle's gaze went to the jacket in her grip.

Angela slid the rookie coat on with a feeling of power and pride that made her stand straighter. Her worries over her son were instantly banished as Adrian spoke.

"This is a symbol of your commitment. You will wear it to lessons and on missions."

Angela's fingers paused on the zipper, voice laced with embarrassment, "But nowhere else, right?" Her cheeks went darker as they all chuckled.

"Wear it whenever you want. It's yours, and only *I* can take it away."

"Only I can take it away." Kenn took his sarcasm out of the area, away from the empty training tent. It wouldn't stay empty long, and he couldn't be anywhere near it right now. Whenever a rookie jacket was given out, a workout always followed. The men would all be in the tent with Angela, alone, for hours.

Kenn walked faster. He was off duty at noon. From there, the day was his and he would spend it waiting for a moment alone with her. She might have been accepted as an Eagle by Adrian and his two suck-ups, but not by all the men. Kenn had

things planned to show them how unfit she was. He would give her one last chance to stop, then he would make her life miserable. He knew how to work the men over without breaking Adrian's rules. His skills at causing pain had sharpened. *If she wants to be one of the guys, I can treat her that way.*

4

Charlie moved back inside Marc's tent with three minutes to spare, not sure if his father was bluffing. The teenager wanted to search mental doors, but the pounding in his skull said that wasn't an option. He would have to deal with this stranger on his own.

Marc had been dozing, warm under the leather coat instead of the rookie jacket he'd pitched into the corner shortly after getting it from Neil. So far, he hadn't worn it at all. *Rookie and me haven't even visited each other in decades.*

Charlie glared. "What did you tell everyone?"

"You ate too many different things last night and need a day for it to clear out. You're here because you didn't want to keep Matt or your mom up and you knew I'd be on duty until dawn."

"You just got off duty?"

Marc's tired yawn was an answer. He saw the guilt he'd been hoping for get quickly hidden by teenage rebellion.

Charlie shrugged, gently. "Not my fault. You brought me here."

“You’re done drinking. For years.” Marc’s tone was like steel. Before the boy could protest, Marc held up a pack of aspirin and a bottle of water. “Take these and eat the crackers in your pocket.”

Charlie patted himself in surprise. *These aren’t the jeans and hoodie I was wearing last night!* He took the water and packet with a glare at Marc. “You’re not my boss.”

“Okay. Then you should be able to get out of this on your own, right?” Adjusting his Colts, Marc moved toward the flap. He instinctively ducked the bottle meant to hit him in the back.

Slap!

The bottle slid to the floor.

Marc stepped over it. “I’ll be done with my next shift around noon. You *will* be here waiting for me. If not, I’ll go to Adrian first and then to your mom.”

Charlie almost cried. “I hate you!”

Marc stiffened, blinking away bright pain. He forced himself to shrug. “We have to start somewhere.”

Adrian saw Marc come from his tent with a wounded expression. He gave the man a nod of recognition for the battle that had begun. Adrian had no problem letting Charlie’s father try to handle it. Maybe they would find some common ground along the way. Much like he would have to with his own abandoned— Adrian stopped the thought. *I haven’t abandoned Conner. I’m just extremely late.*

Adrian's gaze went over the parking area, where Samantha and a small crew were preparing a double semi for the new garden. She was another one who needed to take advantage of the circumstances. Neil's team was trying to matchmake and Adrian wasn't the only one who had noticed. Becky was skipping her new nursing duty with the doctor to perch in the front seat of Tonya's muddy convertible, just out of sight. Neil wasn't in the area yet, but Becky knew he would be. Adrian thought her youth would likely send her searching if he took too long. Becky had become adept at tracking Neil.

It was all likely to become an ugly mess, especially since Neil's XO also seemed to have a thing for Samantha, but Jeremy already had a fling running with Cynthia.

Adrian joined the coffee line. It was life and he was grateful for each of them, no matter how much drama they'd brought. He moved under the steel canopy of the mess with a welcoming smile.

People responded right away. Moods picked up; heavy worries eased a bit. This was a part of his gifts that required no real work anymore. Happiness had its own attractions—like with the college kids and the nuns. They were at a double table, surrounded by Peggy, Hilda, and the other females. Talking and eating as if they'd been friends for years, it was another sign he was leading them all in the right direction and picking up those who were worthy.

And that was another problem he was trying to solve. Who was worthy? It came as no surprise that

he resented having to make those hard choices as much as he liked it. He planned to have Angela meet with all the new arrivals, but that was dangerous to rely on. She couldn't always tell when there was a problem. Like with Rick. Adrian had asked her and been left frowning at her explanation of dark spots. They still didn't know if the man was a threat.

The slavers had been following Angie and Marc, or Safe Haven's radio calls. Maybe both, but they'd shaken their tail for a moment and gone quiet. Safe Haven hadn't put out a radio call in days. If there was a transmission, an attempt at contact, they would catch it and that, along with the extra guards, was the best he could do. If not for the mental map pickups, even the radio silence might have been impossible because of his need to gather survivors. The thought of passing them by was intolerable. He wasn't sure how much longer he would keep things quiet. That made Eagle lessons even more important.

Speaking of lessons. Adrian exited the mess, spotting a group of females reading the tryout notice Kyle had put up. Adrian veered away before they noticed him and rushed over with a million questions. The tryouts were set for dawn, but he had few hopes of those women showing up. Unlike Peggy and Hilda's troupe of helpful females, those six were a clique and stuck to themselves. They weren't ready, but that would change. Angela would be the first, and second... Samantha.

Adrian turned to discover Jeremy leaning in to the blonde as he spoke. Samantha laughed in response, leaning toward him as well. Adrian noted the slyness on Becky's face as she saw the flirting. *That fiery teenager might fall into my army right after Sam.*

5

"Can I go now?" Charlie was full sober. It had been hours. "Somebody will get suspicious."

Marc shrugged. "That's your problem."

"Yours too, if my mom finds out you've kept me here all morning." The frustrated boy hesitated, pushed harder. "Or Kenn."

Marc's eyes popped open. "You want that piece of shit instead of me? Okay. I'll get him for you."

Charlie fell back on the bedroll. "What do you want?"

"You're smart. Figure it out." Marc shut his eyes again. He'd been back from his short shift and dozing in the corner for the better part of an hour now. He'd also skipped lunch mess while he waited for this angry child to understand the path he was walking led nowhere.

"I'm gonna get fed up and blow this open. I hope you know that." Charlie's anger was rising.

Marc sighed. "I hope you get it before you start shouting and bring your mom in here. Why don't you try again?"

“Uhh! I’ve been trying! You won’t tell me enough.”

“Deep down, you know. Push aside all that anger and concentrate!”

Marc’s sharp command had Charlie reluctantly doing as he said, but the mental door loomed like a wall. The frustration rose up again.

“Stop fighting it.” Marc understood the issue. “You don’t want to feel our emotions. It’s holding you back.”

Charlie flushed. “It’s private.”

“It’s your story too, son. Now, open the door. We both have better things to be doing.” That wasn’t true in Marc’s case. Other than Angie, there was no one he’d rather spend time with than this smaller, angrier version of her.

“Fine!” Charlie had reached his limit. Instead of pushing, he yanked on the mental door and fell into a large room in his father’s mind.

A young Angela was what he saw first.

She’s adorable, was Charlie’s first thought. *She seems sad*, was his second.

The little girl was dressed smartly for the holiday, almost a Christmas angel, but no one talked to her or offered her anything from the long table everyone else was picking through. Was she being punished?

The number of guests steadily increased. Each time the door opened to admit new family members, the little girl’s eyes would fly open and give him an awful glimpse of desperate hope.

She's waiting for someone. Charlie was unable to fit that pretty, vulnerable kid with his adult mother.

The door opened again, letting in another large group. This time, instead of quickly hidden disappointment, there was a flash of indescribable joy in the little girl's gaze. Only lasting for an instant, it was missed by everyone who had rotated toward the new arrivals, but two of the coat bound incomers had seen that telling expression. The first was his dad. Charlie had no trouble recognizing this preteen boy as the man whose memory he was sharing. They were still nearly identical.

Young Marc grinned, responding to greetings, but he skipped over the little girl without even a glance.

The group was herded to the full rack to hang their coats. The snow-covered boy managed to place himself behind it. Out of sight, young Marc finally glanced her way.

Charlie's jaw dropped at the open heat there. *You wanted her! At that age!* Angered, Charlie started to retreat.

"Wait."

Reluctant, Charlie continued to study the image, the girl. She seemed to have fallen into a doze, but Charlie saw her flush in response to young Marc's fast glance. She adjusted her hands, stretching out her fingers. Only...had that been a code? After being around the Eagles so much, Charlie recognized the motions as too orderly.

He wasn't surprised to see young Marc nod before coming from behind the coat rack.

"What did she say?" Charlie was drawn despite himself.

"That she'd be outside." Marc tried not to let the pain of the past hurt him right now.

"I don't want to hear that."

"You won't."

The little girl was slipping out now, but no one asked her where she was going or told her to button her coat. In fact, they acted as if she didn't exist.

"Why do they hate her?" As soon as Charlie asked, he knew.

"You tell me." Marc sensed they were finally on the edge of the lesson.

Charlie saw one of the newest arrivals flinch back to let the child go out first. "They know what she can do. They fear her."

"Feared. It was a long time ago, but there's more to this than that. She was an example to them."

"An example of what?"

Marc sighed. "Of who not to cross."

The door shut behind the little girl, cutting off the glimpse of her startling profile of misery and hope. Charlie knew young Marc's face would be the replica. He didn't want to see that; he glanced over the other people instead.

My family? Charlie's gaze stopped at the matching features of a tall, intimidating woman standing near the coat rack. She was imposing, impeccable in her black and white robes...and she

was staring at the door too, only her face was filled with fury. She was the other person who had noticed the little girl's joy when they came in and she didn't like it. Not even a little.

"Mother Brady." Marc introduced Charlie to his grandmother, tone dripping with loathing and pain. "She's the reason you were without a father."

The woman snapped her head around, as if in response to older Marc's voice. Charlie couldn't tell if she had been fast enough to see the caring on her young son's face.

It wouldn't have mattered anyway, Charlie thought. Feelings that strong couldn't be hidden. *Or fought*, he added. The image faded into darkness, but Charlie didn't ease out yet. "I'd like to know something else."

Marc shrugged. "Depends on what it is."

"How you found out...about me." Charlie winced at the instant bright rays of happiness coming from the man now in the Ohio hall in front of him. From the garbage and cracked glass, there was no doubt it had been after the war. When Warren's death came, the world darkened.

Charlie withdrew. He leaned against his hands, thinking about what he'd seen.

"You've had a different life than the one your mother and I would have chosen for you." Marc had spent all day working on this part, hoping it would reach the stubborn teen. "Some people let that sort of thing eat them up, but considering your parents,

I know you're *not* that weak." Marc lit a smoke and opened the bottom of the flap to clear the smoke.

He missed the shadow that had frozen outside as he studied his son. "Would you like to see more?"

Charlie nodded. "But no you and mom stuff."

Marc chuckled. "I promise."

"Okay... Show me where you guys lived."

Kenn had been going to his tent, but Marc's words had drawn his attention; now he couldn't move.

"...your mother and I..."

Marc was the boy's real father. They had known each other before the war! A wave of rage descended over Kenn's numb limbs. His hands clenched into tight fists. In the rear of his head, two voices argued.

One was defensive, wearing Adrian's jacket.

The other was the evil Marine who'd once punched Angela and broken her nose. The feel of that familiar hatred snapped him from the trance. His feet turned toward the training tent. His hand cupped the 9mm on his hip.

The guard on the area headed for Adrian.

Chapter Seventeen

Let Freedom Ring

1

Angela had never been so sore, so fast.

“Uhh.” She dropped down into the lounge chair with a grunt. When her muscles eased, she would get some relief. The workout celebration after getting her rookie jacket, then the impromptu fighting lesson Kyle had suggested, had taken a toll on her.

The large steam tent was empty except for a dozen chairs and towels. She sank farther down into the foldout seat as chilly water dripped and thick clouds of damp fog floated from the center ring of hot rocks.

She had done the entire workout this time—the one Kyle and Seth did five days a week. Compared to Marc, who did his own course every day instead of working out with the men, the Eagles were in even better shape. They were cut, strong; she was looking forward to that too. She wanted everything that came with being in Adrian’s army.

“Oohh.” She shifted, wincing as she searched for a spot that didn’t put pressure on her shoulders. The one-legged pushups were the hardest on her weak arms. The Eagles had warned her she was

doing too much and she'd assumed there would be soreness, but this... *This is hell*. Her thighs, shoulders, arms, and sides were foreign invaders intent on making her cry. Every movement was torture. It had only taken an hour to achieve. How long would it last?

"I don't know. You sure? He didn't send us."

"Yes."

Voices outside the steam tent made Angela's heart thump. Her fingers slid to the gun at her side. Covered by her towel, it was a comfort she went nowhere without. When the two Eagles ducked inside, wearing only shorts, her eyes narrowed in a warning that they couldn't miss.

Slightly breathless from the sight of her cutoffs and half top, both men recognized the clear desire to be left alone. They took chairs that were next to each other, but not her.

"Ugh."

Seth's grunt made Angela smirk. He had claimed he was past that level, too hard to be made sore.

The men settled into the chairs, steam flowing from the rocks in neat, soothing waves. Angela shut her eyes. If it had been anyone else, she probably would have left, but these two took shifts guarding her. She had nothing to fear from them. It was time she believed that.

"The others are coming."

Her eyes flew open at Kyle's warning. The tension came back into her body.

“Seth and I will stay as long as you do.”

Kyle’s words sent reason back into her scared mind. *Eagles don’t run.* “Okay.”

Both males had thought she would leave. The amount of skin she had showing was enough to make a man think bad thoughts. The two Eagles tried to keep their minds from it, not wanting her to know. They would never hurt her in that way, but that didn’t mean the occasional image wasn’t enjoyed when it flashed. Adrian had sent her in here to loosen up, and then he’d sent the Eagles in without a warning, to toughen her up. It was another lesson.

“Isn’t everything with him a training session?” she muttered as more voices echoed.

Kyle had to respond. “Yes.”

Angela shifted again, unable to stifle a moan. “Good. I need it.”

“Did you see that hit?”

Voices were right outside the flap now.

“Amazing.”

“I’ve never seen a girl punch that hard.”

“Woman.” There was good natured laughter.

“You got that right. Marc’s a lucky man.”

The males began ducking into the steam tent, each of them freezing at the sight of Angela lying back, nearly naked and dripping sweat. Men bumped into each other and then became still, unwilling to turn away.

Kyle and Seth got up and took the chairs that flanked hers. It told the others she had protection, even in here.

Testosterone flooded the tent at the clear challenge.

“Stop it!” Angela grunted. “I’m so fucking sore my hair hurts. All I want is to burn some of it off. Sit down or go away!”

Her orders, and that’s what they were, brought sanity to the men who did as they were told.

Seth and Kyle kept their seats on either side of her, just in case.

After a few minutes, small conversations were going again, men ignoring her as best they could. Except for the uncomfortable feeling of having eyes crawling along her exposed flesh, Angela felt little fear despite being mostly naked and surrounded by men who were the same. Her outburst had calmed her nerves. *These are Adrian’s soldiers. We’ll learn to be okay with each other.*

2

Kenn was searching the camp. After finding the training tent nearly empty, he’d started at the QZ and followed her trail. With every stop his fury had grown. The steam tent was the only place he hadn’t tried yet.

“He’s coming.”

Angela’s words caused immediate tension.

“He discovered a secret, I think. I’ll handle it.” She looked around at them. “Can you guys pretend I don’t need your help? It’ll give me an edge I’m hoping to use.”

Understanding nods came at the tactic. Psychology had been one of their recent lessons with Adrian; all of them were eager for the practice, but more than that, they wanted Angela free to make her own choices. Facing her demons herself was the only way she would get that.

Kenn ducked into the sweat tent. His gaze went to the round body splayed out provocatively between Seth and Kyle. Angela was in here. With all these men. Alone. In a skimpy outfit that might as well have been her bra and underwear.

Heat began to fill his vision. *The bra and underwear would have covered more.*

Rage took over. His military mind started sorting it out. When he acted, the others would lunge for him. How could he handle them all and live long enough to kill her?

Angela observed the dangerous Marine through narrowed slits, pretending she hadn’t noticed him yet.

When she didn’t respond to his menacing stare, everyone felt Kenn’s anger grow.

The Eagles were giving Kenn warning glares, telling him she was welcome here.

Marc’s words came to Kenn again. “...*your mother and I...*”

“You whore!” he muttered in hurt surprise at the wound, drawing harsh glares, but when he headed for her, none of the Eagles reacted.

It threw him off a bit. They had to know he was ready to kill. *Why aren't they protecting her?*

“Get up and get the fuck out of here!” Kenn used the menacing tone that had always cowed her in the past.

Angela shook her head. “*You* get out.”

Fury broke over Kenn in an insurmountable wave. The Marine finally snapped, lunging down to grab her by the neck.

Ready, Angela thrust her gun under his chin as his grip tightened around her throat.

“A little more and I’ll pull this trigger.”

Kenn was burning as he struggled to control his urge to squeeze, to keep what he’d earned. “That’s his son. I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Not if I kill you first!”

The Eagles around them faded back, trying to pick the best way to kill him without hitting her. None of them saw Adrian enter the tent. Adrian slid closer, picking it from their minds. She’d wanted to handle it. *Can she?*

Kenn’s grip slowly loosened.

Angela’s reckless side was smothered by the need to show him what now waited for him. “You have disgraced the Corps. I’ll do my best to get you banished for it!”

Her icy words sank into Kenn’s brain, cutting through the haze, as she’d known they would.

“Isn’t that what you told Marc? Pick carefully, Kenn. Everything you are hangs in the balance. Your place, your future.” She sneered despite the awkward position. “Not to mention your life.”

Kenn’s hand was letting go before she finished talking, but Angela didn’t remove the gun, instead neatly following him the rest of the way up.

That drew admiring nods. She learned fast. The Eagles had only shown her that a day ago.

“I could pull this trigger right now and none of these men would stand on your side at my trial. I’d be exonerated.” She was gratified to see an edge of wariness entering Kenn’s expression. “If I want you banished, they’ll do it right now and maybe, just maybe, they’d leave your body on the side of this road for me.”

“No maybe about it.” Adrian’s voice was harder than any of them were used to.

She felt Kenn’s internal flinch. The tension grew as Angela’s own anger rose up to lick her with flames of revenge. She wanted him to pay. *Do I want him dead?*

No, but she did want him to ease off. “The next time I pull this gun on you, I’m using it.” She let her finger tighten a bit more, feeling the hammer sliding. She shook her head before he could react. “I wouldn’t. The witch is running this show and she loathes you. Even if I die, *she* won’t.”

Kenn froze, stopping his fingers from going for his gun.

Angela stared at him. “I don’t want to kill you, Kenn.” She slowly lowered the weapon and sank back into the chair. “But I will.”

The now dread filled Marine spun around to find Adrian’s condemning face by the flap.

“You are confined to quarters until the vote, or we’ll escort you from camp right now!”

Kenn shouldered his way through the elated Eagles, beginning to realize it was all over. “I’ll be there!”

Doug’s huge form appeared outside and fell in behind Kenn without being told as Adrian issued orders.

“Notify the moral board and get more men on his tent. Someone round up Tonya too; put her on ice until it’s over.”

“Wait.” Angela’s protest was ignored by the men as they began to leave, eager to spread the story. “Something’s happening.”

Adrian caught it through the chaos, but his response was lost in the sudden roar sweeping over Safe Haven from the west.

Hours before, Yellowstone ejected an enormous geyser of smoke as the plates below shifted. The earthquake spread across the Midwest like a bomb blast, shaking every inch of dirt for five hundred miles. It lasted more than a minute, sending a black cloud of ash high into the western sky.

The rumbling died down, gradually lessening into stillness, and lava levels inside the no-longer

dormant volcano rose into the cracks and crevices along the surface. The land around the caldera was now swollen, as if preparing for birth.

As a result, a chain reaction of moving plates and tremors spread across the globe and reached Safe Haven right as Kenn's true character was revealed.

The tremor was strong enough to throw all of them to the ground.

Adrian clumsily helped Angela to her feet while he tried to clear the distortion from his ears. Outside the swaying tent were a lot of screams. Adrian hurried that way, using his hands to give new orders. The Kenn disaster would have to wait behind this one.

Angela stepped out into one of the apocalyptic landscapes that she and Marc had come through on the way here and stopped in horror. The neat and orderly refugee camp had been replaced with running chaos. Tents were down, some burning, vehicles wrecked, people and animals streaming through the debris. There were damaged cars, a telephone pole lying across the center bonfire pool.

Angela stared in dismay. How would Adrian ever get this back to normal?

Adrian knew speech was still useless; he gently pushed Angie back into the lopsided tent. He waved Jeremy and Seth over with a short motion. The Eagles followed her inside.

“rin..!”

Adrian could only understand part of Billy's words. He shook his head, signaling. *Can't hear...*

The driver made a fast motion. *People trapped. Show me.*

The two men hurried toward the parking area, Adrian making people pay attention by hitting the air horn they all carried on their belts since the bird attack in Utah. Thanks to the training they'd been given, his army could communicate in half a dozen ways. *Get someone in the kid campers. Do a visual check in with the perimeter guards. Put the fires out. Get a pulley to help us.*

The vehicle was trapped partially in a crevice that had opened up and tried to swallow it. Mitch was slumped inside the crushed truck, along with the shadow of someone else they knew wasn't Matt. That boy, with Charlie at his side and looking better, was trying to climb down to his dad.

Get those kids outta there! Adrian studied it for a moment, ignoring the boy's protests as he considered the things that could go wrong. When he thought he had it covered, he directed the restlessly waiting people now gathered nearby.

The Eagles came through a few minutes later, carting a quickly made pulley system.

The crowd let out a cheer. Adrian would save them. They had faith.

Around the rest of the camp, people were still in panic, shock bringing old terrors to light, but on the ground near the men's tents, one person wasn't moving at all.

Unconscious from a vicious blow to the back of the head, it was almost half an hour before Doug was found and taken to John.

3

Shivering at the fresh bite to the wind, Tonya slid into the trees near the vet area, staying hidden. Where was Kenn? He'd come this way after hitting Doug...

Her hand flashed out to grab the next big shadow running by, but she knew to stay low, expecting him to swing on her. "It's me!"

Kenn stopped the punch, registering her voice. It spun him off his feet and into the side of a large tree.

Damn quake! Damn good shot from Doug too, before he'd managed to escape.

"Get over here!" Tonya pulled him behind the largest tent and shoved his kit into his hands. "The black work truck behind the vet tent has keys in the ignition. You're good for a week."

Kenn stared in surprise, checking in for an instant of sanity. "Why would you do that? They'll banish you."

The whore no longer held glints of greed in her depths, only misery. She didn't want him to go. "You should run now, before they find Doug."

Kenn raised a cold hand to her soft cheek, letting himself feel some of the loss that was waiting. He would mourn later, after his new

mission was over. He ran a rough thumb down her cheek, marking her with a deep red line from his nail. It didn't bleed, but it was close.

Tonya held still, willing enough to take anything he wanted to give.

Kenn dropped his hand, reminded of everything he'd thrown away. For a second in time, he wanted to ask Tonya to come along, but the answer wasn't in question. "Don't wait for me."

Her lip quivered. "No, I won't."

Her sadness was overwhelming. Kenn yanked her forward for a last brutal kiss. He would miss her. That, he hadn't counted on.

Tonya sank to the ground as he swiveled toward the black truck he could see from where they were. She was helping him escape, but she couldn't watch him leave. It would hurt too much.

4

An hour after Adrian had moved the camp away from the huge crevices, Neil found Samantha at the mess and slid onto the bench across from her. "I can't make it tonight."

Samantha hid her disappointment. "That was an earthquake, Neil. I understand."

She winced at how loud her voice was. The quake still had things distorted. It was strange to be back in even a small part of that silent world she'd first traveled through. She'd relaxed here more than she had thought was possible.

“Another time?” Neil was shocked to hear himself offer it, but after how strong Angela had been in the face of Kenn’s breakdown, the trooper suddenly wanted that for this quiet female too. “I might have an hour in the morning, day after tomorrow, but it’s extremely early.”

Sensing he meant it, Samantha smiled and kept her gaze away from the golden skin of his arms. “I run light anyway.”

Neil grinned at the familiar expression, noticing her quick glance toward where Rick sat, three tables over.

What was that? It hadn’t been anything good, Neil was certain. If she was still watching the man, there was bound to be trouble. *Trouble I won’t let her be hurt by, again.* “Five thirty? Same place?”

“Sure. Should I cover?”

Neil hadn’t thought about it and he didn’t now, either. “No. Females are allowed. This is part of your evaluation.”

Samantha frowned, but didn’t tell him no. Maybe a little Eagle training was what she needed. Along with some privacy. The mood was uneasy, like people waiting for the other shoe to fall and squash out the small lives they’d been able to rebuild for themselves. Sam thought they were right to be concerned. Adrian and his Eagles were good, but in the chaos, there was no way they could protect everyone.

Night fell with a menacing suddenness that none of the sentries liked. The sky went from dim green hues to barely even there. They lit extra cans to push back the darkness.

The camp was still up long after the awkward evening mess where Zack had finally noticed Kenn's absence and began asking questions. By the time the main camp had finally settled into their tents, all the levels knew of Kenn's snap and escape. The only good news was Doug's fast recovery from being knocked unconscious.

Adrian put Zack's team, the only one he thought might help Kenn, on duty over the intended target. Then he put two other teams in the shadows to make sure they did their jobs. Most of Zack's men were still on Kenn's side. Adrian hoped making them spend some time with Angela would help. They were the last holdouts to her being accepted, other than a man on Seth's team, but Jeff had already started showing signs of changing. Zack was the one they needed to convert, but Adrian had serious doubts that it could be done.

If it can, I will, Angela soothed from her overprotected tent.

Adrian didn't answer, busy concentrating on where Kenn would be and what he was thinking. All around him, Eagles were wondering the same.

"Where is he?" Neil scanned the darkness.

Kyle gestured. "No one knows. Tonya swears she hasn't seen him and he's not in camp. We've searched it."

"We gotta find him before he gets to her."

"You won't."

Neil and Kyle found Marc sitting on the bumper of the mangled Com truck. Mitch and Rick had both been rescued from the hole and were okay, except for everyone wanting to know what Samantha's ex had been doing with their radioman.

"He's hunting. We might hear the scream, if he lets her live that long." Marc scanned the darkness. "He's out there, getting set, reading us by the changes of the shadows. He'll narrow down where she's being kept and wait for the next travel day for her to come out."

"What should we do?"

Marc's voice went cold. "Kill him, before he can kill her."

"I'll come with you." Neil felt bad for ever fighting with Angela after seeing what she'd been living through with Kenn.

Kyle nodded. "*We'll* come with you."

"Not yet."

All three men jumped at the fourth voice.

Adrian came around the corner of the tent. "We'll make a call first. Give him a chance to come in."

"No way." Neil watched Samantha enter the mess. He would have to reschedule with her, again,

if they didn't get this cleared up fast. "It's giving him more time."

"It was her call."

Marc stopped his own useless protest at Adrian's words. Of course, she wouldn't want Kenn's blood on her hands. And what she wanted, Adrian would give her. If not for all the macho bullshit in this camp, Marc would worry Adrian had made it all up so he could have a chance at Angela.

Instantly fitting that thought in place, he slammed his mental doors shut and tried to be reasonable. He had no proof of that, and he wasn't going to worry about it even if were true. All the men here wanted her. What was one more?

"Do you think he'll listen?" Kyle wanted to do this chore.

Adrian played it cooler than he felt. "If not, I'll be in that hunting party you were organizing."

Because of the tremor, the moral board hadn't been notified. There hadn't been time. They would have to be ready for what came next with the camp, but first, Adrian would give Kenn one last chance to get it right.

Adrian left Safe Haven's light, trying to find the right words among the new piles of debris and the uneasy camp. Even the animals were making more noise than usual. Despite not being able to see the cracks anymore, it was hard for the camp to settle down, but for the Eagles, it was impossible. A sniper was hunting one of their own.

Adrian sighed, feeling cutoff and ill ready to be without Kenn. He didn't know of a way the Marine could keep his high place here, but he might not have to die. His was one life that Adrian wouldn't order his army to take until all other attempts at peace had failed. Adrian pushed the button on the mike.

Silence came from his men as they waited to see how Kenn would be handled.

“Rookie lesson, Marine. Get set.” There was no answer from the darkness, but after a minute, Adrian went on like there had been, positive Kenn was listening to the radio channels. “Eagles are men and women who care about the future of their country. So much, that we are willing to do anything, sacrifice anything, to accomplish that goal. America comes first with us. Not to hide greed, but for the greater good; the survival of our country. The continuation of America is all I care about and there isn't anything I won't do, any one life I won't sacrifice, to make it happen.”

“He's warning him.” Angela now stood in the doorway of her tent.

The Eagles around her let out their relief. To them, it was Adrian proving the loyalty they were all willing to die for as Eagles. Each of them hoped Adrian would give them the same chance if they ever messed up as badly. Until this, no one had.

“An Eagle can now be trusted with a life, the only possession which has any true value. Lives are not to be taken lightly but they *will* be taken. Doubts

are normal and I'm here for that too, but your fellow Eagles share a bond that cannot be broken by miles or mistakes." Adrian felt the right words coming and let them flow. "An Eagle faces errors and makes amends. Even some of the worst choices in judgment can be given leniency if the person acts like an Eagle and is deemed worthy of another chance. Not everyone in Safe Haven will get such a consideration, but as an Eagle, it came to you unspoken, with the first order that I gave, and you accepted."

Magic flowed out, reaching into the darkness with a brilliant golden light.

"Before the war, Grunt, you were something else. Now, you're an Eagle in *my* army and I still have a place for you. That hasn't changed."

"Is he saying we'll forgive and forget if Kenn comes back? 'Cause, it won't ever happen!"

Neil and Kyle ignored Marc's anger. Adrian's decisions were just that—his. The aftermath of the tremor still wasn't cleaned up and probably wouldn't be as good as what Kenn would have done even when they were finished. Kenn had been a thorn in their sides, but until Angela came, he had also been the go-to man. The camp was already missing him.

"Surrender and face the punishment. I'll stand with you." Adrian regarded his two highest men pointedly.

Neither of them wanted to but refusing wasn't possible at that moment. Their bond demanded it.

Kyle keyed the mike. "I won't stand with you, but I won't plot either. Whatever the board votes, my team will go with." Kyle was the first to give Adrian what he wanted.

Neil reluctantly joined them, keying his mike. "Same here, but this only works if you can leave her...*them*, alone. We won't stand for anymore."

Adrian hit the button again, not satisfied, but content Kenn now understood he wouldn't be killed on sight. "Schedule switch. Eagle Two has point from noon until evening mess. Moral board meeting after."

Marc couldn't believe Adrian was letting the dangerous man back in. He earned a head shake from Neil before he could object again.

"Adrian knows what he's doing."

"Giving Kenn a pass?!"

"Buying time." Adrian's tone was soothing. "If he thinks there's a chance to keep his place, he'll take it. Kenn assumes Neil and Kyle and you, of course, to be the headhunters. He won't think I've rigged anything because it'll be much easier if the Eagles vote him back in. Then, we don't have to explain it to the camp."

Marc was confused. "So, you don't plan to let him stay?"

Adrian shrugged evasively. "That's up to the board."

He was gone an instant later, leaving Marc's anger behind. Marc wanted Kenn dead for the

mistakes of their past, but Safe Haven needed him alive to help fight for the future.

6

“What punishment did you ask for?”

All of Zack’s team wanted to know that answer.

“He deserves the same as everyone else, right?”

Angela stared back coldly.

“Death!” Allan gestured. That was the standard punishment for a woman-beater in Safe Haven, always carried out away from the camp’s sensitive view. “She asked for his death!”

“It’s a trap. One of you call him, right now.” Zack wasn’t about to let his mentor be tricked into coming in just to be met with a bullet.

Angela’s laughter stopped even the Eagles in the shadows; all the men stared at her in wary confusion.

She slowly stopped, wiping at her eyes. “I’m sorry... It’s just that you have so much loyalty for him and he feels none toward you.” She shook her head. “Such odd alliances have come from this war.”

Angela regarded Lee. His thoughts were easy to read. “If I tell you what you want to know, will you support me over Kenn?”

It was the moment some of the Eagles had feared. She was using her new freedom to usurp authority, but there was no denying that she was

more worthy than the Marine Zack's team was ready to sneak off and help.

Lee caved. "To know, I'd swear loyalty to the wolf and his master."

Angela cracked a smile. "I won't ask for it. You'll accept me when you're ready. As for your question, talk to Adrian. I'll try to answer it if he says it's okay."

There was a dumbfounded silence as all of them realized she'd just reminded them of who was in charge here—Adrian, not Kenn.

She sneered at Zack. "Kyle is coming through the trees to your left. Don't shoot him."

Kyle nodded to her. "Boss man says for you to meet him in the training tent."

Angela went immediately.

Around her, shadows followed.

Angela tried not to appear worried. Kenn was out there somewhere, probably with a scope searching for her. The moment she'd feared for so long was finally here and it was terrifying.

Kyle had only heard her last words. The few Eagles still in the shadows were quick to fill him in.

When he glowered at Lee, the pain there was too great to deny.

Kyle sighed. "I'll do it this once because she wants it. From now on, anyone else can go to him themselves and explain why it's worth her wasting that kind of power."

Angela ducked into the training tent with a feeling of relief, but she didn't let her guard down yet, not sure if it was a trap to get her alone. The Kenny she'd survived before the war was capable of that and worse.

Adrian was waiting for her in the large hay room.

Angela felt better as she read his thoughts. He wasn't as worried as everyone else. That meant he still had faith that Kenn would do the right thing. She hoped he was right.

Adrian saw her controlling the fear and knew he'd been right to put himself with her instead of an Eagle. She honestly believed Kenn would try to kill her. That meant he might.

This was the most dangerous time—the chaos while they were closing the gaps in security. Adrian would have to be relieved before dawn came, but for now, his presence would be a distraction for her and also for Kenn, who should be set up at this point, as Marc thought. Adrian wasn't sure that his radioed words had been enough. Until he was, he planned to stay close to her. Kenn wouldn't take the chance on hitting him, to get to her. Anyone else was likely a dead bird.

“Ready for a lesson?”

Angela started to say no but stopped. She was too wound up for anything else. “You're the boss. I just hang here.”

He kept his distance. “Good. Show me what they’ve taught you so far in kai.”

Eager to advance in that area, Angela dropped her guns and gear.

Outside, a dirty drizzle began to fall, bringing the fog with it.

Chapter Eighteen

Best Served Cold

1

Dawn hit the refugee camp slowly.

Fog, waist high in places, had rolled in overnight to coat Safe Haven with a mysterious, dingy gray canopy that kept the guards tense. Everyone who knew about Kenn's snap was on high alert. The Marine could be sneaking back in right now to do what he'd threatened.

Still stashed in the large hay room, Angela tossed and worried. The awful dream wouldn't let go of her. She muttered lowly, waking her son with words of danger and death—hers.

Charlie listened. The sense of something about to happen was thick in the chilly air. He'd been scared when he found out Kenn knew who his dad was, but he had been terrified for her and glad Adrian and the Eagles had put her under guard.

Charlie quickly dressed and slipped out. He wasn't sure what to do, but he was positive that trouble had arrived.

On duty, Marc caught the teenager's attention as he came from the tent. He only got a tense glance that made the father look for signs of Kenn. Finding nothing, Marc swept the landscape harder, now

accepting that his bad feeling had grown into an awareness of blood about to spill. *What did I miss?*

Kyle and Neil sipped from steaming mugs, one slowly waking, one refusing to sleep yet. They had finished updating each other about Mitch and Rick, and the hunt for a new Com truck. Both tired males wondered what Charlie was doing, but they didn't stop him to ask. His shadow was Seth, who appeared as confused as they were, but with that expression of intense need, there was only one person Charlie wanted and it wasn't either of the men who had a claim.

They're coming for her!

Adrian's lids shot open at the silent words, not hearing the camp or his men, only the worried thoughts and images of the boy now begging him to do something.

Adrian met Charlie at the flap. "When?"

The teenager linked their minds as he had with Marc... Fate was all around them. They both took off running toward the training tent.

2

On the hill above them, where the layers of damp fog concealed everything, Kenn was waiting. Blind up and ghillie on, he'd been set and ready since midnight. Tonya had packed everything he needed to carry out this last mission. *It's too bad I won't get the chance to thank her.*

The fog below parted, revealing the barest shadow. He used instinct to guide him to his target, the killer instinct his government had honed.

Kenn narrowed in on a shadow that was so small he would have dismissed it if not for the adult form following. Who would have a guard right now? *My targets.*

Kenn adjusted his scope to cover the main entrance of the training tent, but he scanned what he could see of the sides and rear as well. Marc would have her in the hay room, where the bale walls were too thick to be positive of a kill shot. And where Adrian might still be, too. *Smart.* Marc knew Kenn wouldn't kill Adrian or even trim him by accident. If Marc kept Angie and Adrian close, it might take a while to get a clear shot.

Kenn studied the hay room. He was on his own line now. There was time to spare and if Adrian thought his rage could be stopped with a short radio call, the leader was in for a shock. It didn't matter that Kenn's heart had clenched with longing to be back on Adrian's right, or that he'd even been halfway to that coveted place before he'd stopped. They would never really let him— *Someone's creeping along the ground near the flap of the training tent. Infiltrator!*

3

When Angela left the hay room, tired Eagles scanned her, but no one told her to stay put. The first

ever rookie tryout for females was about to happen and she wasn't missing it. She'd spent most of the night worrying, but she'd come to accept that whatever was meant to happen, would. Like Adrian, she knew they couldn't outrun fate.

Angela emerged into chilly fog and saw what she'd failed to account for; it was too late to avoid the knife that slid around her throat.

Time slowed as the blade drew blood.

"Be still!" Dean dragged them toward his waiting jeep.

The knife went deeper... Angela stopped fighting. If he couldn't take her out of here, he planned to kill her. She had to survive to meet Cesar.

Adrian and Charlie rounded the corner of the training tent as Marc dropped from the tree behind them.

Realizing he was trapped, Dean jerked her closer, using her as a shield. "Stay away!"

Angela locked eyes with Adrian, knowing only he would have the strength to do it. She got his subtle nod. Dean wouldn't leave this camp alive, no matter what happened to her.

"Let her go!"

Neil grabbed Marc before he could rush in. Doug helped him wrestle Marc back.

"Let me go! He'll kill her!"

"Eagle lessons, Ten."

At Adrian's words, every man in the area retreated and prepared to do it by the book. They dragged Marc along. It took four of them.

Feeling Dean's determination to take her away or kill her, Angela drew on her courage. She relaxed her body as much as she could. Blood trickled down her chest as she shrank against the burning man.

Almost a caress, surprise loosened his grip for a brief second that she didn't waste. The blade sank in deeper as she twisted. She braced against the pain as she swung her arm around to catch his hanging flesh in a yanking vise.

The knife flared into her skin, making her moan.

Dean's sounds mirrored her agony.

Angela shoved at his loose arm, ducking under.

Dean swung wildly as she spun away.

"Lookout!"

"Open Fire!"

"Angie!"

"Mom!"

"Ahh!" Angela screamed as Dean's knife sank into her shoulder instead of her neck.

Bang!

Dean drained of life as Angela stared up at him in confusion. Between his glaringly dead eyes, a round hole oozed crimson in small rivulets.

Kenn slowly lowered the rifle, heart now thumping with that familiar feeling of victory. *Boo-ya! I made the shot!*

And they all knew. The Eagles were staring up at him in shock.

Kenn snapped a quick salute that Adrian returned. He'd saved her. Now, Adrian would forgive his flaws and let him back in.

Angela caught the thought through the pain and din of voices surrounding her. She shoved into Kenn's mind as Marc swung her into his arms and headed for the medical tent.

Only for Adrian and your place?

You know it.

Then I owe you nothing.

Agreed.

Following Marc and the steady trail of blood, Adrian handed out orders with a steady voice and a worried heart. *We almost lost her!* "Check in of all guards. Get everyone in the mess and accounted for. Pull those steel plated rigs around it and get rid of that body! Call in all shifts and set up a perimeter."

No need. Angela's thoughts were surprisingly calm considering how much blood and pain she was covered in. *He was alone. It's over.*

But how would I know that? Adrian sent back, hoping to distract her with a lesson. She'd been stabbed and it hurt. *Careful cover. Remember it.*

Angela was only vaguely aware of how many members were running their way. *I will.*

In the dark about the drama that had played out behind the scenes, the camp was there to greet Kenn as he walked down the hill in his handmade sniper cover. A large part of the startled crowd met him, some of the Eagles as well, but Adrian was nowhere to be seen. Kenn stored it, bitterness still festering. He'd known Marc would run to her side, but he hadn't expected the boss to.

As he strode toward his truck, Kenn tossed the brass to Kyle. "Give that to him. Tell him I want my place back."

Kyle nodded, sliding the warm casing into his pocket. Like him or not, Kenn was needed. None of them had been able to take a shot without hitting her. Even Marc had hesitated when Doug let him go. Adrian had been drawing his own weapon when Kenn fired, but it would have been late, even if he could have accounted for the angle. Kenn had saved her life. Kyle had little doubt Adrian would give Kenn what he'd asked for.

Kyle saw Kenn be welcomed by Tonya in a way that had the Eagles patrolling the parking area staring in surprise. Most of them hadn't known the two were having an affair.

Kyle frowned at the term. Neither of them was dating anyone else. Theirs was more like a relationship. *Will he abuse her, too? Will Adrian care?*

Kyle vowed to find out.

“Did he know? Did Kenn let him get that close to you intentionally?” Adrian was overwhelmed with the need to do something. *She was hurt on my post!*

Angela shook her head, wincing as fresh warm drips ran down her arm. Kenn had lingered long enough to make sure she’d be marked. This searing wound was his payback. “Yes.”

Marc and Adrian both pivoted to John.

“Is she okay?”

Marc’s tone was threatening.

The doctor snorted, snapping on a pair of gloves. “Does she look it?” John elbowed his way through them to get to her. “Make a hole!”

Both men instantly responded, going to linger near the flap.

Angela’s grin became a grimace as John dumped alcohol over the heavily bleeding gash and began wiping at it.

“You all right, Lass?” Doug’s big form appeared in the flap, face bandaged.

She held still, flashing a too bright smile instead of moving. “Just a bit dizzy.”

“You get that a lot here.” The big man grinned before ducking out.

“Ready?” John hated causing her pain.

Angela did nod this time.

The hardened men by the doorway both winced at a fresh gush of blood of her injury.

“Don’t do that!” John wished Anne was here instead of babysitting.

“Sorry.” Angela smiled at him through the stinging and throbbing.

The upset doctor blew out a sigh. “Hold still now, sweetheart, okay?”

“Yes.”

John picked up the needle.

Marc snarled. “Aren’t you going to numb it?!”

“No.” Angela’s voice was like stone. “I’m losing a lot of blood. Let him get it closed.”

That replaced the anger with worry.

Marc forced himself to memorize the needle moving through her bloody flesh. This was what she was in for as an Eagle and he already knew without asking that this wouldn’t be enough to get her to quit. He would have to be able to take her being hurt, repeatedly.

Angela blocked his thoughts after she picked that up. When her stomach lurched, she tried not to let it show.

“Angela?” Adrian’s voice was full of need for answers.

She sighed. “He felt it coming and went to higher ground to see through the fog. That’s what you tell them.”

Adrian ignored Marc’s warning glare, thinking her being accepted as an Eagle wasn’t just ruffling Kenn’s feathers anymore. Marc was about to start fighting it for real. “Now, the truth.”

“He did it for you.”

“To get back in?”

“He was rolling through the motions, getting set, when he spotted Dean slipping in and made the right choice.”

Adrian scowled. “And if there hadn’t been an attack?”

“He would have taken his own life rather than destroy your dreams. I was only in real danger from him *before* your call.” She felt Adrian’s relief and kept the truth to herself. Kenn had weighed killing both her and Dean with a single shot and claiming accident. The only thing that had stopped him was the certainty Adrian would never forgive him, but Kenn had made sure she would have something to remember from it.

“You should get out of here. It looks funny.” Angela’s words made one of the men grin; the other tensed.

Adrian ducked out.

Marc stared at her. “I’m sorry. So much, I can’t even say.”

Angela tried to smile, closing her eyes as John started on the fifth neat stitch. “You were my shadow?”

“Yes.” Marc’s anger was fading into heavy guilt. “I never saw him.”

“He knew there was no way we could see him through the fog.” Angela didn’t react to the needle sewing part of her shoulder back together, grateful she had a high tolerance for pain. If Kenny hadn’t

helped her build it up, Marc would be in torment right now at her misery. *I hurt!*

“Adrian will have a guard up high from now on.”

“Yeah.”

The needle hit the bone as John tried to get it all in place. Her stomach twisted at the bright red flash.

I need to get these comfort sessions over with so I can have a personal moment. “Will you send in the boy? He’s worried long enough.”

With a last miserable glance, Marc ducked out of the tent, not responding to any of the questions from the dozen or so Eagles waiting. He gestured at Charlie. “Keep your mom company while I help the boss.”

Charlie entered the tent. He slid into the chair by her leg after only a fast glance at the bloody wound. “You’re okay?”

“I’m all doped up. Better than okay.” She hoped the doctor wouldn’t give her away. The boy was already feeling like his father, thinking he shouldn’t have left her alone even to go get Adrian.

“Gonna have a great scar to show off.” Her fingernails dug into her palms as the sharp needle sunk into her flesh for the seventh time. “Could use a different shirt, I guess. And for someone to tell the next group of mourners that I’ll be ready in about five minutes.”

Grinning and eager to help, the boy was gone in a flash.

Angela let out a moan of pain, sucking in the cool air that rushed through.

Charlie left the medical tent to find Kyle and his Eagles still standing nearby. “She’s ready for the next group in five minutes. I guess that’s you.”

His easy tone let them relax a bit, but the tension returned five minutes later when they trooped inside to catch her grimace as John helped her remove the ripped shirt.

All the men spun around while the doctor helped her put on a clean white tank top from his personal drawer.

John swept her wild, tacky hair into a bun, then wiped the drying blood from her pale skin as Kyle’s team gathered around.

“You gonna be okay?”

Angela nodded and had to control her reaction as the tent spun. “Left arm’s shit, but I’m all good.”

Men made jokes that were right, but their expressions said they were upset and needed some way to feel better about how it had all played out.

John watched in fascination as her breathing slowed and the static electricity in the tent tripled. When her eyes shot opened, he flinched.

“There are survivors, fuel tankers, and a working radio station in Omaha... Medical supplies in Cottonwood... Survivors in Martin...”

The list went on for a long minute while John wondered if even Adrian knew what all she might be capable of. John’s thoughts were often consumed by the confirmed stomach cancer that would kill

him in the next months, but for this second, there was hope for him. The stories flying around that she was different were clearly true.

When the Eagles left, each promising to stop by later, Angela gave John a sigh. "Finish it now?"

Knowing how much misery she was in made him nod. Once he was done stitching her up, he would find a way to slip something into her system for the pain.

After Kyle's team, there was still a line of people waiting to be reassured. When she trembled under his fingers, John moved to the flap, glad they were finally done. He didn't like helping mar that pretty skin with stitches.

"Come back after lunch!" He snapped the flap shut angrily on the protests. "I'm going to the mess. You need anything?"

Angela smiled, feeling the clammy bumps and chills of nausea. "That depends on how long I'm in for, sheriff."

The doctor melted. "I won't chain you either. Just give your system time to heal, that's all."

"Thank you. For everything." As soon as he left her alone, Angela reached for the basin and let herself puke, then cry.

6

The camp wasn't doing well. No one knew of Angela's past with the brothers. Now that there had

been a few hours to consider what the attack meant, unrest was spreading. Were they all so unsafe that anyone could sneak in and slit their throats? It was a feeling more than a few people wore.

Adrian was worried about losing them, but he also understood they had to wake up before they could become stronger. Would this be enough to get more of them into his army, where they belonged? Only time would tell. For right now, something had to settle everyone down and make them feel safe again.

Even under the influence of the painkillers John had forced on her, Angela could still hear the chaos of Safe Haven. It buzzed unpleasantly around Kenn's newly inflated laughter and the Eagles' disbelieving shock.

The camp was Adrian's chore, but Kenn was her chain. When she regained her strength, she would handle it one final time and be done with the new games he was now hesitantly planning. They didn't have time for it. When Dean didn't report back, Cesar would come in force and wipe them out. He'd had a tank last time. What would he ambush these people with next?

Poison came to mind and the doctor inside flinched. In these conditions, there would be nothing she or John could do.

During her hours of stitches, pain, and rest, Angela's mind went over everything that had happened. As she drifted, she hesitantly found the

room inside her heart that was hidden deep behind doors covered with webs. She'd only been to this place a few times in her life. She opened the gates with a reminder not to get lost in the past.

Inside the miserable crypt, half a dozen small boxes sat. She swept each one: her childhood, Marc's betrayal, losing her infant. This was where she had placed all the things that were so horrific that she had to get away from them or be consumed by the grief.

Angela took an empty container from the endless stack on the shelf, mentally cringing at so many waiting to be filled. She pulled the day's horrors together—Charlie's screams, Dean's evil touch, pretending to be fine when she needed to cry—and shoved them inside. A fast flip sealed the lid; she slid it next to the box marked *Aftermath*. There were seven crippling horrors in here now. How many boxes would she fill as an Eagle?

Too many to ever go back, the witch warned.

"Good." Angela slammed the crypt shut. "I'd stack them ten feet high to help these people, *my people*, survive!"

Angela carefully stood up and staggered to the flap. She was shocked to find so many camp members gathered outside the tent to wait for word. She'd found a home with all of these shattered, hopeful refugees. She would help Adrian with everything she had, and that included her life. *They're my family... Cesar can't have them!*

In that moment, she understood how to ease things.

Angela shared her full story this time. Using a careful pace, with a wolf at her heels and relieved guards in the shadows, Angela let them in on the personal hatred the brothers had held, smothering the witch when she claimed she finally felt safe now.

A brief time later, the explanation was spreading across Safe Haven, allowing that golden light to once again drown out the crimson.

7

“I can’t make it. Again.”

Samantha peered up from the cup of coffee she’d lifted from the mess, hands still dusty brown from working in the garden all day. “More quake troubles?”

Neil shook his head, trying not to peer down the front of her gaping sweater. “I have to make a run. I’ll be back tonight, but it’ll be too late.”

“Checking for more problems?”

“Yeah. Me and Marc are gonna go have a look around.”

Samantha shrugged. “We’ll do it another time. Be careful.”

“Thanks.” For an instant, Neil thought about asking if she wanted to come along and turned away instead. *What’s wrong with me?*

“Will you tell him there might be a storm? A lot of dirty rain.”

“Yes.” Neil didn’t ask any of the questions he wanted to as he traveled to the parking area. He had already suspected Samantha was special from the way Adrian had her hidden whenever she weather watched, but he’d been busy. Now, he wondered about her gifts. *How much like Angie is she?*

8

Adrian silently screamed at the men who had been on duty; they felt every word he didn’t speak. Someone had gotten through the wire. They had failed.

The leader stared at his men for a long time, choosing, reordering, and yet his mind said she wouldn’t like it, to go easy on them. If Marc hadn’t noticed Dean during the chaos, how could he expect these months-long fighters to?

With nothing to say, Adrian didn’t offer comfort or threats. Instead, he didn’t talk to them at all. He went to the medical tent while the camp was settling for evening mess, hoping she would be alone.

Adrian paused outside the flap, listening. *Is she really okay?*

Come in and see for yourself, the witch invited, always quick to make him welcome.

He ducked inside to discover Angela reclined in a chair, smoking a joint. Her eyes were shut, dark lashes on pale skin; she didn’t open them.

“I’m better now. Going to either make him pay or thank him later. John slipped a few happy drops into the last of my water bottle. He knew I’d guzzle it and notice the taste too late.” He had done it while she was distracted by her son’s last quick visit. Angela wasn’t sure if she was glad or mad.

“Good.” Adrian moved closer to view the red and white bandage covering her shoulder. “How bad is it?” She was covered in a heated blanket. Adrian had no idea how John had managed to do that, but he didn’t get snagged on it.

Angela winced at another dizzying lance of pain. “It’s fine until I do that.”

Adrian grinned tightly, playing along. “Then don’t do that.”

Angela still didn’t open her eyes. She’d heard about Marc leaving on a recon and wasn’t surprised to feel relieved. Neil would keep him safe and distracted, and she would have time to finish sorting things out. Like Adrian knew she needed when he’d sent Marc with the trooper. “Anyone ever tell these people that they’re lucky you chose them?”

Adrian grunted. “It doesn’t feel that way, watching blood run down your arm.”

She sighed tiredly. “Yeah, that top one won’t stay closed. John will do it again when he gets back.”

Adrian scowled this time.

Angela’s tone grew hard. “It could have been worse.”

“Almost was, right? You could have been stabbed and shot.”

That drew her startled gaze to his. “How do you know? I blocked that from you.”

His frown expanded. “It’s common sense. With you gone, Kenn might have been able to earn true forgiveness.”

She raised a brow. “Saving my life hasn’t?”

Adrian snorted. “No. I’m grateful and I’ll show it, but nothing can ever be the way it was.”

Angela was glad Adrian knew the truth. An honestly good man, Kenn may never be. That didn’t mean they could do without him. “What comes next?”

“We get ready for the main group to find us again.”

There was silence again as they both considered that decisive battle, and then he broke it, unable to keep from asking. “Where were you going when you left the hay room?”

Angela’s thoughts were unprotected; he shared the memory.

She woke while Charlie dressed, listening to his worried thoughts.

The slavers are here!

Am I ready? No, but it’ll have to be enough.

As soon as Charlie was gone, she prepared herself as best she could for battle. If the evil group was nearby, she would slip out and surrender, give Adrian time to run again.

He won't, the witch warned. He'll fight for you and lose every man.

Not if I can get to Cesar and bluff him with an offer of giving him my power.

The witch didn't answer.

That was good enough for her. She had to get out of here before all these lives were lost because of her curse.

Angela twisted around to say she had planned to kill Cesar during the power transfer and found herself alone in the tent.

9

Determined not to let the injury interfere with her new life, Angela was on duty near the rear of the vet area before dawn. Set up on a corner post where three rotating patrols crossed, the small dirt bike they'd insisted on placing under a nearby tree made a decent seat when her shoulder began throbbing.

John's medicine had worn off. She stretched her arm slowly, tearing up at the sting. She'd had stitches before and knew the way it worked, but that didn't mean it was easy.

Sighing in boredom and weariness, Angela swept the scraggly trees a minute early. She understood now why she had never been able to get the exact routine of the sentries down. Each area had a rotating part to be covered a set number of times in an hour. It was up to the Eagle to decide when,

during that 60 minutes, those patrols took place. It made them impossible to predict.

Satisfied things were quiet here, she entered the center of the grid around her. She exchanged nods with two of the three men on duty and kept going, assuming the third sentry was on the other side of his route. That happened everywhere in camp so that more than a dozen Eagles would be crisscrossing the entire area at any given time. To make up for those hiding laziness and carelessness, the senior men and Eagle on point had a set pattern they walked for half an hour. Then they did rounds of all the guards. It was complicated from the outside, but once in on the secret, it became clear. Twenty overlapping circles covered the entire camp. It was easy on staffing, as it only required two men in each area instead of four.

Angela settled against the bumper of a truck to have a smoke and give her body another quick break. She was pushing herself, but carefully this time, unlike during the trip here with Marc when she'd run his full course and passed out. She was stronger than she had ever been and not even close to quitting like some people were hoping would happen now. Thanks to John's care, she could still do her duty.

And in the morning when she woke feeling as if she was actually dead? That was what pills were for. *I'm not missing my training time.*

Her shoulder switched from stinging to throbbing. Angela shifted it to a better position, not

hiding her grimace. The rest of the parking lot couldn't see her face from here, only her boots, and the shadows were empty except for the two men she could feel on sniper duty over this patrol area.

"I can make that go away."

Twitching, Angela stretched her arm out carefully. She hadn't picked him up at all. He was incredibly good. "Then I wouldn't be able to use it at the first aid class tomorrow."

Angela holstered her gun. She was going to be fast to pull it again for a while. "When can we start my real lessons?"

Adrian shrugged. "A week or so."

"I don't want to wait."

"I know."

"I'm working my regular schedule."

Adrian's sigh was resigned and proud at the same time. "I know that, too. It's why you were chosen for this, why you'll succeed." Adrian saw she had gotten the wound bleeding again by spending time with the camp and then on duty, instead of resting. He concentrated, pulling from his fury at her injury.

A bolt of vivid blue energy shot from his hand and sank into her shoulder.

Angela arched at the sensation, body alive with need and then it was gone, as was the pain. She drew in a calming breath. "My thanks."

"My honor."

The pain would return with dawn, but the open show of his own gifts, of their likeness, had Angela

fighting the urge to step toward him. She was saved that battle by the sound of a guard coming.

Jeremy slammed an icy façade into place at the sight of them, at the striking need in the air. “Marc’s coming this way.”

Suddenly bone weary, Angela surprised both men. “I’ll find him in a bit.”

The level three Eagle left.

Angela tried to resist the comfort Adrian still wanted to give. Marc would be hurt, but it was better than his oaths of better protection and guilt. She didn’t blame him, but she wasn’t ready to spend this time, when her mind was so empty, being refilled with things that didn’t matter. This was her life, her choices to make. Those who were really with her would accept it.

Adrian studied her, unsure of the mood. Was she blaming Marc? Did she blame leadership? The Eagles were his, so their failures belonged to him as well. He started to say so, then realized that was likely the reason she had avoided Marc.

“How did it happen?” Angela wanted to be sure her guess was right.

Adrian frowned. “With the disks out, Dean must have crawled all night under the fog.”

“I meant the power shift you’re putting in place.”

Adrian’s expression became shuttered, but he didn’t lie. “It’s destiny.”

She had one last question before letting him into what she'd seen for the future. "You have no doubts even though everyone else does, including me?"

"None." Adrian's words were rough with emotion. "It's meant to be."

He didn't say more, but Angela felt it anyway.

Aware of all the ears on them, she flashed those glints of steel Marc would have recognized instantly. "Cesar has to die. We'll never hold this camp together while he murders our people."

Adrian was relieved to have her agree, but it also sealed his choice. If he didn't get her ready for it, she would do it untrained. Her loathing of the evil man had finally conquered her fear of carrying the guilt over his death.

"Yes, it has." Like the man she'd killed on her trip here, another life would be sacrificed for hers. It was hard to swallow, but Angela let it slide down her throat like a fine drink after a toast. *Everything I am and will be to end the slavers!*

The man beside her echoed those thoughts. Together, they would give their flock room to grow without the wolf nipping at their heels.

Marc listened to the conversation with only a little guilt and a lot of confusion. He had gone to the medical tent first, expecting her to be there recovering. Instead, he'd been told she was on guard duty in the parking area. He was pissed, wanting her to get to bed, but even with all that frustration, their words sank in. Had his sweet Angie just ordered a

hit? And why wasn't Adrian telling her the Eagles would handle it and she would be in the rear?

Marc scowled in the darkness, making Dog's ears tense. Because she wouldn't be. If Adrian had his way, Kenn the Destroyer would be on his right and Angela the Witch would be on his left. With that type of an opening line, a leader would be nearly invincible.

There isn't anything, it seemed, that the pair wouldn't do for Adrian. *And I brought her here, to this....savage garden. How's that for irony?*

10

Kenn was high. Being back in good graces again had him feeling like there was hope for the first time since he saw those two Blazers in the street and realized she was here. Saving Angela's life had made up for all those little moments with the camp and even with some of the Eagles. When he ducked into the medical tent hours after making the shot, he felt attention on him, but not in suspicion. If he wanted her dead, she already would be. He only wanted to talk.

"She's not here."

Adrian's voice was hard.

Kenn knew instantly that Adrian hadn't forgiven him a single hit. He entered the dim tent, finding the five other stern profiles waiting. "What happens now? You shoot me even after all those pretty words?"

“This is just a conversation.” Adrian nodded at the empty bench. “A short one.”

The leader waited until Kenn was seated before giving him another hard, searching look and leaving the tent.

It told him this had Adrian’s full support. Kenn braced for the blows.

Instead, there was silence until Kyle finished lighting a cheroot.

“Is it over now?”

Kenn didn’t blink. “Is what over?”

“Your vendetta against her and Marc. Is it over?”

Kenn’s mind flew through answers. His first thought was to lie. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“It is!” Seth warned.

“It isn’t up to you, scrounger!” Kenn sneered.

Kyle gave Seth a resigned nod.

Seth leaned in. Disgust crept out in waves.

Kenn was surprised to feel a small tinge of fear.

“You think you have the power here.” Seth delivered their message. “We’ll run you out.”

“And we won’t give you the chance to sneak back.” Jeremy supported that. “We won’t let you bring it all down.”

“We don’t want to have to talk to you again and we won’t.” Kyle’s hand went to his Glock. “If you break this deal, we’ll kill you and we won’t worry about the herd witnessing it.”

Kenn was silent for a long moment, doing his best to shield his thoughts from his face. If he got

his place back, he might be able to let go of the need to hurt them. “Things will be the way they were?”

“As much as they can be, but there are limits to this deal.” Kyle pointed. “Leave her alone. If you can’t help her grow, at least stay out of our way.”

“I already do that!”

“And if she crosses your line and becomes Marc’s legal mate?” Seth was still furious that Kenn was getting off without a punishment. “Because she will as soon as you leave her alone.”

Kenn let his mind go where it wanted, needing to know if he could accept that. He let out a breath. “I’ll work through it.” And instantly, he knew he could. She wouldn’t rush into Marc’s arms anytime soon and he would slowly adjust.

“You sure?” Seth had to keep pushing.

Kenn snorted. “You sure you can treat me with respect?”

“For Adrian? Absolutely.” Confident they’d made their point, Seth moved toward the door with his fingers snapping and unsnapping his holster. “But all is not forgiven, Kenn. You’ll break this deal. I have faith in that as much as Marc does, and since I drew the short straw, I get to pull the trigger.” Seth headed for camp. “It’s worth the wait.”

Kenn snarled, pushing to his feet in a way that made the Eagles tense again.

“We’ve made a deal and I’ll stick to it but be careful. This trap could still blow up in your faces!”

Kyle shoved forward at that. “Are you one of us?”

“I’m Adrian’s!” Kenn ducked out, hoping Tonya was still awake. “The rest of you can go to hell.”

11

Rick read the letter again, not sure if he had missed anything. The camp around him was a half angry, half happy mob. His frustration grew as music blared to life in the Eagle tent next to his. *Did I get across the importance of laying back and taking out the leadership here before attacking again?*

He’d been able to get Mitch to tell him the truth about the tank. Then he’d spent some time with a map. If the slavers were trapped by the Cheyenne River, they would have to take the long way around. He had roughly ten days before Cesar got here using their cleared roads—a week and a half to take out Adrian.

Rick snarled. And Neil if he could. *That one has it coming.*

Rick slid the note into a plastic baggie and then deep into his pocket. He would put it in the ground tomorrow as they left. There was too much attention on him to do it tonight. After defeating another bad guy, Safe Haven was in higher spirits than ever. If Cesar came now, he would need more than a tank.

Chapter Nineteen

Hard Lessons

Near Arthur, Nebraska
April 19th

1

Angela ducked into the tent with no signs her shoulder was throbbing from the quick workout she'd just put in. It had been four days since Dean's attack and while the wound was healing, it was slow and painful. "Good morning."

The eighteen men mostly returned her greeting, but the nasty cut across her windpipe and then the bandage over her left shoulder had their attention. It was still bothering them that she'd been hurt.

Angela tried not to be annoyed, but they needed to get over viewing her as a helpless female. She couldn't take much more of it. "We've covered sanitizing and wound reactions. Today, we'll learn to care for the wound and then go on to stitch removal."

Feeling the tension rise, she got busy laying out the supplies. "Most wounds like this one should be wiped clean once a day, and then medicated and covered lightly. Wounds that leak or develop an infection require more care."

She gestured at their kits. "Get your journals out and come up. Tell me something about the wound, and then keep taking notes. These journals should become a part of your emergency kit so that every injury you learn to handle will be at your fingertips for comparison during a mission or emergency."

Under Marc's dark glare, Angela slid out of her sweater and hung it over the chair. She carefully pulled the tape up on the scabbing wound and held out the stained gauze. "Observations?"

It was hard for the protective males to ignore the crusty stitch line that was ugly black against angry red. They were used to injuries on each other, but to view it on a female felt wrong. They offered muttered answers.

"Nothing green yet."

"There's only a little yellow."

Angela was encouraged. "Which means?"

"There's no sign of infection on the bandage." Jeremy's tone was curt.

"Good. You come up first."

Jeremy moved closer, studying the leaking wound. "Brighter than yesterday." He wrote it in his journal, trying to ignore the stares boring into him. "It's still bleeding."

"Which means?"

"You need more stitches."

She sighed, eyes shutting. "The stitches are loose again?"

Marc almost yelled. "It means you're not taking it easy like you should be, so that it can heal!"

Angela motioned Marc forward, ignoring the accusing tone. “Very good. Observations.”

Marc gritted his teeth, furious she would use herself this way. “It stinks.”

Impressed and stung, Angela frowned. “Which means?”

Marc wasn’t sure what she had told them. He’d been too angry to do more than show up that first day, but he didn’t need this class anyway and she knew it. “There might be an infection. You need antibiotics.”

“Excellent.” Angela waved to Daniel before Marc could disrupt the flow. “Observations?”

The amazingly good shooter was the quietest man on Neil’s team; his words were short. “You haven’t taken a pill today.”

“Tell me how you know that and why it matters.”

The level five Eagle squared his shoulders automatically at her curt tone. “By your tension and the way you clenched your jaw when you took off the sweater. You’re in pain.”

Angela waited, not about to let them use her weaknesses.

Daniel’s voice hardened in recognition of her silent order. “It matters because you have to be careful about mixing medications.”

“Good. If the patient already has something in their system, you need to know, but they may not be willing or even able to tell you. Check for the

signs.” She chose Jax, one of the rookies on Marc’s team, next. “Observations?”

Angela went through them all, handling it like someone else’s medical problem.

The men responded by paying attention and following her lead.

“Okay, so what do we know?”

“You might have an infection.”

“The top stitch is coming loose. *Again.*”

“There’s fresh dirt you need to clean out.”

Angela settled herself on the stool with only a tightening of her lips. “We’ll clean it, and then retie that stitch or put in a new one.”

Knowing from the first class that none of them would volunteer, she gestured. “Alex will do the cleaning, and Neil, the stitch. Everyone else, come up and take notes.”

Half an hour later, Angela couldn’t hide the pain as Neil tugged too hard, sending fire racing over her shoulder.

Neil paled even more. “Sorry.”

“Come on man, get it right!” The other Eagles were getting upset that the cop couldn’t make his big fingers do what he wanted them to.

Angela tried to sound patient, shoulder throbbing. “You’re doing fine.”

Neil sent his hands back to the thin thread, trying to be gentle, but his large pads with almost no nails slipped again, this time hitting her wound directly.

Angela flinched, smothering a curse.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t stop!” her voice lashed out against his guilt. “If I were bleeding it would be a lot worse, but you have to keep moving. Get it done.”

Neil had flushed at her pain and the shouts from the Eagles behind them, but her words were exactly what he needed. He managed to get hold of the stitch this time.

“Good. Now like a shoelace, without the bow.”

To see someone so admired get reduced to butterfingers was a surprise to Neil’s team. It had them all crowded around, smothering her with their male bodies as they nagged him.

Angela met Marc’s pissed glare over their shoulders. *You’re next. Settle them down.*

It wasn’t an order or a request. It was more of a plea in his mind, and he gave a short nod, but didn’t say anything. He wasn’t sure he could yet without it causing a fight. The anger was too thick.

“Very good. Now we’ll have Marc come up and slap some medicine and a bandage on it. John will give me the antibiotics when he checks it tonight.”

Marc came through the suddenly clear path with stiffly set shoulders under his gunfighter coat and crisscrossed gun belts. Tension crackled.

Angela kept directing. “Use the Bacitracin ointment. Put a light layer over everything, including the stitches.”

Her skin was hot under his chilly fingers. Marc frowned as he smeared the cream over her injury.

“You knew this would hurt. Why didn’t you take a pill?”

Angela braced for more anger. “Because most of the victims the Eagles will treat won’t have taken anything either. If they can handle my agony, what’s a stranger’s pain?”

“And if we hate the sight of it and want to give a painkiller?” Daniel distracted things before Marc could start a fight. They were in his corner now, but that could change if he kept interfering.

“It’s up to the patient, not you. Their wants and needs come second only to their life.”

She sounded so much like Adrian that the two teams of men relaxed. She had settled them down on her own.

She and Marc realized it at the same time. Angela didn’t glance at him. “Next, we’ll put on a tight bandage. Who can tell me why it’s not a loose one to let in air?”

“Because *you’ll* get it dirty if it’s not tight enough.” Marc’s voice was pointed.

“Exactly.” Angela forced another smile. “Always judge the person too when doctoring. It matters. Grab that box of gauze and roll of tape, and we’ll—”

“Oh, gross!” Becky had stopped in the flap. “You’ll never be able to hide that.”

Offended, (*What is it with the redheaded females here?*) Angela put a hand on her hip as she fired back. “Like, why would I hide it, when I can disgust sooo many people?”

The men snickered at her mocking tones; even Marc cracked a grin.

The teenager snapped her mouth shut.

Angela studied her. "John sent you?"

"Yeah, he said to try to help you for a while."

"He couldn't take any more," one of the rookies muttered, causing fresh laughs.

"Have a seat." Angela mentally rolled her eyes. *Great*. "I'll let you know if I need something."

Becky pranced to the empty chair next to Neil, making every member of his team scowl.

Angela noticed it and made a mental note not to have the girl here again while this set of Eagles were. None of Neil's backup liked her. "Cut or tear a strip of gauze and try to keep it sterile. Place it over...a bit higher so the tape won't touch a stitch. Good, now use one hand to hold it in place and the other to get the tape."

Marc struggled to pull the sticky strips free without placing weight on the wound. He was glad when it was done. *This feels so bad!*

"Once the injury has been treated, then you can take care of the patient's comfort. Medication, clean clothes, warm blankets—whatever you can do for them." Her voice sharpened again. "*If* they want that sort of care. Some people honestly don't need it. You wouldn't coddle a senior Eagle, would you?"

Someone behind Neil sniggered. "Yeah, that's what they should have given Cris when he got trimmed in Cheyenne. Warm blankets."

Grunts and cackles filled the tent.

Angela chuckled with them. “Exactly. Some people want to be left alone. Pain means very little to them.”

“Well, I’d want meds.” Becky waved at Angela’s shoulder. “Bet that would really hurt right now if you hadn’t had a pill before the lesson.”

There was silence—long enough for the teenager to realize her mistake.

Before she could take it back, Jeremy spoke up. “You mean like Samantha.” He went on as if Becky hadn’t messed up, but his words were a warning to the embarrassed girl. “She took a hell of a recoil slip and didn’t even go get the stitches she needed.”

Alex, the best natured of Neil’s team (which was good considering his skill with a firearm), supported his XO. “Sam was great with that gun yesterday. Never thought Adrian’s extra piece would ride so well against a sweater!”

There was another round of laughter, but it was harder, meant to drive in the differences between the two females.

Angela didn’t say anything to stop it. She agreed with their assessment. Life as Becky’s mate would be full of chaos and distraction until she grew up, something none of these men wanted for their team leader, but it was also something the camp could ill afford. Unless the girl suddenly switched her affections to someone else however, she was set on Neil.

Angela gestured at the realistic severed arm lying on the table. “John and I put twenty stitches in

that prop last night. You'll each remove one. Let's roll."

2

All of the men did okay, especially Neil, who was determined to make up for his earlier clumsiness. Angela motioned Becky over, last. The girl had sat quietly for nearly an hour and deserved a reward.

"You take out the last two."

Becky did all right until she tried to pull the final stitch free. It was stuck in the fake blood Angela had been sending down the gory wound to test their nerves and reactions.

Becky pulled too hard, yanking the prop as Angela hit the button. The girl picked the arm up to reset it on the tray.

Fake blood squirted wildly.

Angela sighed as fresh crimson dotted her cheek and clean bandage.

"Oh!" Becky quickly swung the arm toward the ground, sending another shower over the Eagles.

"Damn it!" Marc's shirt was streaked in slimy red. "Put it down!"

Becky let go, retreating. Her face was the color of the thick gel as she moved toward the flap. *I can't do anything right!* The girl fled.

Those who'd been snickering allowed themselves to explode, drawing in the others.

"Looks good on you, Marc!" Neil teased.

Marc let out a sigh, not thinking. “Better than what I got from the other teenager.”

The tent filled with warning gestures and glances.

Marc realized his screw up too late. Their thoughts rushed over Angela, full of her drunken son.

Marc hadn’t told her. “How could you do that to me?”

The tent went silent at her disbelieving glare.

Before he could form a response, Angela grabbed her sweater and stormed to the flap. “Class dismissed!” If she didn’t get away from him now, there was no telling how bad it might get. He’d kept something like this from her, and then had the nerve to get an attitude over her open actions? *Who the hell does he think he is?*

Marc ignored the call from Neil to give her some time, hurrying to catch up. “Angie, wait.”

Angela drew attention that she ignored as she stormed toward the training tent. The fake blood made it appear as though she’d been hurt again, but the guards would have to get in line behind her rage.

The fury of betrayal was ugly, dangerous. Did Marc know how many beatings she’d taken for that boy? Had he bled, birthed Charlie? Was it Marc’s heart ripping apart as the bombs fell? She increased her speed, holding in the pain. She didn’t want to hurt him. *How can I get rid of him until I cool off?*

The training tent came into sight... Angela broke into a run. She would use the Eagles to her

advantage. They could give him a quick lesson on how she felt about shit like this.

Angela hurried straight to the hay room with a fast glance over her shoulder that told the guards whoever she was running from was still chasing her.

The men inside the tent took in her upset state, the fresh blood, and rushed to help.

The next body to come through the flap was knocked down, dragged inside, and hit with blow after blow before he was recognized.

The Eagles had expected Kenn; they were shocked to discover someone else on the bottom of the pile.

Marc let Seth help him up, tone rueful. "I shoulda been expecting that, I guess." He shook off the bells, wiping real blood from his nose and mouth. "It's what I get for not tellin' her."

Understanding filled the men, realizing what had happened. She couldn't hit Marc right now and hope to do any damage. So, she'd had them do it.

"Hell of a mind on that one." Doug pulled on his army jacket.

Marc tried to joke through the throbbing and heavy feeling of doom settling over him. "Not a bad temper at all."

Doug chortled. "Adrian will settle her down. Maybe you should wait and talk to her afterwards."

Marc's face hardened. She hadn't come here by chance. She'd run to Adrian. What did that mean?

His stomach clenched with fresh waves of anger. *Damn this place!*

The darker skies were a complement to his mood as he exited the tent. When she needed something now, it was clear who she would go to. She'd replaced him.

Marc's gut was burning with injustice. Nothing was turning out as he'd hoped. *Even Kenn is still here!* Marc couldn't believe they'd let that piece of shit return. She'd been hurt, before and after coming here, and they were giving him a pass because he had taken advantage of a prime opportunity. It was so wrong. *We were almost free of him!*

Marc's mind was full of the anger he'd been carrying for the last week, but now despair had begun to creep in. Unless he could get Angie away from here, he'd lost her.

3

Angela had leaned against the hay room wall, arm tensed to greet Marc as soon as she heard his steps. Doug's words to him made her swivel. *Adrian's in here?*

Adrian stayed still, taking it all in. She'd set Marc up by leading him here and was now ready to give a vicious temple hit meant to disable. How had she planned to deliver enough force with a hurt shoulder? *Her gun.*

"I wasn't going to kill him, you understand." Angela's tone was conversational. "Just get my point across."

Adrian's expression was unreadable, but she could feel his pleasure. Even emotional, she reacted like one of his men.

"He doesn't understand how much I want this."

"Yes, he does." Adrian told her the truth. "And that's the problem. On the trip here, teaching you was fun. Now, it's serious and he recognizes the danger you're about to be in. It's eating at him."

Angela put the .357 away. "Yeah, Marc doesn't like feeling helpless."

"None of us do." Adrian gestured. "How about a lesson?"

Angela agreed right away. Other than standing duty over the kids' area and her first aid class, they hadn't been letting her do much. "Yes."

Adrian came from the shadows, but he kept his distance despite the urge to see if any of those bloody streaks needed tending. "Why did you come here?"

She shrugged. "It was the best place to ambush him."

Adrian raised a brow. "You would have followed through?"

Her nod was fast, but her voice was heavy. "And probably hurt him if he hadn't realized what I intended."

"After the first greeting he received, you hoped he would back off or keep coming?"

"Both."

Adrian gestured at the cracks, where eyes suddenly disappeared.

Angela felt the anger grow deeper. She needed a workout that her shoulder couldn't handle. *Marc lied to me!*

Adrian handed her the knife he'd pulled from the target. "Practice and we'll talk."

Angela felt her anger flare higher. *He should have come to me right away!* She threw the sharp blade with little thought.

Adrian wasn't surprised when it stuck in the center.

"What should I talk about?"

"Versailles."

Angela flinched, then retrieved the blade. "You're the boss."

4

"New arrivals in the QZ." Jeremy let off the mike.

"Copy."

No changes in plans were mentioned. Jeremy listened for Adrian's next call to come across the radio, along with everyone else who knew.

"Angela to the QZ."

"Copy."

At least she sounded calmer now. Jeremy was impressed with her reaction. Kyle's full team was on duty at the QZ today, but Jeremy had little doubt a few other off duty Eagles would show up too. None of the higher levels who took turns guarding Angela liked the idea of her being so close to

strangers who might be sick or dangerous, especially with the bandage on her shoulder the Eagles still felt bad about.

Jeremy took a quick check to verify their full team was in their spots on the garden area, ending with Neil, who had just come through the tent area to join them. Jeremy gestured in response to his leader's silent question. *Do you have this covered?*

You know it.

Neil was another shadow who would patrol around the QZ anytime Angela was doing this duty. Jeremy was glad. In a fight, Neil was the only one he wanted on his six. Neil was ruthless.

Jeremy scanned the stalk covered area again, slower this time. They were still on doubled duty; no sign of the slavers was making them all worry. Most of their team was on this side of the tape, scattered around the livestock and parking corner. Each of them gave Jeremy a motion of disappointment as Neil headed to the gates. They'd volunteered to be here because of the new garden being put in, eager to observe their team leader as they protected Samantha.

Jeremy made a motion with his hands. *He'll be back.*

Jeremy scanned the crew now coming through the trees. Samantha was in the lead, loaded down with gear and appearing eager to start her first project for Adrian.

Jeremy came forward when she peered his way and was rewarded with a smile that he returned

openly. She was cute. Neil had good taste in *adult* women.

Men behind him shifted uneasily as Jeremy said something that made Samantha giggle. Did he want her, too? It was something none of them had considered. A fight over the new woman would be as bad as Neil taking little Becky for his legal mate come October.

Jeremy grinned at Samantha. "I'm pretending to be in love with you today. Do you mind?"

She put her bag and box on the ground, feeling his hot gaze slide down the front of her shirt. Samantha blushed. She wasn't immune to the appreciation she read. "You got a role in mind for me?"

Jeremy chuckled, thinking she'd probably been a great secretary or something. He could easily imagine her in an office. "Got three spots open for the day's scenes—the screaming shrew, the confused bachelor, and the slightly willing bachelorette."

Sensing a ring of truth, Samantha shrugged, voice cooling. "Games are fun until people lose. You got that covered?"

"Not yet."

Samantha studied Neil's XO, ignoring the group of women waiting curiously just out of hearing distance. After adding up the clues from the gun lesson and the babysitting, she had realized Neil's team was matchmaking, but Samantha wasn't sure if she was okay with it. "It's just for

today, right? I don't want to be involved in camp drama."

Jeremy almost caved. *She's so smart!* "That's up to you." Neil had spotted her first. By their unspoken Eagle rules, he had first claim.

Curious, and more interested than she wanted to be, Samantha gave Jeremy a slow, sultry smile that made his team tense again.

"Just pretend, right? I need that part clear upfront, especially if *you* plan to play the other guy."

There was a note of curiosity in her voice that Jeremy let himself answer honestly. "I can't promise that, Samantha. He may not see your worth yet, but I do. I'd be honored."

Jeremy left with the pleased blush brightening her cheeks, ignoring the reporter staring at him in shock from the parking area. Cynthia refused to let anyone know about their relationship, saying it would hurt his place under Neil. Over the last weeks, since Angela had come, it felt more like the reporter was only with him for the information supply and that wouldn't do. Neil wasn't the only one who would get a wake up.

And if you get hurt in the process? his mind asked. Jeremy answered bluntly, *Then, it's what I'll deserve for chasing her too, when I know she belongs to Neil.*

Angela caught the thought as she passed by the area, but she didn't react. Jeremy didn't want to own Samantha, only care for her. As for Neil... Angela

wasn't sure. The trooper was hiding a possessive streak that was similar to Kenn's, but it was something for Adrian to handle if he needed to.

Fake blood cleaned off now, Angela was more nervous than she appeared as she approached the QZ. She managed to keep her expression blank when Doug held up the tape for her, drawing murmurs from the small group waiting near a beaten RV.

Doug motioned at a small table under a long green awning, still amused at her tactics. *When will the other women here act that way?* "We'll be around."

Angela sat down without acknowledging the small group of refugees, feeling them out first. John only needed one form to get them registered and it wouldn't take long with these people, she was glad to discover. The little girl on her father's hip was busy whispering her favorite story to him while they waited. It was about hunger. As soon as Angela mentioned food, they would be convinced to stay.

Satisfied they weren't hiding anything big, she smiled in welcome. "I'm Angie, one of the doctors here. Come on over and fill out a paper, and then we'll get you all fed and settled for the night."

"Where do you want me?" Charlie sullenly joined her under the canopy. He was braced for a reprimand; he knew she and Marc had been fighting about him.

"In your tent tonight so we can talk."

Charlie sneered. "My *dad* already handled it."

Angela felt the flames go up, but instead of being nasty, she shifted into a more comfortable position in the hard seat. “It’s good you two are getting along.”

Not sure what to say, the teenager reacted with the only emotion he seemed to have for her these days—anger.

“*Someone* needs to protect him from being hurt.”

The wounded mother snorted, shoulder throbbing mercilessly. *So much for peace.* She was fed up with both of them. “Marc always lands on his feet, boy. Look at the current problem. He lied and gets your support. I, on the other hand, give you the truth to every question and still get shit. It appears that you have the same double standard as your father.” Leaving him speechless, she surveyed the curiously waiting people. “My apologies. Even the war couldn’t destroy teenage angst.”

Moving by the over-patrolled QZ, Adrian heard the sharp remark and smothered his amusement and approval. You could only have a light touch for so long and then a heavier one was needed. Adrian got a gesture of things being fine from Doug and kept going. It was Angela’s first time meeting the new arrivals without John there to direct her or alert the sentries to any problems. All the Eagles were nervous about it.

Waiting until he was out of sight of the area, Adrian waved Kenn over, aware that the Marine

was ready to leave for a shift on road clearing. Things were far from fixed between them, but the much quieter man was working on it. Kenn had spent most of the last week out of camp, gathering food, water, and fuel. Tomorrow evening, he and a small team would leave on a slaver recon. In their case, no news was not good news, but a sign of danger. “I need photos this time. If you get the op.”

Kenn knew he would make the time. On this, he and Neil agreed. The Eagles were ready, but until Kyle put his vote with theirs, Adrian wouldn’t budge. There was complete trust of the mobster’s judgment there and it bothered Kenn as much as it always had, only now there wasn’t a struggle inside to hide it. His true nature, surly and quick to spark, was on view for all to witness. Kenn and the camp were both slowly adjusting. “Main men, special spots and weapons?”

“Everything. Their chain of command, captives, blood—get it all.”

Adrian’s voice had hardened with a frustrated anger that told Kenn the leader wouldn’t be able to ignore the threat much longer. Kenn wasn’t sure why it was so important to get those images now, but anything was better than being here and seeing Angela welcomed by the Eagles for her determination and strength. He’d tried extremely hard to crush those things.

“Marc, wait up!”

Neil’s loud call drew attention.

Kenn spun away from the parking area as if he'd been stung. He may have to accept the changes and he would, but it didn't make the need to kill Marc any easier to deal with.

“Hey, Marc!”

Marc couldn't keep ignoring Neil like he had been for the last week. After seeing the way Angela was so set on being an Eagle, he wasn't even sure he was angry about the kai lesson anymore. A couple of shoulder slides were nothing compared to watching the clumsy trooper put in that stitch.

Waiting, Marc saw Charlie sitting next to Angie, Dog at their feet, and felt his heart clench. His happy family...except they weren't his anymore than they were Kenn's. After this morning, Marc wasn't sure if the small hope he had held for them still existed. If Angie wouldn't give up being an Eagle, he would end up leaving. That thought stopped him from doing more than nodding at his son when Charlie glanced his way.

Don't sweat it. She's sharper now.

Marc's mind flashed to the morning's fresh set of bruises. *Tell me about it.*

Neil was glad Marc hadn't embarrassed him by refusing to stop. “Can we talk a minute?”

Marc shrugged. “I've got the time if you do.”

Neil gestured toward the small wooded area outside the tape. “Let's take a short walk.”

The two men slipped out with only a few witnesses. One was Jeff, the guard on the area and

that man hesitated. Those two weren't as needed as Adrian. Surely they didn't need a tail too?

Jeff was the only man on Seth's team who hadn't swung to Marc's side yet and he turned toward Safe Haven in defiance. He and Zack had been from the same Texas town before the war. When the horror had destroyed their lives, they'd set out together. That was a bond not easily broken. What Zack thought was best, Jeff intended to go along with.

Of the other two witnesses, one was hoping the guard might feel that way and the other one never considered the danger of following three grown men out of Safe Haven's perimeter.

Neil led them to a secluded area before stopping. He took his hat off. "I'm sorry. I hated it. I only did it because—"

"Of Adrian's orders," Marc tried to finish.

"No. Because of Angela. She pushed me too, hard." Neil sighed, dropping down on a nearby boulder. "She wants it, Marc. Neither of us has the right to stop her."

"And when she gets killed?"

"We won't let that happen."

"Bullshit! If not for Kenn, Dean would have killed her."

Neil didn't answer; he couldn't. It was true.

Marc wanted to stay angry, but the sadness was too consuming. He let Neil off the hook. "It'll be her choice from now on. I'm done."

Neil sighed in relief, missing the wording. “Good. Now spend some time with her that doesn’t involve an argument.”

Marc let out a snort. “No problem there. I doubt she’ll even speak to me.” He tried not to be bitter when his friend laughed.

“She’s as dangerous as the rest of us, only in other ways.”

“Yeah.”

Now perched carefully in a nearby tree, Becky’s attention was pulled between the talking men and Rick. Clearly, the new guy was spying on Neil and Marc, like she was, but why? Was he really a slaver in disguise? A delicious chill shot into her gut. She forgot to breathe as the suspected traitor turned her way.

Rick’s vivid stare held her, saying everything she wanted to hear, and yet nothing. He was an exotic, foreign mystery to her slowly awakening female body. When he went back to spying, the teenager flushed happily. *He’s letting me stay!*

Not sure why she hadn’t already alerted someone to the new guy’s odd behavior, Becky studied him. Rick had acquired a uniform somehow and gave the appearance of being an Eagle... The same Eagles that were adamant about Adrian’s age rules.

Rick wasn’t. She could see it in his hot glances and feel it in his body language. If she offered herself to him, there wouldn’t be any hesitation. He

would be between her legs before she could change her mind.

As if hearing the thought, Rick surveyed her again. The open need in his gaze sent up flares of alarm and made her body tighten. Suddenly feeling shy, she switched her attention back to the conversation, but not before a small smile of invitation crossed her young lips.

“Are we okay?”

Marc sighed. “Yeah.”

Neil’s relief was obvious. “Great.” He did a quick sweep. “You ready to get back?”

“After you tell me what’s up with you and Samantha. I thought you wanted—”

“Wait.” Neil’s tone was sharp enough to stop Marc. “I heard something.”

Becky froze as Neil swept the area where she and Rick were hiding. But neither of them had budged, she realized, and let herself draw in air as the trooper scanned another direction. He didn’t know they were here.

Marc frowned. “What was it?”

“Like a...growl.”

Marc’s mind flashed to Nebraska and the wolf battle that he and Angie had fought to get here. “Let’s go.”

Both spies held their breath as the two men walked right by them without noticing.

When the two Eagles were ahead, their shadows followed silently, keeping track of each other's progress and the conversation.

"Can I ask you something?"

Marc chuckled as they neared the caution tape. He hadn't repeated his request, waiting to see if Neil wanted to talk about it. "Samantha, no question."

"That apparent, huh?"

"You need more than a game or a chase. Samantha can give you that."

"I know, but I..."

"Want the other one, too."

Neil reddened. "Yeah."

"The problem there is that she won't stay young and flirty, and you'll be stuck with a woman who doesn't have a clue what she wants." Marc tried to give solid advice as they stopped just outside the perimeter tape. "With the other one, it's different. She's been through enough, learned what matters. True survival hasn't even crossed Becky's mind. She's a cute kid, I'll give you that, but in the end, cute fades. You have to be able to live with what's left."

Neil's own common sense, and the comments of his team, had been telling him that all along. "I have to be an Eagle first. My woman would need to understand that."

Marc chuckled. "Good luck there."

"You too."

Marc's amusement faded. "Yeah. We have the gun class together tonight. Should be tense."

“She’s pissed.” Neil didn’t tell Marc that he’d heard Angela arrange to switch off that duty.

Marc didn’t answer, his attention swinging to the woods behind them. Had he heard Neil’s growling noise?

“You gonna try to talk to her?”

Marc swept the trees harder, now sensing a shadow and he berated himself for the lack of awareness. “Probably. You knew we had a tail?”

Neil nodded. “It’s Becky.”

“You allow it?”

“Yes.” Neil brushed away a small fly, thinking for being so small, they bit like mosquitoes. It was early for them, but the vet already had a stockpile of salve for the animals’ ears.

“And what about the things she overhears?”

Neil snickered. “I didn’t say anything bad. *You* did.”

Marc laughed as they ducked under the tape, feeling like friends again.

Behind them, rage was boiling from both of those listening. Their fears of Neil and Samantha were founded. Instantly bonded by their anger, when Rick sidled over, Becky held still. He would help her keep them apart. And in return?

His expression was one of a wolf about to have a meal, going over her young body with blatant lust.

“I’ll think about it.” She edged out of the tree fork.

Rick slid his hands to her small waist to help her down.

“Don’t!”

His hands snapped back as if she’d slapped them.

Her tone remained sharp. “Never without permission!”

Rick’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “May I?”

Satisfied he knew the rules, she refused. “I have plans later. I can’t smell like you.”

Rick’s sexy grin made her knees go weak.

“Lucky guy.”

“Yeah, wish he thought so.”

The traitor admired her slim curves again, producing a jolt of awareness that made her blush again. “His loss.”

Becky kept eye contact as she marched by him.

Rick retreated, aware of how much he liked the sneaky girl. So far, she was the only one who had noticed he was out of his tent without a guard. Maybe when this camp fell, Cesar would let him keep her too. Then he would have both of the females Neil wanted.

Neil’s mind was full of Marc’s words as he joined his team. He wasn’t sure enough to try to claim her, but he hoped Samantha felt like talking about things. He needed to know if the attraction was there for her too. The lust he felt for Becky had been sharp for a while, but the need to know Samantha had overpowered it. When he took

himself in hand these days, it was cornflower blue eyes and platinum hair in his fantasies.

Struggling with the change, Neil entered the new garden area and stopped in shock at the sight of Jeremy and Samantha entering one of the supply trailers, alone.

Neil's hands clenched. *I waited too long.*

Chapter Twenty

Tropical Heat

Pitcairn Island

1

Kendle was drowning. Her lungs burned as the shark dragged her below the icy water, and her desperate punches had no effect.

“Home. Have to...”

Kendle thrashed restlessly and Luke listened with a heavy heart. Soon, she would ask him to leave with her and he would go, even knowing he wouldn’t survive it.

He wasn’t certain how his death would happen, was terrified of that part, and yet, he would go where she did. When he’d first found her, Luke hadn’t realized it was his pain that would be healed. He no longer woke with his own screams echoing; no longer slipped into those trances of the past that he couldn’t be wakened from. She had healed the rift, and there wasn’t anything she wanted to do that he wouldn’t help her with.

“Please...”

“Kendle, wake up.”

She jerked out of the dream as if she’d been slapped, gasping for air.

Luke jumped.

“You okay?”

Kendle tried to control her ragged breathing. “Yeah...shark.”

Luke got her a drink. She’d told him of her battle for survival after her cruise ship flipped and about how, in her dreams, the shark always won. He was amazed that he believed her. Movie star, female, young, and yet one of the strongest people he’d ever met.

“Do you want a pill?”

Kendle considered. She’d refused the last couple of times. “Yeah.”

He got it without a comment, handing her the drink and capsule before going to the small table to roll a smoke.

They’d been in the hole-up for four days as soon as the chilly dawn graced them, and in that time he had fortified their new home. His assessing gaze went over the traps and wires along the baseboards, the caps in the ceiling. Ethan was responsible for the body on the beach, Luke was sure, and it was only a matter of time before the rich playboy decided to tie up the loose ends and take what he wanted.

Luke glanced at Kendle and was glad to discover that she’d lain back down. He couldn’t lose her now. They’d spent the last days quietly so he could think it all through and make plans. He’d strengthened the hole-up so that they would have a place to make their stand, and he’d packed them survival kits, but the next phase would be harder and

he wasn't sure if she was ready for it. He had a duty to perform, and soon, before anyone else died.

Kendle's thoughts were more in line with Luke's than he would have guessed. The sight of the body on the beach had woken the old Kendle. Until that moment, she had only been a victim of an unnamed disaster, the sole survivor, and thoughts of her old life had come and gone without much effect. She hadn't been able to recall the Kendle who had bungee jumped, rode the rapids, and spent weeks away from her California home. That girl had been determined to make her mark on the world, fearless.

Kendle after the event, was a ball of live nerves and a terrified survivor who saw only what could have been. Even her grief at losing her twin, her entire family, was second to the need to survive and her waking moments had been consumed with it. Ethan's subtle stalking had magnified that helpless feeling and she'd depended on Luke for security. And she may have remained in that shocked state for an unknown amount of time, if not for the body on the beach.

Mora looked enough like her to give Kendle the sense that she was viewing her future. It had been eerie and scary, but also shocking enough to succeed where all else had failed to reunite her with that other Kendle. The maid from Baxter's was dead, murdered, and Luke was about to be framed, leaving her unprotected. Ethan would claim her the instant Luke was in custody. And then, he'd make her sorry for the wait.

“Are you all right?”

Kendle glanced up from her seat against the wall. “I will be after we catch him.”

Luke blinked. She already knew what he had to do.

Kendle rose slowly, feeling the strength, but also the limits of her body. Whatever she’d been hit with on that cruise ship had done permanent damage, along with turning her the color of a boiled lobster and she was still hoping time might return more of her health.

“We should go to Jenna.”

Luke wanted to tell her no, but after their confusing trip to the Sheriff, he’d come to the same conclusion himself. The only reason Cole had let them go was so the body could be found by a town resident and complete the frame-up. His ex, on his part of the beach, and now he and Kendle were missing. The residents would think they were guilty. Travel would be dangerous, to say the least.

“Luke.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The crazy woman was related to the ruling family here, but more than that, Jenna had those little details that would help them solve this mystery. Without her, he was going to take the fall. Luke’s mind flashed to them arriving in town to report what they’d discovered.

“Very convenient, it being found at your place.”

Luke frowned at the Sheriff. "She's on the beach. If you don't hurry up, the tide will pull her out."

"You mean go there now, at night?"

The Sheriff's tone was sarcastic, but the fear on his sweaty face was genuine.

"Why should we do that when her killer is standing right here?"

"He was with me." Kendle spoke up, hating how the Sheriff's slimy gaze went over her. "We were going to spend the night on the beach."

Silence fell at the image of her and Luke about to share a romantic evening and Kendle took the moment to check out the room. The two-cell town hall was dusty and obviously not used much. Sheriff Cole had been sleeping in the bottom bunk of the smallest one, but he'd jumped to his feet when they came through the door.

As if he was expecting trouble, Kendle thought, recognizing his instant accusations as distraction.

He's in on it.

Kendle swallowed her need to strike out in anger, feeling that old fire. This man could lock them up and then they'd be sitting ducks for the real killer.

Luke's thoughts were along the same line and he waited for the Sheriff to decide what to do next. Things were far worse than he'd thought, even upon discovering that body.

Knowing that locking them up wasn't in the plan yet, the Sheriff turned glowing green irises toward

the door. "I'll check things over when I get out that way."

Luke nodded, slowly moving Kendle toward the exit. Those eyes!

"Fine."

"And we'll be by, for your statement."

Luke nodded again. "I'll be watching for you."

That had been four days ago and they had only been to the cabin once. After a fast trip to gather their things, Luke now had them in his hole-up. Kendle had assumed he was making plans and left him alone, but with each day that had gone by, the tension thickened. Mostly, it was because of an answer he'd given a while ago, when they'd come here to avoid an early hurricane.

"Anyone else know this is here?"

"Probably. Everyone out here has a hole-up. It's the way you do things on Pitcairn."

Eventually, the Sheriff and his co-conspirators would show up.

"We'll leave at dusk."

Kendle didn't protest being in the jungle during the night. It wasn't safe for them anytime.

"What causes their eyes to do that? Do you have a theory?"

Luke set his mug down so she wouldn't see the way his hand shook. "None I care to share."

"I have ideas of my own, you know."

Luke leered. "Are they naughty? We've got a few hours to kill."

Kendle didn't return the joke, too worried to be so easily distracted.

"I think it's something from the war."

That had Luke's mind taking notes. He hadn't thought of that. "Like a side effect?"

She was thumbing through one of the old magazines he'd dug out for her. "Chemical warfare."

"Our nukes didn't have that shit."

"But if there was a world war, not just our weapons were fired, right? And diseases can be let loose too."

"And maybe it could affect optic nerves, too..."

"Yes. I think parts of this island are contaminated with something that has side effects that include dementia, rages, and changes in appearance, like a mutation almost. Did you catch that twitching the Mayor was doing when we first met him by the creek? Some type of biological agent is what I think."

Luke felt his panic slowly begin to ease. He hadn't been able to explain those irises, but her theory made sense.

"We'll do a scouting trip on the way to Jenna's. Maybe we can trace something down by the wildlife."

Kendle surveyed him worriedly. "Will they be monitoring her place for us?"

"Yeah, I think so. We'll have to go on foot."

"And if they catch us?"

Luke didn't lie. "They'll hang me right then, probably save you for a trial, but it'll be fixed. You'll be dead before I'm buried."

"Then we'll have to get them first, won't we?"

Kendle's harsh sneer took Luke by surprise. That was the old Kendle, the one he'd viewed on TV, and the outcast agreed reluctantly. "Yes, if it comes to that."

"You already know it will."

He sighed. "No, I don't and until it's sure, we won't talk about killing them. It's one of my hang-ups."

Kendle understood returning to the past that had almost destroyed him was painful to even consider, but she had a feeling that before this was over, Whacker, as Luke had been called in Vietnam, would be required. If Ethan and the others were infected with something, they had nothing to lose and it took them from dangerous to deadly. She and Luke would have to react accordingly.

"How long until dark?" she asked, missing the cabin's windows, but not the background noise of angry ocean.

"Four hours, give or take. We should get a snooze in."

Kendle flushed at the instant image of sleeping in his big arms and that sent her thoughts to the mission they were about to undertake. Things would get rough from here; she could almost sense it coming. These might be their last few peaceful

hours together and she couldn't think of a better way to spend them.

"I could take a nap," she stated softly, smiling.

Luke felt her need and grinned in return. "You want front or rear?"

"Front."

Her furious blush had Luke forcing a yawn. "Yeah, me, too."

2

Their trek down the cliff took a lot longer on foot. The sun was gone before they hit the bottom and Kendle stayed by Luke's warm shadow as they moved through the darkness. He had them tied together again, but for Kendle, it wasn't enough to dispel the tension caused by the sense of being spied on.

Luke felt the attention on them too, and was glad when they reached the bottom and slid beneath the dense canopy of the jungle. In here, they could move without being glimpsed, thanks to his liking for not taking the beaten path.

They moved steadily through the night, stopping only for short rest and food breaks where they sat close and didn't speak. Now that they were actually taking action, the seriousness had set in. They were tracking down a murderer.

Dawn was still an hour away when Luke finally called a halt and Kendle sank to the ground

gratefully. She was determined not to complain about whatever pace he set, but it was clear that her body wasn't ready for much more than walking.

"You okay?"

She was anticipating curling up with him to wait out the daylight. "Fine as frog fur."

Luke sniggered. "Didn't know frogs had fur."

"It's very fine," she teased as he began to prepare the area for a campsite. They were about a mile from the base of the cliff that hid his hole-up and Kendle tensed suddenly as the sound of water came to her ears. They weren't near the ocean here. What was that noise?

Luke knew her demons well and sought to soothe her. "It's a waterfall, from the cliff. We'll stop by later and cool off."

Kendle agreed happily. Despite the darkness, the temperature was still above seventy and she'd been sweating heavily most of the trip so far. Cooling off sounded wonderful.

Luke made a motion. "Stay put."

He sliced through the end of the rope, releasing her and she waited with trepidation. "Where are you—"

She stopped as his shadow began hacking vines from the base of the wall. The machete flashed in the darkness and Kendle wondered if his demons were on him as he cleared the entrance to what could only be an over-grown cave. Moving through the jungle at night had to be a blast from his past.

Luke ignited a torch and he vanished into the small hole in the cliff.

Kendle slid in behind him without hesitating. She wasn't staying out there alone.

The cave was small and dry, surprising since he'd mentioned a waterfall. Flat and curving around to disappear, the area was also spooky and she kept him in sight as he checked it out.

"This should be fine until nightfall," he called, slamming the torch handle into a hole in the center to keep them lit up. "The rear is mostly a dead end, bats in there."

Kendle shuddered at the thought, but dutifully stripped her gear. If he said they were safe here, they were.

Luke got busy setting up their camp. When he finished, he moved outside to cover their tracks and Kendle waited silently by the torch, fighting images of what would happen if he didn't return. She could count on Luke. He would never abandon her. *And I won't leave him either*, Kendle realized, recognizing her feelings. *I love Luke. It isn't in question anymore.*

3

"Where do you think they're going?"

Bright green eyes studied the Sheriff with contempt. "Your mother's place."

Cole wasn't sure that a few slaps and threats had been enough to keep his mother from telling what

she knew, but said the opposite. He couldn't let Ethan infect her, too. "She won't help them."

"She already did," Ethan growled in frustration. He'd expected to have Luke locked up by now and Kendle in his private care. "She was supposed to send them off on a wild goose chase, not give them clues!"

Cole hadn't understood what his mother was doing either and he let out a quick sigh. Since he'd been attacked at the shack, he was always impatient. "You know she isn't right, Ethan. You shouldn't have picked her to help frame him."

Faced with the truth, the deteriorating playboy spun toward the cave. "They didn't have contact with anyone else. He's too slick."

"Where are you going? The Mayor said to wait."

Ethan spun around suddenly, grabbing the Sheriff by his shirt. "My dad is almost dead. I'm next. Before that, *them*."

"But the plan--"

Ethan shoved him away in revulsion. "The plan! My father wants to leave our family in charge. If I'm dead, what the hell do I care?"

Cole watched carefully, sensing he was on the edge. If Ethan went nuts, Cole would have to be the one to deal with it. What would calm him down? It came easily enough, after considering Cole's own new, violent urges.

“But if we don’t get rid of them other girls first, Luke can’t be blamed. They’ll figure it out and know it was you.”

Ethan had stopped and Cole pushed, but carefully. “Awful way to be remembered, but if you think we should do it now, I’m with you.”

“I need to fill it again.”

The Sheriff felt a chill at the words, picturing the last mess, and then the future that waited for his own infected soul, but he seized the opportunity. “Why don’t you go on? I’ll report or keep following them, whichever you want.”

“Get the rest of them over to Jenna’s and shut her up,” Ethan ordered, moving away from the cave. “If you don’t, I will.”

4

Kendle had been awake for a while, listening to the creaks of the cave and night falling outside. Only desiring his warmth at first, she’d crawled onto Luke’s bare chest and pressed tightly, trying not to shiver. Once his heat had begun to seep into her bones, the feel of his naked skin under her cheek had sent delicious thoughts into her mind.

When he’d hugged her tighter in his sleep, it was easy to be carried away and she pressed her mouth fiercely to his.

Kendle knew he wasn’t alert yet, knew she should stop after the one good morning embrace, but when he deepened the kiss, claiming her mouth

as if he owned it, thoughts of stopping were pushed aside by desire.

Luke was struggling with himself, still in that hazy area between sleep and awake. Her body was hot against him, inviting, and he let his hand drift down to capture her jean-covered cheek. He shifted beneath her as that familiar iron bar returned and his hips tilted upward instinctively.

“Oohhh.” Kendle melted against him at the intimate contact, swept into a vivid river of stunning light.

Luke tensed under her.

“Don’t stop yet.” She gasped against his mouth. “In a minute or two. Maybe.”

Luke answered with a sharp jerk that had her arching against him in stunned pleasure. He pressed his lips to hers, swallowing a growl of need when she spread her legs over his hips. He let the kiss linger, their bodies rubbing, breath mingling.

“Any farther and I won’t want to stop, Darlin’.

We should get up now.”

Swallowing a flip remark that was sure to ruin the mood, Kendle said, “I don’t want you to stop. I want to be yours.”

Her confession was a tight whisper and his nostrils flared as if he was scenting prey. Luke’s lips rose to hers and this time, he was demanding, insisting. He cradled her as he rolled them over and they both arched at the feel of him lying on top of her.

This kiss was hotter, and she shuddered when his hand slid inside her shirt to touch bare skin.

“Easy,” Luke breathed against her cheek and Kendle's heart thumped as he rubbed a taut nipple. His grip tightened, almost to pinching before letting up, and Kendle moaned at the sensation.

Luke slid his lips to her neck, nose full of her exotic smell, and he pressed a kiss to her throat, feeling the hunger wake. They'd necked a lot since his promise to love her, but none of those sexy moments had gone far before she pulled back.

That's not going to happen this time, he guessed. Heat flashed out, nearly consuming.

“Kendle, are you—”

Her mouth covered his, tongue tasting, and his hands slid around her bare skin. He deepened the kiss as her silken breasts touched his hard chest.

Kendle moaned lowly at the feel of their skin touching, stunned by the waves of need, and Luke held her tighter, trying to memorize it. He wouldn't be able to go as slow with her as he wanted to, but it would be incredible.

Luke shifted and the heat in his gaze was enough to burn. “So beautiful...” he murmured, sliding a hand down her hip.

Kendle jerked as his hand brushed the button of her jeans and slid the zipper down. Instead of stripping her as he wanted to do, Luke only lowered himself against her.

Kendle shivered when his rough cheek slid across her bare breast and her hands tangled in his hair.

Luke pressed soft, slow kisses to her pert little breasts, her taut, rosy nipples, and finally allowed himself to taste her.

His tongue flicked over a tip and Kendle arched against him.

He repeated the action on the other side, and used her distraction to unbutton his own jeans without her noticing. Then he reached down for hers.

Kendle tensed, but allowed her pants to be pulled off, hands clenching to keep herself from bolting. She wanted Luke, but she had a fear of the pain, too. All of it flew from her mind when he settled against her. Still wearing his boxers, he pushed against her as he suckled a rocky tip and Kendle shuddered at the sensation.

Her body was damp against his thigh, and Luke slid a gentle finger over her folds, pressing. He did it again, a bit slower, and Kendle's breath caught at the dizzying wave of chills. When he kept doing it, the fire between her legs spread out until she felt like she was being consumed.

Luke allowed his finger to press harder, sliding down to glide through the signs of her approval, and Kendle's body trembled, muscles clenching in that telltale sign that sent Luke's own need from hot to leaping flames. She was ready.

He leaned down to nuzzle her chest again, pushing against the only G-spot he'd ever discovered, and she moaned, a low, liquid sound that sent a vicious crack through his control. *This is the wire!*

Kendle was pulled from the river of rainbow colors by his sudden tension. Not sure if she'd done something wrong, she waited for him to move again, heart pounding. She'd never been so aware of her body, or felt need like this!

Luke fought for control, but the flames! Against his will, his hand went to her slender hips, and then moved over her taut, pink breasts.

They both drew in air at the not-as-gentle contact. His fingers brushed a nipple, drawing another molten sound that sent heat rolling into his toes, and then he was leaning down to claim her mouth in surrender.

Lightning flashed as they kissed, small gasps and groans of pleasure echoing, and she was unaware of all his clothes being gone until she felt his bare knee between her legs.

She tensed, scared, and Luke won a last battle for gentleness. He slowed his movements, finishing the torturous slide between her long legs, but stopping without touching his throbbing member to her slick heat. He kept himself under tight constraint, his own need screaming for him to take her.

He dropped his head to her neck, breathing harsh. "I love you, Kendle," he whispered.

Simple, it had the desired effect and her body relaxed against his. “I love you too, Luke. You’re so good to me.”

His hand slid over her leg and upward. “Let me be good to you a little more?”

Her body jumped under his touch and he let his hand continue its journey. He stroked her nub with his thumb, being sure to linger and she shuddered, regaining that dazed, smoky color he loved so much. He did it again, harder, and felt a rush of wetness that told him she was as ready as he was.

Leaning down, his hands went subtly to her wrists as he drew her into another soul searching kiss and gently pushed his hard body into hers.

Kendle’s lids flew open. She flinched and then tried to roll over.

His grip tightened. “Easy, Darlin’...”

She stilled beneath him and his hips shifted, adjusting angles. Her tension was clear despite her want and he leaned back to lock eyes with her as he pushed forward against the barrier. Her mouth opened to protest and he thrust through it brutally.

Kendle whimpered, hands now fists that tried to hold him at bay and Luke jerked forward, sinking deeply into her. “Ohh, God!”

Release flew toward him at the feel of being inside her tight body. Luke sucked in a determined air that gave him a brief second to regain control that he already knew wouldn’t succeed. Until he looked down.

Kendle's lids were shut, tears slowly oozing from the corners and her clenched fists were trembling against his arms. Luke shifted and felt her try to shut her legs.

He held his throbbing body in check and dropped his head to her chest, lips brushing, teasing.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

"Is impaled okay?"

The sting was fading and Kendle opened her eyes, not about to miss this view of her first time, no matter how bad it got. "I'm fine."

Luke chuckled, feeling her body slowly thawing against his. "That's it for the pain. It only feels good from here."

He kissed her as his free hand roamed her curves and she returned his kiss distractedly. Not moving his lower half, Luke used his lips and fingers to remind her of the pleasure and felt her body soften more. When she moaned against his lips, he gently pushed against her.

His head lowered to her chest, drawing a shudder and Luke rocked harder. It was like nothing he'd ever felt when she began to thrust back against him. Helping her become a woman gave him the strength to hold out, to please her. She slid over his member like liquid silk, tight and inviting, and when she reached her pleasure, her female body clamped down on him in a way that had him thrusting remorselessly in response.

It was heat as he'd never felt.
"Oohhh...Kendle!"

The stunned cry had her body clenching in another spasm of pain-like pleasure, and Luke thrust frantically. Over the edge, he gave a last deep shove that had him locking their hips in ecstasy.

5

Despite the lack of flames, they were easy to distinguish through the cave's entrance and the man spying on them shivered in rage as they made love. Glad to be on duty alone instead of with Ethan, the shadowy figure could hear their noises, could feel their passion. When it was over and almost immediately started again, he still lingered. Ethan would know as soon as he saw them. It wouldn't be much longer now.

"That was incredible," Kendle whispered. She'd never felt anything like it. "Is it always that good?"

Luke snorted against her skin, making her jump. "No. That was...magical." During the end, both of them had been oblivious to their surroundings. Anyone could have walked up on them and been ignored.

Luke felt pride rise up at the thick smells on her naked skin. *I put those there!*

He snorted again, making Kendle giggle.

"Share."

He propped himself up on one arm, their lower bodies still connected. “Just having a man moment.”

He used a soft hand to brush the damp black spikes from her cheek so that he could place a kiss there.

Kendle arched under him in surprise at the new, wet friction of their entwined bodies. Electric heat shot through her at the flash of how much she’d enjoyed his pleasure and she pulled his mouth down to hers.

6

Jenna’s place had been ransacked.

There was no sight of the shopkeeper and Luke and Kendle stared in surprise at the damage. They’d made it here in two days, but it hadn’t been fast enough. Windows broken, goods scattered, it was clear bad things had happened recently. The embers in the fire-can were still glowing.

“What should we do now?” Kendle asked lowly, searching the still greenness around them.

“Back to the hole-up, I guess,” he answered reluctantly. He was almost certain that Sheriff Cole knew where it was. They needed a place that no one would think to search.

“Can we go by the cabin first?” Kendle asked, mind suddenly on their first trip here. She’d spotted something that day, hadn’t she? Something they needed.

“Why? You leave something behind?”

“Not exactly. I...I think I spotted a clue.”

Luke studied her, hating the flashes of his awful past now slapping him. She was his now. If he wanted to keep her, he would have to fix whatever the Krafts’ had done to this island. And she would have to help, because he had nowhere to stash her. Damn it!

“Tell me where. I’ll pick a different path in.”

Sensing his waiting protests, she answered quickly. “The big tree we ate lunch under.”

Luke’s mind flashed immediately to the sense of danger he’d felt going through the area right before that, but he pushed it away to leer at her. “Yeah, I could eat.”

Kendle felt his gaze go over her sore, sated body with a familiarity that made her blush. So that’s what the big deal was. She certainly understood the fuss now.

Half a day had gone by when they made it to the big tree.

“It’s like a...name.”

Both aware that they wouldn’t make it to the hole-up in time, Kendle used Luke’s big arm to pull herself up. “That’s what I thought too, at first, but it’s more like an arrow, you know?”

Now that she’d pointed it out, he saw what she meant.

“There.”

Luke followed her finger to a similar marking on a nearby tree.

“It’s a map,” she exclaimed excitedly. “Can we follow it?”

He glanced up at the quickly brightening sky. “Tonight.”

Kendle’s reluctance was in her tone. “We staying around here?”

“No. We’ll crash in the cabin during the day, using the hatch.”

The hatch was an escape tunnel behind the cabin that he’d told her about last week, but hadn’t shown her yet.

“That’s perfect. We can track it down by night and hide out under their noses during the day. Sounds fun.”

“Improbable.” He retreated, tugging gently on their connecting rope. “Come on, Ms. Roberts. We can follow it for an hour before we’ll have to go underground and inspect each other.”

Kendle’s happy giggle floated through the jungle, where it was heard by another admirer. This one listened to the sound with a blinding rage. The ship was coming soon, in the next week, and when the slaves were off the island, the movie star wouldn’t be laughing anymore. Screams would be the only sound Ethan allowed from her.

Chapter Twenty-One

Scene One

1

Samantha jumped as the radio on Jeremy's belt crackled. "Do you need to get that?"

"No. What else is on the list?"

Samantha surveyed the neat shelves, comparing with her list. "A first aid kit, another rake, two hand shovels..."

For Earth Day, she'd been instructed to plant all the trees they had found during the last supply run. When she'd asked Adrian why, his answer had pleased her. *It's for those who come after us.*

Jeremy followed Samantha willingly enough, arms loaded down. He had volunteered to cart supplies, running on the instinct that said Neil would check up on her. *Good call.* "Would you like to know what one click on the radio means?"

Samantha stared at him in surprise. "Sure."

"Someone's coming."

It took her only a second to guess who and put the clues together. "Act one, scene one?"

Jeremy didn't think he had ever been so close to personal betrayal in his life at her continued flashes of extreme intelligence. It was hard for him to laugh as if it didn't matter. He wanted to steal her from

Neil! “Confused bachelor confronts slightly willing bachelorette and smitten XO. Take one.”

The door flew up, flooding them with light.

Sam gestured with her hand. “Action!”

They both laughed.

Neil took in the scene with surprise.

“Hey, boss. Just offering some help to the lady.”

Neil wiped his face clean, shoving that rarely seen part of him back into the cage. “Good.” He flashed a tight smile toward Samantha. “I have an hour free after mess?”

Samantha beamed, moving his way. “You think we’ll get to do it this time?”

Neil’s stare was intense “Even if I have to post a sentry. For that hour, I belong to you.”

Samantha blushed as hot images swung through her mind.

“Unless Becky calls, anyway.”

Jeremy’s mutter reminded her of the role she’d agreed to play.

Neil swiveled to scold his XO for continuing the dangerous matchmaking game, but he couldn’t at the challenge in Jeremy’s stance. His XO meant it.

Determined to do the right thing, Jeremy climbed out of the truck. The tension was thick when he gestured at Samantha. “Take five.”

He left with the supplies.

Samantha let him go with confusion and regret. The jealousy in Jeremy’s tone and body language was very convincing.

“He likes you.” Neil’s voice held surprise.

“He’s nice. Attentive.”

Neil felt his anger fading. *Attentive*. That’s what she would need, and Neil wasn’t sure he was capable of giving it. She intimidated him.

“Can you do me a favor?”

Neil braced to be reduced to a message boy between them.

“Sign me up for third shift guard duty and maybe some personal time.” Sam gestured. “Like what Angie’s getting, only quieter.”

“I’d be happy to handle that.” Realizing how much grovel was in his tone, Neil snapped his mouth shut.

“Great.” Sam rotated back to the shelves. “Thanks. See you after mess.”

“Yes...okay.” Neil left in confusion.

Sam realized Jeremy had their roles pegged perfectly. So was Becky really a screaming shrew? She was much too young to play that part. Samantha shrugged. They would find out. It was time for the evening meal now, and it was the big one Adrian liked to schedule occasionally to show them all how large Safe Haven was becoming. That meant twice as many people. *Lovely*.

Samantha straightened her kinked spine. She wasn’t caving and sitting with the other females tonight. She didn’t want to chat. If she had to sit alone to avoid it, she would.

“Can I sit here?”

Angela peered up from her tray with an uncensored welcome that made Marc’s heart thump.

“You know it.”

Her words, however, made his anger flare higher. She sounded more like these people every day. “I’d like to talk to you about something that’s bothering me.”

“What’s up?” Angela studied him distractedly, glad the pill was finally calming the heat in her shoulder.

Marc sat across from her and braced himself, suddenly certain it would go badly. “I don’t think you should be an Eagle.”

A breathless sort of shock slid over her face, but Marc didn’t stop. “I’d like you to resign, find something else. There has to be a safer way for you to help him.”

“I see.” She felt only ice now. “And your reasons?”

Marc felt the ambush coming and tried to intercept it. “There’s a lot you’re not considering. It might get you hurt. These people don’t want you to do it, not even the women here. Just you and Adrian.”

There was a sneer in his tone that bothered her. He still didn’t trust or even like Adrian. “That’s not true.” She thought of her shower visit from Hilda and Peggy. “There are a few.”

“Trained lapdogs don’t count.” His voice gentled, became almost patronizing to her wounded ears. “None of them really think you can do it either. When the first cage match comes and no one hits you, everyone will see the flaw in his plans.”

Angela knew she should be furious with Marc’s lack of support, but she’d already noticed those things, hadn’t she? Marc’s beef wasn’t with the Eagles at the moment, but Adrian. “You’re jealous.”

It was a fact being said. Marc couldn’t, wouldn’t deny it.

Sadness hit Angela in waves. “Why can’t I have both?”

“What?” Marc had been bracing for her anger, not a compromise.

“You and the Eagles.”

Marc didn’t know what to say to that.

Angela leaned forward. “I have the room and I’ve been working on it from the moment we got here. I want both.” Angela’s voice lowered to a plea. “I need both. Please don’t make me pick one or the other.”

Marc hated it that he could feel himself turning into Kenn. “How does that work?”

“You have to let me do what I am meant to. If I get hurt in the process, that’s life now. I’ve been held back for so long!” She noticed the nearest perimeter patrols changing, making contact with the shadows. “And there’s so much I can do, so many ways I can help if I’m an Eagle.”

Angela turned back to him with flecks of steel. “I will be one of them, in every way. I’m almost free of the past, but this can’t hang between us. You’ll have to decide if you can let me live my life the way *I* choose. If you can, I’ll share it with you, openly.”

Her tone became icy. “But that means accepting me as an Eagle.”

“And that’s firm? No room to bend?”

Angela sighed at the stiffness in his voice. “What if I said okay, Marc? I’ll haul my stuff into your tent today and resign, just be a doctor. Is that what you want?”

Marc shook his head. “Yes.”

Angela’s nostrils flared. He wouldn’t force her, would he? “I’ll go pack. You tell Adrian and our son.”

Marc’s eyes flashed anger.

She gave him a hard stare, pushing away from the table. “I owe you, right? It’s time to start paying off that debt.”

Was she bluffing? Did it matter? Marc sighed. *I could never follow through.* “I’m leaving soon. Get ready for it.”

Angela stood. “I was ready for it when you found me back in Indiana. I’m just surprised you’ve stuck around this long.”

Before he could respond, their attention was drawn to loud voices from the long line still waiting to eat.

“She’s not an Eagle.”

“Adrian says she is.”

“He’s carrying this women’s lib shit too far.”

“You watch your mouth!”

“Make me!”

Angela spun away from the coffee line where two Eagles were now brawling. The shouts were drawing more spectators. She was glad Doug and Kyle were rushing to break it up., but it was happening a lot. Yesterday it had been two women arguing during evening mess, and last night, Kyle had punched a rookie for a nasty remark about Adrian. Now, yet another fight. Her joining was causing problems and unless she could find a way to fix it, Marc would get his wish.

Female Eagles were a big part of Adrian’s plans. Angela could feel that clearly. He needed her to be accepted, but how could she? She wasn’t a man, her magic was off limits for this, and as far as these men were concerned, she was already being given special treatment, even before the cage match. They had tryouts and tests to become an Eagle and it had just been given to her...

Angela stopped, barely breathing as the solution came.

Will that work? She stood there, surrounded by Safe Haven’s light as she considered. *Yes. All of it will matter, but if I can stack that one moment...*

Angela changed directions, absorbing the fear.

She stiffened her chin into that set line as her target came into view.

Kenn stared at her stupidly. “You want to what?”

Angela willed her nerves to relax. She and Kenn hadn’t exchanged a single word since he saved her life. She made her voice sound confident. “I want to take the *real* level test with my team.”

Kenn laughed unpleasantly, missing those flecks of steel in his relief over her demand. He’d been expecting something else. “You? In the cage? Yeah, that’ll happen.” He let out another bray of hard amusement.

Angela made a fast choice she wasn’t sure of. She ducked, threw out a leg sweep and used her free arm to shove him onto his ass in the dirt. “Sign me up, Marine. I mean it!”

Kenn was surprised to feel admiration and a strong wave of attraction instead of the anger or embarrassment it should have brought to be put down by a female—by *this* female. “There’s no way he’ll let you take the real test.”

Kenn stood, brushing himself off. He was careful to stay back so none of the approaching Eagles would think he was a threat to her. “Men can’t hit a woman here, for any reason.”

“I got through Neil’s class. I want to be one of them, Kenny. And there isn’t anything I won’t do, *anyone* I won’t destroy, to get it.” The complete honesty was a change for both of them, but more for Angela, who had spent so long censoring her words.

Kenn was aware of how pleased Adrian was that she'd been keeping up. He conceded reluctantly. "I'll mention it to him, but it'll hurt his plans, if you fail."

The warning was a surprise to her, showing his loyalty to the dream. She'd thought he was only so loyal to Adrian because it gave him the XO slot.

"I won't fail."

Kenn scowled, still hating her new confidence, and dreading the hard months he would have to endure while re-earning what he'd thrown away. "If he says yes, it'll be on your schedule. Now get to the kids' area. Your shift starts in five minutes."

Angela snapped a salute and left. She nodded at Jeremy as he strode by determinedly. She sighed at the images running through his mind. The crowded mess was about to get another show. *Encore!*

4

Samantha had watched Marc and Angie's fight with sympathy, but she would have gladly traded places when Jeremy ducked under the canopy.

He saw Neil first, settled comfortably at Adrian's center table, and then her, sitting alone in the rear of the mess. His scowl was threatening.

Samantha couldn't stop herself from responding to the righteous anger on her behalf. She gave him a raised brow and a short wave, offering him the seat across from her.

Jeremy's expression lit up.

Everyone in the area stared in surprise at the happiness he didn't try to hide.

Jeremy joined her, but before any conversation could restart from those around them, his words echoed. "Scene 2: the screaming shrew." His expression darkened. "I'm sorry for this. The location was a write-in."

Sam was expecting Becky. "Little girls should be careful who they challenge."

Coming up behind them, Cynthia drew up short at the clear warning... Then the reporter shrieked. "I'll show you a little girl! Who the hell do you think you are? I'll--"

Caught off guard, Samantha lost her temper. She jumped up to put herself in the woman's space. "You'll what?"

The tone was menacing. Cynthia realized she had made a mistake.

Samantha slowly gave the expensively dressed woman an insulting onceover. "Be a shame to get blood on Gucci. It won't come out...or so I hear."

The reporter flinched at the word blood, now trapped. She couldn't shout that Jeremy was hers without the camp discovering their affair, but she wouldn't ease up and lose him either. His connection to Adrian was too good to give up.

"Cynthia."

Adrian's tone said he knew.

The reporter shot a lingering glare at Samantha before leaving the mess.

Sam sat back down, not looking at Jeremy. He and Cynthia had something going. Whatever she had felt from the helpful guard was simply great acting to make Neil jealous. *And Cynthia*, she added a little bitterly.

“Are you mad?” Jeremy hoped not.

Sam shrugged. “I’ll have to get back to you. I didn’t expect *that* shrew, and I’m not a fan of surprises.”

“I can try to explain, if you want.”

“I’ll pass.”

There was silence for a minute and then he flashed a charming smile. “Ready for scene three?”

Samantha snorted. “Depends on what it is.”

Jeremy leaned in, aware of being the center of everyone’s attention. “Scene three is where apologetic bachelor number two becomes scarce so the slightly willing bachelorette can cool off with still very confused bachelor number one.”

“And you’re one of the players, not an actor, right?” Sam tried not to get upset “Another alpha male who wants two mates instead of one.”

Jeremy reddened, but he didn’t deny it. “That scene comes later in the story.”

Samantha snorted again, flattered, and wary. “Guess I need a copy of the script.”

“I’ll see what I can do about that.” Jeremy stood, taking his untouched tray. “Try to have fun with Neil tonight. He’s a good man.”

Samantha was aware of the surprised, uneasy people around them as he left. Jeremy had to know

how this would end. He would be left out. As nice as he was, there was no way *that* Eagle would ever be able to break through the wall of ice around her heart.

Samantha's gaze slid to the center table and found Neil staring at her. There was enough heat there to melt an iceberg. She dropped her gaze. There was little choice between the two, but she wasn't sure if she even wanted one of them yet. She didn't have enough of her self-respect back to be in a relationship. All she wanted from either of them right now was friendship or training. Everything was secondary to surviving.

Adrian's table was much quieter than usual. Kenn tried to keep the conversation going, knowing the boss didn't like the tension, but with Neil distracted, Doug on sentry duty, and Kyle still angry that Kenn had been allowed to return, there was little cooperation.

"I'll catch you guys later." Neil left the table and let his feet go where they wanted instead of where they should.

"You ready?"

Samantha jumped when Neil dropped onto the bench across from her.

His tone was defensive.

She responded sarcastically. "Shouldn't we wait and let Becky have her say, too?"

Neil followed Samantha's line of sight to the teenager staring at them furiously, frozen in place.

The line around her advanced, forcing Becky to do the same. She did her best to clear her expression, mind flying through suitable retaliations. She could ignore them and keep up the act that there was nothing going on with her and Neil. She could also cause a scene and force him to claim her early, but she knew both of those options would lose her his affection.

Becky spotted Rick sitting by himself in a far corner and carried her tray to his table. *Take that, Neil!*

“Talk to her. Tonight.” Sam glared at Rick.

Adrian’s gesture demanded the same.

“I will,” Neil answered them both. He glanced at Samantha. “Let’s go now, okay?”

Samantha was glad to escape the attention, but her mind stayed on Rick and Becky. At this point, not telling the girl some hard truths would be more dangerous than keeping quiet.

The sight of the training tent made Neil’s stomach twist. He didn’t want to do this, but the thought of Seth *or Jeremy!* alone in there with her was enough to make him follow through. “So, are you ready to fight?”

“Sure.” Samantha hoped her voice didn’t sound as shaky to him as it did to her.

Neil held the flap for her and ducked inside after a quick glance around verified only one bitter guard lurking in the shadows. He had no idea how this might go. The fewer witnesses, the better.

Samantha waited by the flap for Neil to light a lantern and lead her into the canvas room. When he took them inside the large area made of hay bales, she held her nervousness in check and followed. She'd asked for this and he was breaking the rules to give it to her. She wasn't an Eagle or in official training, so they had to be somewhere private.

This fits the bill, she thought, taking off her gun and placing it next to his. It was so quiet in here that it was almost like they were alone.

Neil kicked off his boots, stalling as she did the same. He was hoping to spot cold feet that he could respond to. If she would give him a sign that she didn't want this—

“So what's first?”

Eager. Damn it! “I'll show you the basic moves and we can go from there.”

“No, Neil.”

He paused. “What?”

“I want exactly what you gave Angie.”

Another hard voice echoed. “You're not ready for that yet.”

They found Adrian in the doorway. Neil hid a sigh of relief, grateful.

“Angela was already a level fighter when Marc got her here.” Adrian gave her a goal. “You'll need to build up to that.”

Samantha could feel how much happier Neil was as Adrian left them alone. He hadn't wanted to give her the lesson. Afraid to hurt her? Maybe.

Afraid to be caught was more likely. Sam didn't stop herself from reacting.

Neil was unprepared for her swing and took the full hit.

Samantha saw the blood run from his split lip and waited nervously for his response. She needed this too. If she had to push him to get him to get it, she would. As for Adrian's rules, well, he hadn't said anything about a workout.

"What was that for?" Neil's ears were ringing from being caught unprepared.

"Lying, pretending, screwing around with my mind." Sam gestured coldly. "Take your pick."

"But it was Adrian's choice." Neil tensed as her fist clenched again.

"He did it for you. He felt your fear."

Neil opened his mouth to argue and found he couldn't lie to her. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not. Now show me."

Neil stared at her, more confused than he had been before. She had a hell of a swing. "Later. Let's do a workout first. It'll settle you down, let you concentrate."

Samantha raised a brow. "Who says I can't now? As I'm sure you know, anger is great for that."

Neil laughed. He knew it was a mistake when her fist clenched again.

"I challenge you!"

He had time to think she'd picked up a lot in her brief time here, then she swung, and he tried not to fall down.

Thud!

For the fifth time, Neil landed with a hard thump, blood dripping.

Samantha retreated. “Why are you letting me beat on you?”

Neil winced, but didn’t answer. There was a method to his madness. Telling her wasn’t a part of it.

Rolling to his feet, Neil rushed her, dropping under her wild swing. He took them to the ground with his hand braced under to keep her from hitting too hard.

“Ankles!” he ordered sharply.

Sam did as he’d shown her, using the force of her locked legs to gain leverage. She slammed his ribs with quick, hard knuckle punches, and used her head to connect with his nose.

Grunting, Neil rolled over and off to keep from spraying her with fresh crimson.

They stayed on the floor, breathing hard. They’d been at it for almost their allotted hour and Neil was hurting. He’d given her the perfect workout. He let her hit him repeatedly. “Be at the self-defense ring at dawn.”

She knew that wasn’t allowed. “You’ll clear it?”

“No. It’s important for this to appear like your idea. Only the teachers are there so early. Go to Doug and challenge him. After, demand to be

signed up for the level classes, not the crap we give the sheep. You're way beyond that."

And she is, he thought. She was clumsy and had habits that would have to be broken, but she also had a fury Neil wasn't sure even Angela could match. Samantha had an endless supply of rage to draw from and every hit she'd delivered had been solid. When she was ready, Samantha would follow Angela into the Eagles. Neil was now positive of it. "You okay?"

Samantha sighed, sitting up. "Thinking."

"Yeah." Neil examined his feelings on being in the background while she went through what Angela already had and found he could understand why Marc had been so upset. If he saw a man hit Samantha, he'd react. It was that simple.

"Can we do this again?" Her voice grew pointed. "Without the passive teacher."

Neil hesitated, still not sure about anyone, including himself, hurting her even for lessons. Sending her to Doug would make it so he didn't have to see it until he'd had more time to adjust.

Samantha waved a hand. "If not, no big deal. Jeremy will probably—"

"I'll do it!"

Samantha only felt a little guilty for using his jealousy. "Good. You'll let me know when?"

"Yes."

"Great. Thanks, Neil."

"Adrian sends 'em and I beat 'em."

“But Adrian didn’t send me, and you never hit me. Wonder what that means?”

Her thoughtful voice had his eyes flying open. “Might be nothing.”

She gave him a sharp tone that cut through his indifferent façade. “I’ll keep that in mind when Jeremy asks me out.” Samantha retrieved her gun. “See ya, Neil.”

Neil was fast, on his feet and then right behind her in an instant.

Samantha stopped, waiting. She’d pushed him tonight, in more ways than one.

“Please.” Neil’s voice was ragged, tortured.

“Please what, Neil? Don’t tease you about Jeremy?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Samantha hadn’t turned around. Neil was able to give her a bit of honesty that the sight of her face would have locked up. “I need...time.”

Samantha’s heart jumped. “For?” She heard the tremor in her voice as clearly as he did.

Staring at her stiff shoulders, Neil felt his caged need spring forward. He smothered the urge to spin her around and prove his desires. “To be sure.”

Samantha let that sink in, understanding she was now firmly in contention for him, with *Becky*. “I won’t play those games, Neil. And I’d never share you with another female.”

She rotated slowly, let him view her indifference. "Plus, I don't know if I'm even interested." A dark flush slid up her cheeks.

Neil slammed his hands into his pockets. He wanted desperately to expose that lie. "Ouch."

"Sorry. Long day."

"Long life full of pain."

Samantha's voice lowered. "And it's not over. Things are happening too fast for me."

"Did you tell Jeremy the same thing at mess?"

"No. I don't need to. He understands that without being told." Before he could respond, she slipped out of the tent, unable to help a shiver at the immediate darkness.

"Hey, there."

Jeremy's voice was unexpected.

Samantha's hand went for her gun.

"Easy. I'm the guard he posted."

Sam cringed at those words, thinking Jeremy had been able to hear them.

"I've been in the shadows and on patrol. I heard nothing." His smile widened. "Saw some vicious swinging shadows though. Good workout?"

Samantha realized he knew of Adrian's visit and what it meant. "It helped."

"You gonna have another lesson?"

Samantha heard the familiar tones of jealousy; her voice was cool. "That hasn't been decided yet."

Jeremy fell in step as she took the path toward her tent, wondering what she was thinking.

“He wants me to wait!” Sam was horrified to hear it blurted so bluntly. “Until he makes up his mind.”

Jeremy scowled. “He what?!”

Samantha instantly wished she hadn’t told him.

Jeremy responded to her need without hesitation. “Come here.”

Samantha let him surround her with his big arms, surprised at the way she now enjoyed being held. Tears were rare for her. She was glad when only a few rolled down her cheek to soak into his jacket.

“He’s an ass!” Jeremy didn’t care that Neil had come from the tent and stopped in shock. “It’s not your fault he’s stupid, baby. That’s on him!”

Jeremy glared at Neil and led her away from the training area, fighting the urge to say something nasty to his team leader. *What the hell is wrong with Neil that he can’t recognize the differences like everyone else? Is that little tart worth his place?*

Samantha let the concerned Eagle take her into the darkness, thinking she would have to seal up these feelings she now had for Neil. If this continued for long, it would hurt her, and she couldn’t allow another man to do that.

Neil’s heart thumped with guilty anger. Jeremy would be a better mate for her. Clearly, he was more attentive, as Neil hadn’t even realized he’d hurt her until he’d seen the tears when Jeremy led them toward the shadows. But...that male part of him, the

side that his dad had built from the ground up, was insisting he could give her more.

What about Becky? his body asked.

Neil grimaced uneasily. She was in the shadows behind him. “Becky, we need to talk.”

He waited until he heard her come closer.

“Hey, Neil.”

Her tone was very cool. He sighed. *It just isn't my day.* “I’d like to talk to you about your new friend.”

Her clenched fists told Neil to brace. He had also learned something tonight.

“And don’t forget *your* new friend, Neil. We’ll have a talk about her, too.”

Neil moved toward the tent he’d just left.

Becky sneered angrily. “You know nothing about women, Neil. Do you know that? I don’t want to talk in there, where you were with *her!*”

Neil had had enough. “You need to stay away from Rick...and stop following me.”

Becky froze, heart thumping. He was doing it now.

“Did you hear—”

“I heard you!” Becky didn’t keep her voice down. “Anything else? Like October isn’t happening because you’ve found something better?”

Neil winced. “It’s not like that. I... I need some time.”

Becky grew red. “To pick.”

He gave a short sigh, realizing she deserved to know the truth too. “Yes.”

“Well, then I don’t see a problem with my spending time with Rick while you spend time with Samantha. Maybe someone as a comparison will be a good thing!” Becky spun away, tearing up.

Neil was ashamed of his first thought. He already had a basis for comparison; he just wasn’t sure how he now fared against Jeremy in Samantha’s estimations. “I’m sorry.”

“Slam you!” floated through the stillness.

Well, that went well. Neil glanced in the direction Jeremy and Samantha had gone and went to the showers instead. What he wouldn’t give to hear that conversation.

6

“Try not to let it keep eating at you. He’ll come around.”

“I’m not a second prize, Jeremy. It’s already too late for that.”

Jeremy ignored how his heart responded. “Neil’s wired differently than most of the people here, Sam. It’s a cop thing.”

The storm tracker became cold. “I’m not interested.”

That was supposed to be the end of it. Jeremy heard the tone, but the need to make his team leader and this soft, furious woman happy was stronger

than her desire to be left alone. “Give him a little time, baby, like he asked for.”

Samantha’s weathered face held no trace of the tears that had brought them to this secluded part of camp. Showing misery was a luxury she refused to indulge in. There was just too much of it. “And in the meantime?”

Jeremy let a brief glimpse of his feelings show, unable to deny her the comfort she wanted and the hope his heart needed. “In the meantime, we’ll get to know each other. If he waits too long, it’s his loss.”

Samantha sighed restlessly, thinking again that this man would never hurt her; he wasn’t dangerous to a woman, and that was why it wouldn’t succeed. She needed that edge of unknown. Still, at least she wouldn’t be walking through her days completely alone. “Okay, for now. How long I’ll last in this play, I don’t know.”

Jeremy understood completely. “Same here, baby. Same here.”

7

Still running through the dark trees in a wild rage, Becky hit a hard body and came to a jarring stop. They fell in a tangle of limbs.

The girl’s sobbing increased. “Slam this place!”

“I don’t think so much of it either.” Rick was amused.

Becky didn't get off his chest. The tears were still coming. She shuddered when he slid an arm around her.

"Sshhhh..." Rick comforted her and enjoyed the feel of her young body against his. If not for the guards... He pushed himself up, gently hauling her along, and though he left his arm around her, he put clear space between them. Too bad he wasn't on his own time right now but sneaking around had to be done carefully. "It'll be okay. You'll think of something."

Becky sniffled against his hot arm. "And you'll help me with it."

Glad her voice had been barely audible, Rick nodded. "Yes. In a little while, they'll all be too busy to think about women."

The guards watched, hoping Rick would cross any line, but the suspected traitor only offered a little more comfort and then gently nudged the upset teenager back toward camp. It would be reported, but without an actual crime, Rick was safe.

Chapter Twenty-Two
Playing With Fire

Safe Haven
April 24th

1

*F*ate isn't something you can plan for. Sometimes, all you can do is hold on and steer toward the shallows. I was expecting all men. My council will be only half that. I'm struggling to be careful with them and the camp. Samantha needs time to adjust before I can pull her in openly. Angie has to be trained, taught. The load has increased, but so have the benefits. Not one Seer, but three!

Fate blessed me and cursed me by sending me so much power that it can't be used freely. Somewhere, laughter is spilling on my account, I'm sure.

I now have what I need, but where to begin! What to push the hardest? We're spending the next two days on the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge and I hope to make progress in my plans. These women need to be accepted; I have total faith that fate will supply the right places, at the right times.

And if one of them fails, these people won't give a second chance.

Adrian turned the page in his notebook, not entirely certain about that now. It would depend on how bad the flinch was and what it cost—

Got a minute?

Adrian steadied himself against the vivid feel of Angela suddenly being in his thoughts. *Sure. What's up?*

I need a schedule switch.

Instantly alert, he shut the newest journal that now held a single entry. He had already filled five others since the war. *You having trouble?*

Not exactly. Kyle said you changed my shifts to midmorning when I got hurt. Please, put them back.

Adrian's mind raced. Why would she want to be awake so early? Part of proving herself?

Mostly to...avoid the morning sets.

Adrian scowled furiously. Hiding from Kenn? No, he was out of camp now with Zack and his team on a slaver recon, and Kyle usually had point at that time. The lower levels all trained on that shift... She was avoiding Marc. *I'll take care of it.*

Thanks.

There was a pause as he felt her need for something else, but he didn't respond. If it was important, she would ask. Without being able to view those expressive eyes, he would only be guessing at her thoughts.

Grateful he wasn't pushing, Angela left their connection open, giving him what he wouldn't ask

for as she walked through tents—another view of his dream.

Safe Haven sprawled out over the muddy street and corn, refusing to bend to the will of the ominous sky. People walked, talked, and enjoyed being with each other. There wasn't a single sign of the terror that had brought them together. Happiness flowed from those already awake, contentment and peace caused by the caring of one man's determined dream. His ambitions glowed with life through her sight.

Adrian's heart filled with pride and satisfaction. These people were in decent shape considering all that had happened, and they were obviously well cared for. Their leader was a good man. *Thank you.*

It's my honor.

Adrian was grateful for the peace that allowed for a rare extra few minutes to snooze and think. And what did his mind consider most important right at this very moment? The woman now on her way to give a final medical class to two levels of Eagles. This is how it had become. Even the threat of the slavers came second most days. And the dreams!

Angela had been here for almost four weeks and each day came with a new awareness of her good attitude, her soft voice. She was the light in his darkness, only instead of rebuilding, most of his nights now revealed ways to teach this special female everything he knew.

She was unlike any other here, but more than that, she was different than any woman he'd known, except for his mother. Their resemblance was probably part of his growing fascination with the quiet beauty. Both of them were strong, able to adapt, and they loved their sons. It was clear Angela would do anything for her boy. Adrian was aware of how hurt she was that the teenager was still giving her, but not Marc, the cold treatment. It was one of the things Adrian planned to help her with, but all these changes happening in sight of the herd meant he had to go slow. His guts twisted in a painful spasm. *So long!*

Adrian sighed, pushing the awful image away. He'd imagined endless months of waiting to have what he now wanted as much as any of the other males here. *Does she even feel this pull?* Not likely. All she wanted was Marc, but *that* Marine wouldn't be able to make her happy either.

2

"I have eighteen seats and only sixteen students. Who isn't here?"

"That would be us."

Neil and Marc entered together.

Angela lifted her uninjured arm. "Two volunteers, come on up." She gestured at the bench of supplies. "You've taken the class. This is the level test. Remove one stitch from my shoulder."

Face tight with disapproval, Marc came up. "You're the boss." He concentrated on the ugly wound waiting to be tended. "Timed?"

"You know it."

Marc dropped his jacket and quickly scrubbed, clearly agitated. "Ready."

"Go."

Hands steady, Marc opened the packages in the right order and carefully but firmly pulled off the bandage. He couldn't hide his wince at the ugliness of it against that satin skin.

Angela tilted her arm toward him with a low mutter. "It sliced the K in half. Did you notice?"

"No." He hadn't. There had been too much anger, but it was true. For a moment it was like a sign that things would get better from this point.

Aware that the others would copy him, Marc tried to remember her lessons and forget some of the things he'd been taught before the war. Angie's classes and basic aid training were worlds apart.

He did fine cleaning the ugly wound with the alcohol pads, pretending it was someone else's tense shoulder. He chose the right tools to take out the stitch, but when he actually started to do it, he hesitated, unsure. What had he forgotten?

"One minute!" Doug was supervising from a corner where he still towered over everyone else.

Marc got moving. As he snipped the stitch, it flashed in his mind. Glaring, he pulled the gooey black thread out of her shoulder.

Angela called it. “A minute forty, one mistake. Next.”

“Why did you let me keep going?” Marc was angry, again. “Why did you do that?”

“This is a level test.” Angela glared.

“And what if my mistake gets the wound infected?”

“Then I’ll treat it. I am a doctor. Next!”

Marc stormed from the tent.

Angela explained her reasoning to the Eagles, hoping they could help him understand. “If he didn’t have feelings for the injured party, this wouldn’t be a problem, but it’s highly likely you’ll be doing these things for a teammate. Better that you can handle it. Next.”

Neil came forward. “Ready.”

“Go.”

Neil repeated Marc’s actions, remembering to smear antibiotic over the tips of the forceps. He gave her a smile as he tugged the stitch out. “First one I ever did that wasn’t on me.”

“One minute, 35 seconds. No mistakes. Next.”

Neil washed up and then quickly ducked out of the tent. It was time for the self-defense lessons. He wanted to see if Samantha was there again. Since bloodying Doug’s nose, it was becoming her morning ritual. Her and *Jeremy*.

Samantha was finishing when he arrived. Neil noted the impressed facades of the teachers. Showing another flash of why Adrian had given him

such a high place in the chain of command, Neil glanced at Samantha. “Ever think about joining the Eagles? We’re always hunting for new rookies.”

“Not me.” Sam left the hay ring. “I have to be...able to defend myself.” Samantha wiped the sweat from her neck. “Everything might...have been different.”

Neil tried not to think about the days after the war. “It was bad for a lot of us then.”

Sam shrugged. “Might not have been, if women weren’t so weak, so ready to lean on the first set of nuts they met.”

“That’s one of the reasons Adrian tells everyone to take this class.”

“And we appreciate it being available, even when we’re sore all over.” She walked away.

Neil found himself following. “Are you okay?”

Samantha nodded, tired. “Bad dreams.” She stopped to retie her shoe.

Neil found himself peering down the front of her sweater. *Blue lace bra. Hmm...* “John could give you something.”

“That’s okay. I need to learn to handle it.”

“Alone?”

She frowned up at him. “Yes.”

“Most of the people here had terrible things happen to them, Sam. Why not talk to us?”

She hesitated.

Neil waved at himself. “Adrian’s, all the way. If he trusts me, so can you.”

Samantha studied his earnest expression. “I don’t talk about it because I don’t think I’d be welcome if people knew.”

“I’m not everyone, and I’m guessing Adrian already knows. You can trust me. I’d never judge you.”

Samantha allowed herself to hope. “I worked for the government, before.”

“The government?” Neil’s dismay was obvious.

“Yes.”

“Weather tracking?”

“Seattle EPA.”

His mouth dropped open in quick understanding. “You had a pass!”

She nodded stiffly. “The chopper crashed, got hit by an EMP, I think. It went down in Northern Wyoming. I was the only survivor.”

Her haunted voice reminded him of Angela’s as she confirmed his suspicions. Neil’s mind raced. “You made it to the compound?”

“I didn’t get the chance for a while.” Her posture was now rigid. “I had to get away from two painters first. They found the crash site. No one else ever came.”

Neil forced himself to ask, sure she needed to say it. “How long were you with them?”

“Two weeks.”

Her body language said that was the moment in time when she’d needed protection. Neil felt something inside shift. *I would have fought for her.*

“Then I went to NORAD.”

Neil mirrored her sadness for the once great American icon, but in those blue depths lurked a knowledge of life and death that told Neil she'd also had problems there.

“There was nothing left.”

He nodded. “Same as the other places the slavers have been through.”

“You’ve been there?”

“We take pictures at most of the places we check.”

“Most?”

Distracted, Neil gave a full answer. “All. Adrian wants concrete proof there’s no safety to be found there.”

“Proof for later.”

Catching himself, Neil didn’t respond.

Samantha knew. “I may not be on the team, but I’m checking in from time to time, learning how it works. He’s careful.”

“He’s right to be and so are you.” Neil confirmed her worry. “Some people wouldn’t want you to stay.”

Sam motioned toward the hay ring. “Thus, my not joining the Eagles. It draws too much attention.”

Neil didn’t pull any punches. “And since you don’t want to repeat your mistakes and join with leadership, it’s a good excuse.”

Samantha flushed. “Maybe.”

“Like Angie, you’re gifted and afraid of that power being used by the wrong people.”

Samantha didn't deny it. "I respect Adrian, and I like it here, but then I liked my old life too. Who's to say this isn't just a good beginning to another bad end?"

Neil wasn't sure what to say to that. "I can't give you guarantees, Sam. You already know that *real* life is always about the risks vs the rewards."

"I'm not afraid of that! I expect it to be hard, but until I'm a believer, I won't even pretend. When that changes, you'll know it."

Neil stewed as she walked away from him. Samantha had signed up for every public and private defensive class they were offering to non-Eagles... It clicked in for him, why. She expected to be thrown out. She was trying to prepare for being alone again. *What is she guilty of?*

Neil changed directions. *Angela will know.*

3

"I'm sorry, I don't. There's only darkness, not a good sign."

"Do you think she might be a traitor?"

"No." Angela spotted Adrian at the shooting area. Why was she being drawn to him? There wasn't any danger triggering her reaction, so what was up? She dropped her head before he noticed. "Samantha feels responsible for things. Guilt is her demon."

That terror, Neil understood all too well. Not being able to save his father had almost destroyed

him. He did a fast sweep. *Clear*. “How can I help her?”

Angela marked her place in the study guide that Jeremy had left her after removing one stitch with no mistakes and no record. She had five minutes until her workout lesson with her team; she was busy cramming. “Why do you want to?”

Neil blinked, not expecting the question. “She’s one of us. She should be at Adrian’s side too.”

Angela swept the noisy people. “She helps him quietly, like John. Tell me the real reason and I’ll give you the answer, but I’ll warn you now, you probably won’t like it. I know *she* won’t.”

Neil sighed. “I’m already aware that she wants to be left alone, but I’ll do it anyway. She’s not happy...and I don’t like that.”

Satisfied he wanted the information to help Samantha, not to make her uncomfortable, Angela gave him an answer he could work with. Their relationship had come a long way since he’d called her a Barbie. “Watch her, Neil. Figure out what *she’s* watching, and then you’ll know. Or at least get an idea. And she is by Adrian’s side. I think what she’s searching for is easier found if she’s not so public.”

Neil left Angela alone to study, knowing he would follow the advice. If Adrian needed the blonde accepted, he could help with that. After all, he’d gotten Marc his start here and that had been an ugly mess. *Hers can’t be as bad.*

Fate laughed at him.

Charlie spied on the Eagles without moving, surprised he'd been able to sneak by the sentries. He was lying in the corn stalks under one of the trucks surrounding the training area. He blocked his mind as his mom came from the tent

She seems like an Eagle, was his first thought. *A real Eagle*. She had the clothes and cap, and of course, the rookie jacket that everyone was muttering about, but it was more than that. The way she stood, the way she swept the area, even how her hand rested on the butt of her gun. She was really one of them. Not pretend, like Zack's boys were saying.

Charlie watched her join Kyle's team as they came out into the chilly dimness. He was surprised again when she took the bodyguard's place behind Cris, the team's second in command. *Is she that good?*

The Eagles began a complicated drill there wasn't room for inside. When Angela covered her charge, not letting the others touch him as they circled, Charlie realized she also looked like she belonged with them. She was fast, smooth, and not afraid. He didn't see her flinch once. His heart was suddenly full of gratitude toward his dad. The trip here had changed her, helped her. Adrian was right. He owed Marc a debt.

The boy slowly inched out of the area, then stood. He had to stifle a shout. Adrian was standing inside the truck he had just crawled from under.

“Something interesting in there?”

Charlie shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Good, since this area is off limits to you.” Adrian lit a smoke, considering. His bond with this boy would be important in the future, he was sure of that. “Don’t ever get caught snooping by the Eagles. It’ll cost you a place with them before it’s even available.”

The shocked teenager was overwhelmed with emotion as the leader strode to the mess. *Too bad Adrian can’t be my dad.*

Charlie thought of his dreams and the island woman who was now in grave danger. If she survived, she would come here. The boy had a feeling Adrian would like the red-skinned castaway. A lot.

5

“Com to Eagle One. Both crews pulled in. No contact. QZ?”

Adrian pushed the button. “Negative. Send ‘em to the mess.”

“Copy.”

Adrian pulled the battered notebook from his pocket, along with the new one.

The men at the table did the same as he joined them.

“We’ll have a mini meeting now and be on our own time when we make camp tonight.”

Around them, voices lowered. There wasn’t a tension with it, only a curiosity that said they also wanted to know what the recon teams had found. Two of them had been sent out—one to spy on the slavers, the other to find the wild dog den.

Adrian surveyed Neil and then Kyle.

Both men gave him a quick gesture. They would keep Kevin and Zack from saying anything they shouldn’t.

Noise levels increased as the four top men came toward the mess, Kenn and Zack in the lead. Those two returned the greetings loudly, glad to be home. Doug and Kevin followed more slowly. Of the two teams, theirs was the one watched the most. Grim expressions said trouble had come.

The missing tension now found its way into the group of eating refugees.

Adrian waited for the recon teams to be seated and gestured at two people to join them. A third, he motioned toward the line.

Charlie left right away to get trays for the returning men.

Angela waited until Kenn was sitting securely on Adrian’s right before joining the crowded table, taking the spot to Kyle’s left. John sat on the open end by Doug. To Angie, he appeared fragile in contrast to the gentle giant. In fact, he was paler than usual. *Is the doctor sick?*

Adrian let them get set, ignoring Kenn's angry glare at Angela being here. "Where are they?"

Kenn handed him photos. "They've burned parts of Howes. We think there were people still around and the slavers used fire to get them out."

Adrian forced himself to go on as if it didn't matter, but inside, his chest tightened. *I missed them!* They'd been so busy with the tank that he hadn't thought to have Angela feel for survivors.

Angela didn't meet his eyes, but he could feel her pain, her guilt. It rivaled his own.

Kenn made a motion that said there was triple that many photos, just not all of them were being delivered in front of the camp members. "We also staked it out for a bit. Some of the slavers are missing."

Adrian frowned. "Supply runs?"

Kenn shrugged. "That's what we figured. They've been following us and have run out of food and fuel. Hopefully, they'll be there a while."

"We'll keep making tracks, get off their radar." Adrian wrote in his book. "The wolves?"

Afraid to reveal his shaking hands, Doug gave Kevin a glance. His symptoms were worsening, but he refused to go to John yet. He wasn't giving up this new life until he couldn't do the job anymore.

"There's a den near Chadron." Kevin paused, noting Angela's interest at the name.

"More than a hundred in one place. They ran after us, attacked the tires. We think that's the spot

to target.” Doug coughed into his hand. *Damn side effects!*

The wild dog sightings had caused people to stay out of the high corn and grass, but it had recently progressed from a sighting to an attack. Thankfully, it had only been on a goat. Adrian wasn’t waiting for it to be a child. *This* problem they could handle now, and he already knew Angela would want to go. He hadn’t had time to fully consider letting her, but he was already sure she would ask.

Kevin finished the sitrep. “They all came to the same area around sundown. No idea why. Lot of females with pups.”

“Good. That mission will come right after the tests are done. It’s open to anyone, so long as they are a level Eagle.” Adrian turned to John, feeling the men all relax as they realized he’d excluded Angela since she was still a rookie and not scheduled for the tests.

That they know of. “What did the exams show?”

“There’s nothing that explains the aggressive behavior, no signs of mutations or radiation either.” John pushing an envelope toward Adrian. The truth was in it.

“That’s ‘cause they’re eating people,” Kevin muttered.

Angela saw Kyle give the rookie a subtle gesture.

“More likely they’re eating animals that aren’t sick.” John provided cover. “They can smell it.”

“So there’s nothing we should be on edge for? No super wolves?” Adrian led, always singing to the herd.

“Not even wolves, from what I’ve examined.” John shrugged. “It’s a bunch of abandoned pets.”

“All right. Anything else?” There was quiet. Adrian gave Charlie a nod when he sat trays down, glad the teen had drafted Matt to help. “Enjoy that warm bread. Only picnic baskets in the vehicles for dinner tonight.”

There were grins and groans at those words, and not only from those at his table. Some of their travel days, like this one, would now start at noon. Each car was packed with a basket of cold dishes that would serve as the evening meal so they could keep traveling until after it got dark. When they camped, everyone would be on their own time, with warm tents waiting for their tired bodies.

Adrian subtly searched the people for problems and was pleased not to discover anything that couldn’t wait. Becky and Rick were still exchanging occasional glances, but she was sitting with her mother. Neil had assured Adrian he’d told the teenager to stay clear of the suspected traitor. If she didn’t, Adrian would take matters into his own hands.

Like he would with Cynthia if Jeremy didn’t make peace. Those two were also exchanging glances, but not the friendly kind. The reporter was sharing some of the glares with Samantha, who was with Hilda at one of the female tables. The college

kids Angela had rescued were also there, the pregnant mother now glowing with the knowledge that in the height of winter, she would have a new life to care for.

Adrian stood, gathering his trash. “We leave in twenty. I’ll be around.”

Kenn felt the air at the table cool. He turned to Zack. For a few days, he’d been mostly at peace. “Make sure it all gets put where it belongs?”

Zack’s mouth was too full for speech, but his hands directed Kenn to the bulletin board, where Angela’s name was under shotgun.

That old, familiar rage flooded. Kenn shoved away from the table to keep from saying anything. *What else happened while I was gone?*

Kenn went to the training tent, where Jeff would be helping pack things like usual. That Eagle was on his side and Kenn needed an update. *How much power did she gain while I was away?*

6

Angela climbed into the lead rig and shut the door, aware of all the attention it drew. Usually Kenn rode with Adrian. Today, her name had been on the board. She got comfortable, wondering what Adrian wanted while hoping it didn’t cause more trouble.

Adrian was waiting nearby, discovering who had a real problem with the driving change. Other than Kenn and a few of his allies, no one seemed

resentful, simply curious. He went to his rig. The camp would be told he had medical questions; the Eagles would think he needed her gift, but deep down, it was her safety. He wanted her close by.

“So, you don’t have any work for me?”

“You sound disappointed.” Adrian settled into the seat and shut the door.

Angela pushed a curl aside, noting members hurrying to load up now that the boss was ready to go. “I kind of expected it. I brought a book.”

Adrian picked up the mike, chuckling. “You won’t need it.” He hit the button. “This is Eagle One. We leave in five. Count off.”

Angela waited patiently, let him work, but she was keenly aware of his strong life force and his musky, man smell. She was careful not to glance at him, afraid he would read the unease. The spark between her and Marc was powerful, but the raw, primitive flames in Adrian’s quickly hidden looks made it dim in comparison. She was in love with Marc, always had been, but something was growing between her and Adrian and it made her nervous. If anyone found out...

“Ready?”

Angela jerked as he leaned over, pulling a map from behind her seat. She let out a sigh. “Yes.”

Adrian gave her the map, tone light. “Which way?”

Angela studied the noisy paper, concentrating. After a moment, she pointed. “People near Chadron,

food and water in McCook.” She raised a brow. “That’s what I’m up here for?”

Adrian shifted into gear, giving the same answer he’d spoken the first time she’d shown an interest in being an Eagle. “Among other things. Tell me about the people.”

“We met them right before Kenn found us. They have our predator problem, too.” Angela told him the story quickly. “If Marc had been alone, Lenore wouldn’t have helped him, but she was fair. She gave us the supplies we traded for and trusted us to leave our part of it where we said it would be.”

It’s no coincidence, them being so close to where Kevin said the den is. Fate was providing another opportunity. Adrian considered, trying to make the best use of it.

“I might be able to convince her to come with us.”

Adrian was quiet. No one would like it, but Angela was an Eagle and a member of Kyle’s team. The slavers were at their old site, still on the far side of the Cheyenne River. It would be at least a week before the Mexicans could get to the state line, no matter what route they took. That was more than enough time for a team to roll in, wipe out a wolf den and evacuate any nearby survivors.

Adrian heard her sigh. She was bracing to accept the *no* she expected. He felt his plans shift again. She wanted more, now. He would give it to her. “I’ll tell Kyle, you tell Marc.”

Angela was surprised into a challenge of his honesty. "And Kenn?"

"Will be taught to handle it."

Realizing he meant it, she beamed, lighting up the truck with happiness. Her first overnight mission. She paused. *Isn't he afraid I'll be in danger?*

"Terrified."

Angela liked the connection that sometimes allowed him to pick up her thoughts, like with Marc, but the honesty meant more. "Maybe they gave up."

Adrian slid his sunglasses into place. "Maybe."

"But you don't believe that?"

"No; be careful. We need you with us."

She glanced at the lengthy line of people behind them. "I need to be here. It's where I belong now."

"How's the training going?"

She didn't whine. "Okay."

Adrian wanted more details, but he didn't push. Instead, he listened and could hear her thinking about how hard it was to train with all the attention on her.

"Thank you, for adding me to the tests." She didn't want him to know it was only one set of eyes that bothered her. *I used to be so comfortable with Marc around...*

"Uh-huh." Adrian grunted. No one knew yet. Even the Eagles wouldn't be told until the last minute. Which was good because he didn't have it all sorted out yet.

Angela didn't tell him that she didn't either, but at least there was a bare plan in her mind. When they settled for the night, she would attend the leader's only meeting and get things rolling. She started to ask if Kenn would be told she was taking the level test, but they were both stunned into silence at the horror coming into view.

The schoolhouse was small and old, unused even before the war. It was two-storied, with thin trees and tall grass surrounded by open land and birds. Big black crows were feasting on bodies. Hundreds of the flying carnivores flew around the area, fighting, falling.

The remains are drying up. "Convoy halt."

Angela jumped at the call.

Adrian hit the private communication button on his belt. "There are tracks up here. Four, fall out and search for survivors."

"Copy."

Angela spotted the deep skid marks in the muddy weeds as Adrian picked up the main mike again. "Radio silence is over. Get my waves rolling, Mitch, now."

7

Adrian had them make camp well after their normal time for evening mess. By making their departure time later here and there, they would spend more day hours aware of their surroundings and less nighttime hours sleeping when they could

be attacked without warning—maybe by the wild dogs he now suspected were responsible for the death scene they'd rolled by. Those four-legged creatures were a threat.

That thought made him sweep for Angela's shadow as she opened the door. Anything might lurk in all those stalks. "Wait."

Angela gestured. "He's right here."

"Good. See you later."

Angela swallowed an automatic response, unhappy with herself. "I'll be in the training tent after the leader's meeting. I've got a game calling for me."

Adrian chuckled, sensing a wall of determination slowly sliding into place. "You've done your work. Now it's time to play?"

Angela ignored the part of her heart that didn't want to leave his side yet. "Sort of. It's also a workout for my patience. Kenn's still got that damn high score and I want it!"

Adrian chortled as she and Seth entered the slowly forming camp. They hadn't spoken much beyond the obvious things and it had been peaceful. It had also been torture keeping his eyes off the skin showing from under that black tank top.

Adrian watched Kenn get out of his Bronco with a gunnysack. Zack emerged from the passenger seat with folders. Kenn would put the photos in his tent later. Adrian was dreading them yet dying to know what his enemy looked like. He ignored the waves of coldness spreading through the camp now.

Angela wasn't supposed to be taking her level test this time around, but the public schedule Kyle had just posted said she was indeed going to. Word had already traveled. The Eagles were more than upset. They stood in small clusters, smoking and glaring. Their thoughts were full of fear, worried over who would be sacrificed so Angela could play games.

Adrian didn't interfere yet. It wasn't time for that part of the game.

8

As soon as the camp was settled in, Angela went to the training tent for the meeting she wasn't allowed to attend. It was the top Eagles all in one place, and she wanted to talk to them.

When she got to the large tent, the leaders and their supports were arguing over who would give her the cage match. They were pissed at finding out from the sheet, but not at Adrian for withholding the information. They were angry with Kenn and Marc, who they believed to be the reason their boss had to hide it.

Angela couldn't argue. The camp wasn't showing any signs of concern, only her men were.

"There's no way, not against any of us!"

"She'd get hurt."

"One hit and she'll be done."

"And then one of us will be gone, 'cause the camp won't let that fly."

Kyle grunted. “Maybe you’re underestimating her.”

Kenn was surprised to hear Kyle defend the idea. He’d been quiet so far, listening eagerly, but now he scowled. “You think she could last in the cage with me?”

Kyle said what all of them were thinking. “She survived you beating on her for years. Who knows your weaknesses better?”

Kenn was in Kyle’s grill a second later. “You should be careful!”

Kyle let his own fury show. “You should have been banished!”

“Stop it!” Angela’s voice echoed through the tent, drawing everyone’s attention, including the two men about to exchange blows.

This has to stop now. Angela glared as an awkward silence fell. First, how to get rid of Kenn? She shrugged out of the rookie jacket and tossed it at the Marine, who caught it automatically. “You still want me to quit?”

Kenn was aware of the dirty glowers going from her shoulder to him and kept quiet.

“Well, tough shit! Your wants don’t matter here anymore.”

Kenn’s face became ugly. He threw the jacket to the ground. “I’m already aware of that, you sneaky bitch!” He pushed his way through the men and exited the tent.

Angela walked toward the center and slid onto the edge of the gun table. “My joining has caused a

split among Adrian's army. I told my team on the very first day that I'd bow out if it endangered his dreams and I meant it. If I have to resign to fix this, I will."

"Adrian wants you right where you are." Seth gestured. "That's all that matters."

"No, it's causing fights and I won't be the reason his plans fall." She paused, encouraged they were willing to listen. Even Zack was keeping his mouth shut. "The women here want this. They've come to me already, given their support. They'll follow me in. I know that's another part of what holds you back. I understand better than you might think but let me ask you something. Did you really and truly *like* the women of the old world? Didn't you get tired of being the reason everything was wrong, of carrying all the weight? It doesn't have to be that way now. We can share it. All you have to do is teach us."

Jeremy started to protest but stopped.

Angela waved. "Please. I prefer honesty to political correctness. It saves time."

Jeremy grunted. So did he. "Most of us don't think you should have to. Men are the protectors here. That's the way it should have been all along. It might have been part of what was wrong before."

"I agree." She surprised them. "Most females would still want their old lives, but for some of us...the war unlocked prison doors. The women who came out of those ugly cells are a new generation, searching for where we belong."

Jeremy didn't betray himself this time, but she read it anyway. "I know. You don't think a woman, especially one who looks like me, can take the hard choices, constant training, and nasty battles, right?"

There were nods, some reluctant, some not.

Angela gestured. "That's why I'm here. I'm hoping to make a deal."

"What sort of deal?" Cris eyed her warily. "We won't steal Adrian's thunder."

"And I wouldn't take it if you did." She sucked in a breath. "If I fail the cage, I'll resign. If I pass, I get treated like any other Eagle. Before the war, we were all something else. Now, we're soldiers in Adrian's army. I want that place as much as any of you."

"It's about more than you." Jeff spoke up, his neutral tone a surprise to Zack. "If one of us hits you, we get banished and it won't matter if it's in the cage or during a workout."

She shook her head. "That's a law for members. I'm an Eagle."

"The camp only cares that you're female." Zack gave her a nasty look. "What happens if you draw Kenn's name for the cage on a level test? He can't make any exception by Eagle rules, but by our laws, he'll be banished."

"Not if I kick his ass."

There were disbelieving noises from many of the men at her words.

Angela didn't back up her comments with boasting. When her silence let the scorn fade, she

continued. "If I had teammates who were willing to teach me, I'd have nothing to fear from him or any other man. And that, the camp would support completely." Angela added another layer of pros before any of them could give a con. "If they know a woman wants this life, they'll let her have it because of Adrian's rules, but only if she's accepted."

"You've already got Adrian's support. You don't need the Eagles!" A high-pitched male voice caused attention to shift. "Just do what I do and keep your head down."

Angela found the man in a corner, alone, and ignored the witch whispering for her to let it go. "You don't get it, Ray. If I did like you, I wouldn't have his support, and honestly, why are you still here when they don't want you either?"

The man's hands came up. "I want a place by his side, too. They have no right to deny me that!"

"They have every right. Your very presence in this tent tonight is a lie. You pretend not to be something that you are, so that you can keep being something you've been ashamed of your entire life." Angela exposed Ray the rest of the way. "You hide from your team and from the camp. Even around Adrian, you're closed off. With that kind of web around you, being hit on in the shower is the least of their worries. You have no trust with them, and I won't live my new life that way. For me, it's all, *openly*, or nothing."

The level one Eagle wanted to argue, but shifted for the door instead, muttering about female dogs under his breath.

Angela silently thanked Ray for his unknowing help. He might be Kevin's right hand now, but the man would never be a true leader here until he stopped running from who he was and what he wanted. "I won't be treated like that and stay anyway. If I lose the cage match, I'll drop out."

Seth lifted a brow. *Damn, she's good.* "What exactly do you mean by treated like one of the team? 'Cause sometimes, that'll be hard no matter how well you fight."

"Let Adrian make those calls. It'll be his choice then, like it should be." She moved toward the flap, rotating her sore arm. It felt different with the stitches out. "You could even make it a semiprivate match, so the camp doesn't see this first one, only the Eagles. That way, whoever might hit me won't get in trouble and I still get my chance to prove I belong in his army." She cast a lingering glance at the rookie jacket still lying on the dirty floor.

Each man there felt an instant kinship with her because of it.

"I'm going to want that back." As she exited into the chilly darkness, she found Adrian waiting.

"This is what you want?"

"Yes." Angela almost felt naked without the jacket. "You'll play fair and not help me?"

"Yes."

“Hell, maybe I’ll flunk out and be happy as the camp’s second doctor. Marc sure would be happier that way.”

“You think that’s what will happen?”

She shook her head at the worry in Adrian’s tone. “No. I think after this you can relax, that whatever plans you’ve formed around me will be safe.”

Marc came from the tent as she faded into the darkness, hurrying to catch up. He didn’t speak to Adrian. Another argument was coming.

Adrian motioned his own shadow after them, sure Marc would be too busy dealing and ducking blows to watch her six, though he was her guard right now. A woman like her deserved no less than a man’s full attention.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Twice Taken

Pitcairn Island

1

***T**hud! Thud! Thud!*

The pounding was obnoxiously loud and intimidating.

“Open up!”

“We know you’re in there!”

Kendle jerked awake to find Luke standing near the cabin door with a gun in his hand. Where had that come from? She hadn’t noticed a single gun the whole time she’d—

“Luke Johnson! This is Sheriff Cole. You hearin’ me?”

Luke scowled, but didn’t answer. There were ten men out there, more than enough to rush him. Whatever had happened overnight, they’d come heavy and that meant someone was expected to leave with them.

“Last chance, and then we’re coming in!”

Kendle was dressing behind him and Luke asked worriedly, “Can you get to the hole-up on your own?”

“Yes.” They’d made enough trips in the tunnels for her to mostly know her way around.

“Go now, the rear window. Stay there until someone comes for you.”

Luke clicked the lock off the door, causing silence to fall among the muttering men outside.

“You’ll be on your own and they’ll know that.” He set the gun on the shelf by the door. “Take that, too.”

Kendle dressed faster and Luke rotated the knob slowly, buying her time to slip on shoes.

“What do they want?”

He let the door swing open, waving at her to stay quiet. “Me, out of their way.”

Kendle peered out the door and instantly felt dread sweep into her chest. The Sheriff and his friends were armed and there was a pair of gloating green eyes behind them that made her knees go weak. Whatever this was, Ethan was responsible.

She backed out of their view.

“Luke Johnson, you’re under arrest for—”

“Some trumped up charge so he can get my woman alone.” Luke threw an angry hand at the Kraft heir, not expecting his words to help, only buy her time to run. “You plan to take her in, too?”

The Sheriff moved his way, but stopped abruptly when Luke came down the stairs.

“No.”

Luke held out his hands. “Didn’t think so. Guess that Kraft money still works all right.”

“Coming from a murderer, that means nothing to me,” Cole sneered, finally letting his loathing of the pilot show. “And she made her choice.”

Realizing they were all in on whatever was happening, Luke snapped his mouth shut and prepared himself for their custody. He had a feeling there were a few things they would want to get straight with him.

The others crowded around as the Sheriff put Luke in cuffs; all but Ethan, who kept his attention on the cabin. As soon as they were in the jungle, he would return.

“Are you going to read him his rights?” the deputy asked slowly, not certain of the outcast’s guilt. He had clues that didn’t add up, but he knew better than to question the Mayor’s orders.

“He ain’t got none,” one of the other men stated.

Higgins dropped his head to keep the rest of the sick men from realizing how against this he was. He had been deputy for almost a year now and anticipated replacing Sheriff Cole. If he were careful, he’d still be alive when these evil fucks were part of the town landfill. For now though, he had to shut up and play along. He gave Luke a hard shove. “Get on the bike.”

It was a quiet pickup with little delay, but Kendle had done well in the time Luke bought for her. Before they were out of sight, she was lowering herself into the dark tunnel and pulling the grassy cover over the hole. She didn’t care much for being underground, but it was dry and she had more important things to worry about. Like how she was going to rescue Luke.

Thud!

Luke winced at the blow, not moving fast enough for Ethan, who was clearly impatient. Blood dripped down Luke's chin.

"Get on it!"

Luke swung his leg over the bike, settling in behind the deputy and Ethan warned as he mounted his own, "Don't forget what my father said."

The Sheriff glared rebelliously. "And don't forget what I told him. That's taking things too far."

Ethan brought his ride to life. "Personally, I don't get the point. It's like an extra layer of icing, but daddy wants it, so..."

The cop still hesitated and the other men muttered lowly. Disobeying the Mayor now was not a good idea.

Ethan's anger flashed out dangerously. "Should I do it myself?"

Sure that would be worse than not doing it at all, the Sheriff refused. "I'll handle it. Now get the hell out of here. Go...fill up."

Ethan's orbs flashed again, this time with a vivid glow that made Luke stare in recognition. Kendle was right. They were all sick.

"Drive slow."

The playboy was out of sight seconds later and Luke swiveled to glare at the Sheriff in outrage. "You serve the devil!"

To his credit, the Sheriff flushed. "Yes, but not alone."

The thickly built man advanced toward Luke with resigned, set steps and Luke braced for the blows he had expected earlier.

Instead of swinging, the man pulled his pocketknife and took careful aim. "Be still and I'll make it quick. Fight and they'll see how she scratched you all over to get away."

Luke steeled himself as the knife neared his skin, but he swore there would be payment for it.

2

Kendle heard the single bike above her and felt panic threaten to freeze her in place. Would Ethan know about the hatch behind the water tank? Not wanting to take the chance, she stumbled forward with only the candle she'd been able to find, and the gun clutched tightly in her grip. She knew very well who was stalking her and terror was her companion below the ground.

Ethan stormed up the stairs to the cabin with a tight body and a light heart. Luke was in custody and would be hanged for three murders he didn't commit. The other girls were being shipped out tonight, sent to Africa along with Jenna and Cole, who would find that part out later. His father would be satisfied, the town would settle down, and he would have Kendle. Luke's fourth, undiscovered victim was in a shallow grave near his cabin and it

would also be pawned off on the pilot if it were ever discovered. Things were going well.

Not bothering with manners, Ethan raised his foot and kicked the door open. He couldn't wait to sink his teeth into that pink skin.

"Honey, I'm home!"

His cheery voice echoed in the empty cabin in a way that told him instantly she wasn't here and his sickly face lit up with anticipation.

A treasure hunt on a pirate island. Oh, Goodie!

Where would she go? Jenna's? The hole-up? His quick mind flashed to spying on her and Luke as they tracked the tree maps. The couple didn't understand they were following opposite-codes on the trees and had gotten nowhere over the last five days. The Mayor hadn't liked it that they were getting their clues at all though, and had ordered Luke's arrest last night. And she'd been here; he'd enjoyed her fear when Luke opened the door. She would do what he had told her to, and what would Luke choose?

Ethan's anticipation grew. He had only gotten to trace a couple of the tunnels while the pair slept, but one of the shored paths had led uphill, probably toward the hole-up. Another had led toward town, and a third, toward the beach. There was no reason for her to go toward the shore or town, and wouldn't Luke have told her to go hide and wait?

Ethan's joy was ugly. He would use the bike to get ahead of her.

His stomach tightened as he jogged down the stairs. They would be alone in the dark together. Did it get any better than that?

3

Kendle was struggling to remember everything Luke had told her about the tunnels. He'd wanted her to go to the hole-up and she would, but first, she had to make a stop in town.

"Go right at the root that's shaped like a woman." Luke sniggered at himself. "Her name's Mable."

It was a quick flash that brought tears she refused to let fall. They would take him to one of the two cells she'd seen when they reported Mora's body on the beach... Kendle stepped over a huge root, ducking the large corner-web. Why had Mora been there? No one on this island liked the water much. Kendle had never viewed people near it. And that was a clue, wasn't it? Because if there were no witnesses, then a person would be free to do whatever they wanted, good or bad.

Wishing for her sweater to fight the chill of being underground, Kendle moved faster, shielding the thin candle flame with her hand. There had been a lot of blood, but no tracks. Mora hadn't been dumped, but killed there. Maybe whatever was happening was connected to the ocean.

Kendle swallowed a groan at the thought of going near that salty nightmare alone.

“But I will,” she vowed lowly. “Whatever it takes to figure this out.”

Kendle flinched at the sudden shadow in her path and then realized it was her sign.

“Hey, Mable,” she croaked cheerfully.

At this distance, she could make out the sound of a dirt bike moving. Good, Ethan would be searching the jungle for her, Sheriff Cole would have Luke safely in a town cell, and once there, she would help him escape. Then they would go together to the beach and find out what was going on.

4

Luke didn’t wipe the blood away, letting it dry there instead for the townspeople to view. The shallow grooves would appear to be nail marks and add another layer of guilt to his charges. By viewing it now, when it was fresh, he might have a chance at a reasonable doubt with a jury if they intended to give him a trial. Which he doubted.

“Get in there!”

Cole shoved him into the first dusty cell, the second already occupied, and Luke stared at the sight of Jenna lying on the bunk.

“You locked up your own mother?” he asked incredulously.

Cole flushed darkly. “She’s safer here. Even you have to know that.”

“But, I don’t. We didn’t find anything on our hunts,” Luke probed and was rewarded with confirmation of the eyes he’d been feeling on them.

“Don’t matter. He doesn’t like you snooping.”

“Who?”

The Sheriff’s face tightened and he slammed the door shut with a loud clang. “You know.”

He rotated the key in the lock and tossed it to the deputy. “Watch them while I go check in.”

Luke waited for Jenna to say something when the deputy went outside with Cole, and he was unprepared for what came.

“My son’s got it. You’ll have to kill him, too.”

The door opening again halted Luke’s response. Clearly unhappy, Deputy Higgins walked in and Luke guessed he wasn’t okay with the things that were going on. Instead of trying to talk his way out, Luke gave the man a nod of understanding.

“It’s hard to do the right thing on Pitcairn. It always has been.”

The deputy regarded him, but didn’t answer and the former POW shrugged. “Just wondering what comes next for us.”

Higgins gestured to the gun case on the wall. “Waiting on the orders.”

Luke was surprised by the honesty. “Sounds like you’re not a fan of killing women.”

“I used to have a mother too,” Higgins swore softly. “She taught me better.”

“Your ma was a fine lady.” Jenna’s voice was toneless despite the gentle words. “Kind, caring, and strong. This island don’t like that.”

“What do you mean?”

Unable to view her because of the wall, Luke shivered at Jenna’s eerie warning.

“The island will kill her if it can.”

That, Luke didn’t doubt. He’d observed the way the tides rolled in when Kendle neared the water, even when it wasn’t time, and he’d heard the angry roars from their cabin bed when he woke her from a nightmare about the shark.

Strange things were happening here and the townspeople weren’t responsible for all of them, Higgins was sure.

“Will you let her go? Please.”

“No. If he brings her here, she’ll die with you.”

“Thank you for the truth.”

The deputy snorted. “Sure. Anything else I can not do for you?”

Luke leaned against the wall by the window so he could peer outside. “I have some questions.”

Higgins settled into the chair behind the desk, uninfected brown eyes interested. “I’ve got nothing but time to kill until the order comes down on you two.”

5

Kendle emerged from the tunnel after dark with her nerves on edge. More than once, she’d been sure

there were footsteps other than hers, and a minute ago, she'd thought someone had tripped and fallen.

In a hurry, Kendle let her survival instincts take over. As soon as she cleared the cover, she ran.

Trying not to break off a clear path, she wove in and out of the shadowy vines for a long minute before climbing a tall tree. Its weak branches only let her go into the first layer of the canopy, but it was enough to give her cover as she waited to see who else came from the tunnel.

Inside the dark ground, Ethan peered up through the open hatch, mind whirling. She couldn't know for sure he was in here unless he came out. If he didn't, she would use this hatch again.

Wiping his face free of the dirt wall he'd stumbled into, the playboy kept moving toward the hole-up; sure that's where she would eventually go.

Kendle waited, able to see the open hatch from her vantage point, but with each minute that crawled by, her worry for Luke grew. Had she imagined the noise? How did she know it was Ethan? Because she'd been able to feel the menace? It could have been anything in there and she didn't have time to wait and discover what ground-dwelling animal had spooked her. She had to get to Luke before they hung him.

Kendle climbed down and resumed her journey, staying in the jungle this time. She wasn't going

back in that tunnel without Luke unless she absolutely had to.

Kendle realized she was a lot closer to her destination than she'd thought. The town lay in front of her, shops being lit. She ducked into the thick greenness to form her plan. To her delight, she picked out Luke's shadow through the jail window and sighed in relief. He was okay.

"Fire it up!"

The yell came from behind her and Kendle sent her body up the nearest tree in a mad rush. Leaves floated down, the weeds swaying heavily. She held her breath as the sentry and his torch bobbed in her direction. If he were observant, he would discover her. What should she do?

The sentry was an elderly man with arthritic hands and a permanent hump to his shoulders. He scanned the area and Kendle stiffened when he stared at the place where she'd been.

The old man had been an island resident for more than fifty years. He looked up.

Kendle froze, hoping maybe his sight was bad.

He gazed directly at her for a brief second of concern and shocked her with his raspy shout.

"All clear. Movin' on."

As he left, he dropped a bag that was obviously meant for her.

Confused, but not about to stare a gift horse in the mouth, Kendle climbed down and opened the bag to find what she least expected; a way to free Luke and end the madness.

Apparently, some of the residents here not only knew what was going on, they knew who the good guys were and wanted to help.

Kendle shouldered the heavy bag as she crept toward the jail. Great. They needed all the aid they could get against the Mayor and his evil son.

Sliding along the trees, she stopped in the shadows, listening for the right moment to let him know she was there.

“Kendle was right.”

She heard Luke mutter in anger.

“They’re sick.”

“Oh yes. The result of eating contaminated food, they think. They found a cruise ship that had a hold full of supplies

“While they were searching for buyers.”

That sent his mind to Kendle’s words when he’d found her in the jungle, barely alive. “*The ship’s gone...all dead.*” Was fate ironic enough for this illness to have come from her cruise-ship of horrors?

“So they’re slave traders. They had a load of girls from South America when they found the cruise ship. They brought it all with them to wait for the buyers, but they didn’t come.”

“Whatever happened to the world, took them too,” the deputy clarified.

“It was a war, nuclear probably, but it could have been chemical, too. Their sickness might be from that.”

“Does it matter?”

Luke sighed. “No. If it destroys the nerves and brain cells until rage is all that’s left, where it came from means little. How do we stop it from spreading?”

“Don’t have contact. Blood, sex.”

Luke’s mind shot to Kendle and he almost gave it away when he glanced out the window and saw her standing in the shadows with a machine gun. He relaxed his instant tension and kept the conversation going. That wasn’t the pistol he’d given her. She hadn’t gone to the hole-up.

“What about all the women they couldn’t sell?”

“Oh, they’re selling. Some to men here, most to random people they meet on their trips.”

“Trips?” Luke stared at the deputy. “That’s the engines we’ve been hearing, and the strangers in the jungle.”

Higgins kept tabs on the window, sure Sheriff Cole would return soon to finish the job.

“And the tree markings, they’re a path for the buyers to get to the women?”

“Simple codes for the Mayor’s idiot henchmen. They keep getting lost when they bring the girls down.”

“From the estate?”

Like they’d have such dealings on their property, Higgins thought. “Ethan has a hole-up in a cave out by that rock wall his daddy bought for him. He keeps them there until we get a buyer...”

Luke’s gut twisted. “Or until he needs to hurt one of them to bring his rage under control.”

“Yes.”

Luke was burning to confirm his suspicion of why the man was telling him all this, but he forced himself to finish getting what he needed first. “How many are left up there?”

The Deputy’s voice was full of anger. “Enough to repopulate this shitty little island without any inbreeding.”

“You ready?” Kendle whispered as calmly as she could, angered at the sight of Luke’s injuries.

Luke didn’t lower his voice when he answered. “Thirty seconds.”

“You said you wouldn’t let her go. Will you let me?”

Higgins pushed his hat up. “I might be convinced to do that and more, Mr. Johnson. Especially if I suspect your intentions are to eliminate this island of some of the current plagues.”

Luke’s regard was just as hard. “I do and the method is standing at the window.”

“Tell her to stay down,” Higgins stated, pulling his hat forward as if he’d been dozing the whole time. “Cole’s coming.”

Grateful they had an ally, Kendle pressed herself as flat against the wall as she could, melting into the thick leaves that surrounded the brick building. Staying in the darkest of the shadows, she listened to the new conversation with one ear, and the jungle-bound town around her with the other.

“I have to go find Ethan. The Mayor said for you to stay here,” the Sheriff challenged hatefully. This little snout had been after his job long enough.

The deputy yawned tiredly. “Should I feed the prisoners?”

“No. Don’t leave this room until I come.” Cole wasn’t taking any chances with the too-quiet soldier and he slammed the door to add effect to his order. If Luke escaped, Higgins would die before the Mayor’s order came down.

“How long before he beats on people for release, too?” Luke asked, meaning the Sheriff.

“He won’t. He’s sworn to kill himself first and I mean to make sure he keeps that promise,” Higgins informed him coolly, ignoring Jenna’s moan from her cell. “Come on, have her slide it in the window and then get lost somewhere until this is over. If Ethan catches her, there won’t be anything left.”

Luke was putting the pieces together. This brave man had played the Mayor and his men for fools. As Higgins spun the key in the lock, Luke was trying to remember what he knew of the deputy. Very little, he realized. Public figurehead or not, Higgins was even more anti-social than himself.

Kendle handed the gun through the bars, waiting for the questions about where she’d gotten it, but when none came, she assumed Higgins was responsible. He’d known she would try to rescue Luke. From her reckless TV shows? Probably.

“You have to hole-up now for a day or two.”

Kendle swallowed a protest, knowing he was right. He needed to be able to travel fast and not be hindered by someone who would be squeamish. She would want to spare even those who didn't deserve that kindness.

"I'll go to Jenna's."

"No!" Jenna's voice echoed from the next cell. "They stop there with girls sometimes, on the way through."

"The cabin?"

Higgins ruled it out this time. "Nowhere near that beach. We have buyers lined up."

"Moving stock?" Luke asked.

"Yeah, something like that."

"I'll go to the hole-up."

Neither man liked it, but unless she hid in the jungle, there wasn't much choice.

Luke felt her fear and his own rose up to match it. Something wasn't right.

"We'll pick somewhere—"

"Cole's here, shit! It has to be now, get ready!" Higgins ordered, drawing his weapon.

"Don't kill him!" Jenna cried.

"Hush now."

Kendle had started fading into the greenness. "The hole-up."

Luke's hands were already flying over the machine gun, mind getting ready. "I'll be there or Higgins will."

Kendle heard the door open and darted into the dark jungle. She kept moving fast, no longer

worried about making too much noise as she ran for the hatch she'd left open. Luke was about to draw the attention of everyone on the island as he eliminated the sick men. She would be safe underground.

6

Ethan stilled, ears finally hearing what he'd been straining for. The tunnel had no other hatches that he'd found and he'd gone all the way to the hole-up before picking his place. He wanted to take her to the estate and his special room, but his limit had been reached. It would have to start right here.

His nerves blared out another sickly blast of pain along his limbs and he clenched his fists to keep from growling. He needed a release. The hours of waiting, of hearing nothing that could be her, had weakened his control. And then there was a volley of gunfire that had lasted long enough to tell him something had gone wrong, but Ethan hadn't left the darkness. Even now, he could hear sporadic shots in the distance and understood Luke had gotten free. Nothing less would have his father's men pulling the trigger.

"Almost there... Almost there..."

Ethan leered in the pitch blackness. She was searching for comfort. How sweet. *I'll enjoy this one, I just know it!*

Kendle sensed the lurking monster at the last minute, the waves of evil anticipation thickening until her hair stood on end. Just as the candle would have revealed his glowing green eyes, she dropped it to fumble for the gun.

The flame sputtered out as he lunged forward and swung a big fist.

Kendle dropped the gun, swaying to her knees.

His boot caught her in the stomach, driving the fight and everything else from her. She fell against the earthen wall where she collapsed in a heap.

“Kendle! Kendle! Kendle!”

Ethan screamed repeatedly as he rushed toward her unconscious form, the fire in his blood blazing with victory. He couldn’t wait to taste her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I Challenge You

1

Marc followed at a distance, trying to get his emotions under control. He was surprised by who she approached.

“I need you to help me cheat on the level test.”

Kenn snorted bitterly, not turning from the clipboard and inventory sheets she’d found him digging into. “Outta your fucking mind. Always knew you were.”

“It’s what Adrian wants.”

Kenn rolled his eyes. “Like I don’t know that! He made a big show of giving you the jacket, but real Eagles get theirs quietly. You’re a decoy or maybe bait.”

“So?”

“So why don’t you ask him? Or your lover boy over there, glaring from the corn? Either of them would do it.”

“Only you can give me this.”

There was a moment of thick silence as Kenn studied her. “Why an Eagle, Angie?”

“Not for your place.”

“Then why?”

She didn’t answer.

Kenn sighed. "I'm his second. I can't help you betray him."

"That's only to the camp if they found out. To the men, who know what Adrian wants, it'll be viewed as support. FND."

Kenn blinked. He hadn't thought she could grasp the concept, let alone use it to her advantage like this. "I can't do it."

"Because of Marc, you'll let one of Adrian's dreams die?"

Kenn hated it that her pull was so strong.

"This is part of what you signed up for as his right hand. You've always known that sharing power would come up, but I don't want your place and neither does Marc or Neil. Give Adrian what he needs."

Tonya's voice flashed in his mind. "*In time, she'll be above even Adrian.*" If that was true, then the leader had it planned that way from the very beginning, and it was too late to change now. Kenn's shoulders slumped. "Cheat how?"

"Take a dive, if it's needed."

Kenn gaped at her. "You think I'm getting in the cage with you after everything that's happened? You are nuts!"

Angela gestured toward the training tent. "They've promised me they'll be fair. There's a chance I could draw your number from the hat."

Kenn shook his head. "I'll refuse, even if he orders me, and so will everyone else. You'll never get one of us to hit you."

Drawing in a breath, she used her big gun, knowing it would succeed, but still scared of the consequences. “Not even Zack?”

Kenn hesitated, thinking of his conversation where they’d joked about the trucker hitting her in front of Adrian. “...not unless I tell him to.”

Angela let him see her anger. If they all refused, she couldn’t pass. “I need you to set this up for me!”

Kenn didn’t want to. If he gave Zack the okay, and he hurt her, all the problems with the Eagles would return. But Zack breaking her nose would be almost as great as doing it himself. *Tempting.*

Impatient and scared, Angela’s sharp voice snapped at his ego again. “Are you loyal to him, Kenn? Because I have my doubts and Adrian probably does too.”

“You’ll have to challenge, or I’ll have to tell him to volunteer when everyone else refuses,” Kenn ground out, hating her. “A challenge will succeed every time. It’s a serious insult not to accept it.”

Angela surprised him again, this time with gratitude. “Thank you.”

“For telling you the secret that will get these men to hit you? Crazy!” Kenn climbed into the supply truck.

Angela strode to the parking area, hoping it would be mostly deserted for the ugly scene that was coming. She hadn’t told Marc she was taking the test and he was hot.

Marc was on her heels now, not as her shadow, but as a verbal combatant she was tiring of sparring

against. Why couldn't he understand and accept her choices?

She faced him stiffly. This would be the last time she tried to get him to come around. It was tiresome and hurtful. She dropped the next hard truth without mercy. "If I pass the cage match, I can go on the mission."

"No!"

"You don't get to tell me that."

His face twisted at the reminder. "Fine. Do what you want. You will anyway."

"Marc."

He stopped his departure but didn't turn around.

"Please."

Marc couldn't resist and found her only a step away, without a shadow he could pick out in the darkness. "What?"

"I need to do this."

Her almost desperate tone snagged his attention and he studied her this time, seeing the truth. She was tired. And afraid.

"We're about to go to war. I'll be on the front lines. This is something I need to do now, so I'll know how *then*."

The depth of her fear had Marc reaching for her before he thought about it.

Aware of their audience even if he wasn't, Angela flinched.

Marc froze, wounded.

They stared at each other, feeling old frustrations, and underneath, loneliness. It was

crushing, heartbreaking, and so strong she wasn't sure she could resist if he moved even an inch.

Marc sensed her weak state and retreated. "I need to know where we stand, Angie. Soon."

She agreed stiffly. "I'll let you know as soon as the mission is over."

"I'm coming along."

"Good. It'll be like old times."

There was a flash of joy in his face and then anger again. "What the hell is wrong with him? With you? It's toward the slavers!"

Angela pushed her resentment away. "I hope to get Max and Lenore to come back with us. If I'm there, she might."

"Your life for theirs, is a bad trade."

"Who says I'm not coming back?"

"You shouldn't take that risk. *He* shouldn't take it."

"I want to go. I also want to be an Eagle."

"I've got that, loud and clear."

"Then what's the problem? Was everything on the trip here an act? Just tell her what she wants to hear." Angela's voice became an eerie imitation of his. "*You would have made a good Marine*. Just smoke, right?"

Marc was getting angrier at having his words used against him. "I meant it, but you're reckless. Look at the way you've handed yourself over to Adrian."

Her eyes flashed. "He's worthy of it."

Marc's control broke. "You hope! You don't even know him yet. You're just drunk on the power he's offering!"

Angela gasped. "You think that?"

Marc was indifferent. "Does it matter? You've made your choice and you don't give a damn about anyone else, not really."

That blow hurt more than the first. Angela struck back, sure of his weak spot. "That sounds familiar. I wonder if it's your own guilt finally speaking up. Must suck to be so in love with someone that you couldn't give a shit if they're happy or not." She leaned in. "Who are you and what have you done with *my* Marc? 'Cause he would never treat me this way."

Before Marc could think of a response, she spun from him and entered the rear of the garden area. Hurting, he trailed her. Was she right? Did he care if she was happy? A month ago, he would have said that was all that mattered to him, but—

"Whhoooooooo...!"

The howl was nearby. They both stopped, sweeping the distance. Now a common noise in the night, Marc agreed that eliminating the nest was a good idea. He just didn't want her anywhere near the battle.

"Ask yourself why, Marc. And try honesty this time."

Admiration was forced out of him. No, he hadn't been blowing smoke. She was one of the strongest females he'd ever known. Any branch of

the service would have been proud to have her. *It's... I'll die without her. I can't let her be hurt again.*

Angela didn't relent. "That's not your choice to make. I have to conquer my weaknesses. You should be helping me with it, not holding me back."

2

"Whhoooo...."

"Whhooo!"

The second chilling howl was answered almost right away. Samantha froze in panicked fear. *The wolves!*

Pain flared in her scarred leg; she automatically clutched at the empty ghost before remembering where she was.

The garden truck was deserted except for her. A handful of guards outside were the only people still on this side of camp. Fear overwhelmed Samantha. *Not again.* She shoved herself up from the dirt with a gasp. *The trailer door is open!*

"Wwhhoooo..."

The call had an almost human cadence.

Sam ran for the door. She lunged at the handle and jerked it down just as a dark shadow came through the last of the space.

The door hit the shadow.

Samantha kicked instinctively, foot connecting with something warm and hard. Seeing movement, she pulled her gun.

“Do not fire that weapon!”

Sam flinched at the shout, fingers tightening. *Wait. It talked. Not an animal.* She eased off the trigger and retreated as she examined the scene in horror.

Adrian was on the dirty semi floor, hands up in defense, while two people peered in shock from the bottom of the door. Sam let go of the gun. *I almost shot Adrian!*

She collapsed, not crying, but sucking in huge breaths.

Adrian waved the two Eagles in as he left. “Take care of her.”

Jeremy climbed into the truck with Neil behind him.

Sam cringed. “I didn’t mean to hurt him!”

The Eagles exchanged uneasy glances.

“You didn’t.” Jeremy comforted her, while Neil observed. “You did surprise him though, something none of us have been able to do.”

Distracted from her fear, Samantha’s tone was a bit snotty. “Why do you try? Aren’t you guys his loyal minions?”

Kneeling next to her, Jeremy regarded Neil, and got a curt gesture of agreement. “Because we don’t follow blindly. Some do, but not his main support. He has us, but only if he remains worthy.”

Sensing a moment for real questions, Samantha let hers out carefully. “But the secrets he keeps! How can a...liar be trustworthy?”

Jeremy hid a frown.

Neil's calm voice gave Samantha another piece to Adrian's puzzle. "Because he would do anything for these people. He's already killed for them, for their safety. What's a lie compared to a life?" Neil slowly picked up the gun by her foot and held it out. "He takes shattered people, like you, and puts them back together. He can return what you've lost."

Samantha holstered, wanting desperately to believe she had found true safety. "And the evil he lets walk free here?"

"Should he kill without proof? If he did that, this haven would rip itself apart." Neil didn't feel an attraction right now. He was worried about her.

"But I know—"

"You *think* you know, and some of us agree, but neither of those is proof."

"I hate this waiting!"

"So do we. It's something the Eagles struggle with, but it's for the dream." Jeremy smiled at her.

"Adrian's dream..."

"Yes." Neil helped her toward the door. "He would give us the world that should have existed, if he can get enough help from people like you."

Her slacks had been replaced by jeans over boots, but the sweater remained, giving her an appearance of office casual that fit well with her promptness and attention to detail. Now keeping her hair in a ponytail while she worked, Neil thought she looked exactly like the mate of an Eagle should. From her slender, labor roughened hands, to the

sensuous curve of her lips, Samantha was a full grown woman.

Sam stared between them. "I don't want to have to leave. I like it here."

"He won't let that happen."

"You're one of us, and I mean more than just a camp member." Jeremy glanced at Neil and saw his team leader was unsure. "For personal reasons?"

Neil stared at him. "Probably." The thought of her at their side for missions had just terrified him.

"Then you're unfit to make the call. Should I wait for one of the others?"

Samantha frowned. "What are you guys talking about?"

A new voice echoed. "He wants to recommend you to Adrian, for the Eagles."

They turned to discovered Angela in the open space, pale face strained with nerves and curtness that all the low level Eagles displayed right before a test.

"And I agree. No woman should be oppressed because of a man's fears or jealousy." She disappeared.

Before the trio could say anything, Marc's face popped into the empty space wearing a rueful expression. "That was aimed at me. As you were."

He ducked out. They heard his mutter.

"Damn. Where the hell did she go?"

Sam and the two Eagles exchanged glances, then burst out laughing, sending the last of her panicked fear out into the darkness.

“You’re upset.”

Angela smothered the shout that wanted to fly out of her mouth, but her gun was drawn and pointed at him before she could stop it.

Adrian was pleased with her reaction. He’d confirmed his assumptions about distance with Dog and that had been enlightening. Then he’d snuck up on Angela again, on purpose. She was ready for more and now, so was he.

“Things are unfair sometimes.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No!”

Adrian felt her need. Marc had let him know she’d ditched her shadow. It wasn’t a stretch to guess that Marc hadn’t liked discovering she was going on the mission. “Want a lesson?”

“Yes, a real one!”

Adrian scanned her dark red scab, then entered the training tent that they had to themselves. “You can talk to me.”

When he removed his weapons, Angela did the same, certain there were guards on them. Marc might be out there somewhere too, but right now, his face wasn’t welcome. “I know that.”

Adrian raised a brow expectantly.

“I’ll handle it.” Angela entered the hay room and was hit with a sudden sense of worry. Adrian had taken out Neil so easily.

“I won’t hurt you.” She’d tensed and he couldn’t stop himself from comforting her.

“I know that, too.”

“The hard way or the easy way?” They’d been taking it slow, challenging small areas, but that was over now.

Angela didn’t hesitate. “Hard. I want to be able to kick his ass anytime I feel like it.”

Adrian didn’t doubt who she was talking about. All of this mess was Kenn’s fault. Steeling his heart, Adrian stepped forward. “I challenge you.”

Angela immediately swung a roundhouse he wasn’t ready for.

Adrian staggered at the blow... Then returned the favor.

It was only a sting on her cheek, but shocked sounds echoed from the dim cracks around them. *Adrian hit a woman!*

Angela wasn’t shocked. She knew what she’d asked for. She leaned into her next swing, telling him she could take more.

Adrian let her hit land, then delivered another slap, this one a bit harder.

She swayed, caught her balance. “Again.”

Each slap Adrian delivered was received with a pinched face and a healing heart. Before the war, she would have been on the ground already, begging not to be hit again.

Slap!

Adrian’s blow knocked her down.

Angela felt rage spring to life as she picked herself up, blood dripping from her lip. *How many times did Kenny do that to me? A hundred? A thousand?* And she'd had to sit still and take it. Her facade was ice as she advanced. Not anymore. *Now, I get to fight back!* Her hit was full of fury, solid and well delivered.

Adrian staggered again.

Blood dripped from his nose, but his thoughts were still calm, safe. "Again, and mean it this time, bitch!" He made his voice sound almost identical to Kenn's.

Angela did, using the new skills she'd learned from Neil. More of his blood sprayed at the hit.

Three of the stunned men gaping through the cracks in the bales weren't sure who to protect as the tension grew thicker and the hits got harder.

"Whore!"

The insult had Angela swinging again and Adrian grunting at the impact. Neil had done his job. "Never get away! Mine!"

Angela's fury was firmly in control and even though Adrian was no longer hitting her back, she couldn't stop the shiny tears of rage from rolling down her red cheeks with every swing. "Hate you! Fuck you! Pig!"

Adrian stayed as still as he could, bitterness growing for the Marine. Kenn had been a pile of shit before the war.

Angela stopped swinging, shoulder on fire. She rested her hands on her knees, getting her breath back.

Adrian wiped his sleeve over his bloody nose, waiting. He wasn't sure if it had been enough.

Angela panted. "I'm not...either."

He checked his wrist. "Another five?"

She moved toward him with fire burning in her eyes.

Kyle had called Neil right after the first hit. Seth had already been here, on duty. The three guards now stood together watching, unsure gazes occasionally sliding to Marc, who had his stiff back to them. None of them spoke.

4

"Is your fear gone?"

Angela shook her head in a violent spray of blood and sweat. Usually, these stains and pains belonged to the men of Safe Haven and she relished the feel of them while they were there. Adrian hadn't told her what to do after their private lesson, but she already knew the camp wasn't ready to see her this way. "I still kept waiting for you to really hit me."

Adrian grimaced. "What I did was too much. It makes my heart hurt."

"Mine too." Angela went to where he was standing against the bale wall.

She leaned in, so much that those guarding thought she might hug him. Instead, she exhaled hundreds of brightly colored atoms that swirled in the air around them.

“Breathe them in.”

Adrian did without hesitation, mouths almost close enough to touch if either of them were hit by a gust of wind. Hunger flashed up between them, sharp and dangerous.

A minute later, the tiny, colored orbs began vanishing.

“The Eagles are debating just turning around and pretending they didn’t see anything now that they think we’re done.”

Her eyes flashed with amusement he thought was a bit forced. *She felt it this time, the future waiting for us.* Adrian stared at her, not caring who saw his attraction. “You did well.”

Refusing to let Marc’s chaotic thoughts distract her, Angela smoothed her hair down, adjusted her clothes. “Sometimes I can’t believe I didn’t kill him.”

“I’ll give that to you if it will help heal the damage he’s done.”

“It means a great deal to me that you would, but I don’t want him dead anymore.” Angela was unable to deny the attraction flying between them. “Not after all you’ve done for me and my son. That would hurt your dream and I’d never do that.”

“*Our* dream.”

He was putting her in a position of power, teaching her how to lead them. "I owe you a debt."

Adrian used the moment to confront something he was uncertain about. "It's nothing compared to what I owe you for not telling them who I was."

Angela's voice lowered even though they were out of earshot. "When these people find out, you'll lose everything."

"I know." He sighed. "I deserve whatever they give me, but until then, I'll rebuild and teach them what the old world had forgotten."

Angela ignored the voice wanting to know exactly where she fit into those plans. "You're doing great with them, especially the women."

Adrian concentrated, sending her his vision.

"Like the Amazons." She picked up his mental image of an army of warrior women, with her, in full glory, leading them. Angela was still a bit amazed to have this kind of connection with both him and Marc.

"Yes, in a place where the women are as dangerous as the men, America's survival will never be in doubt."

"Big dreams..." She felt the question coming and wanted to know the same thing.

"Is it possible? Can we do it?" He waited impatiently while she searched the future. His heart leapt when she nodded.

"Yes. With the right pioneers, almost anything is still possible."

Neil spotted the shadow moving his way through the empty trees around them and grimaced. *I thought we settled this.*

He was on duty in the rear of camp. Becky had no business here. Using the skills that he'd honed during his time in Safe Haven, Neil ducked out of view and circled back around, never losing sight of the darkly dressed female. He grabbed her arm as his other hand covered her mouth to stifle the expected yell.

"What the hell are you doing, Becky? I already told you not to track me anymore!"

She shook her head, mumbling against his hand.

Neil gently shoved her away. "I can't give in to you, so stop it now!"

Samantha was shocked by her jealousy. She didn't turn around, chest hurting from how much she wanted him.

Neil heard the sound and felt guilty for all the times he'd led her on. "Wait."

She kept moving.

Neil caught her around the waist and pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry, Becky. Please don't cry."

Before Samantha could decide between yelling and laughing, he kissed her, hard.

Samantha responded as if she was drowning and he was the only way to breathe.

Neil let her deepen the kiss against his better judgment, unable to resist as her sweet tongue slid

along his lip, begging entrance. Hot fire flooded him as their tongues touched. He held her by the hip and cheek, lost.

Neil felt the hunger, the passion of a grown woman simmering. His heart responded even as his mind registered her height, her smell, the feel of her body melting over his like it had always been there. This hotblooded seductress wasn't his virginal Becky.

Neil slowly broke the kiss, hand reluctantly letting go of the firm cheek it was gripping.

His eyes flew open at her mewling noise of protest. *I know that voice!* "Samantha?"

"Neil." Sam swallowed, winded. "I'm here to give you relief."

The muscle in his jaw twitched.

Her cheeks turned pink. "I mean, I'm your relief!"

Neil remembered to breathe, aware of only two things. He wasn't worried about who might have seen the kiss—only her reaction mattered. And he was incredibly hard. "I'm sorry."

Sam waved it off. "It was a case of mistaken identity. No big deal."

Neil stared. "You aren't mad?"

She snorted. "Mad? No. Turned on? Hell, yes." Sam veered around him to take up her post in the darkness. "I wish all shift changes happened this way."

Neil entered camp in a daze. *How am I supposed to sleep after that?*

“This is Safe Haven. We are an American refugee camp offering food, protection, and medical care. Is anyone listening?”

Rick hit the button on the timer and took another long swig of his beer. It would be almost three full minutes before the radioman stopped broadcasting and rechecked the channels for messages. It was an easy rhythm to predict. Rick thought he had it down. He was about to test his theory.

He picked up the short mike, remembering the tan Eagle asking why he wanted the portable CB. He'd said to listen, like everyone else, but he knew Kyle hadn't believed him. He'd had the radio for two weeks now, not daring to make any calls until Adrian lifted his radio silence order. Was it okay now that they were broadcasting again?

“Only one way to find out.” Rick put the distorter over the mike and keyed the button. “I've got one minute. Instructions?”

There was almost thirty seconds of silence, but Rick waited patiently, positive someone was taking the radio to Cesar.

When the answer finally came, it was short.

“Orders are confirmed. Take him out.”

Rick clicked the mike once, then yanked the cord from his set and quickly unscrewed the box, pulling it apart. He dumped the last drops of his soda inside, shook it off and put it on the set with his

tools. Anyone who came snooping while he was out of camp tomorrow would discover a system impossible of communication and dismiss him from their thoughts.

The distorter, he shoved into the hole already waiting under the corner of his sleeping bag and patted it down until he was satisfied the square that he had cut in the bottom of the tent wasn't showing. He was always careful when he broke the canvas down and put it back up. It was the only clue to what he was doing, but it was a big one.

Rick stuffed thick gloves and a large burlap sack into his kit. While they were gathering supplies in the next town, he had a pet store to visit. Not all of the caged animals would be dead, but the survivors would be very hungry.

I've got a meal planned for you, my pets. It has blonde fur and thinks it's a king.

Chapter Twenty-Five
Leveled Playing
Crescent Lake Refuge
April 26th

1

“**T**his is your level test, Eagles. It has seven parts. Cage matches will be called three minutes before they start, so listen for your name. Draw a number from the hat, then go to the area with that number.”

Neil clearly loved being in charge. Angela was glad he was running things. It meant he wouldn't be the one in the cage with her. She didn't stand a chance against the trooper, who'd started her regular kai lessons upon Adrian's approval. Neil was lethal.

Angela drew the firearms area first. It calmed her nerves to begin with something she was good at. She entered the gun tent with a light heart despite the glares and mutters she endured. She loved guns. Even the Eagles' unease couldn't ruin that feeling.

But Kenn could. He was the man in charge of this test. His thoughts met her across the tent. *Go away!*

More surprised at the near panic than his silent communication, she lifted her chin. "I belong here as much as you do."

Her quiet words drew nods from Seth and his team.

Kenn flushed scarlet.

"Maybe more," one of Seth's men muttered.

Kenn snarled in surprise. "Fuck you, Jeff!"

Instead of the fight Angela expected, the level four man stared coolly.

"You'll get your turn. We won't leave you on the outs."

Kenn's hands clenched. "Too late for that, isn't it?"

Jeff was now firmly on Angela's side, like the rest of Seth's team. "Yes. You get what you earn in this new world."

The warning was impossible to miss. Jeff had swung to Angela's side in silence; no one knew what had swayed him.

Kenn sneered. "Remember that when you draw my number for the cage match."

Now Jeff flushed, telling Angela he'd already lost to Kenn at least once. She slid toward the targets, impatient. *Why can't they all just grow up?*

Jeff opened his mouth to keep the insults flying.

Angela pulled her gun. She opened fire an instant later, silencing the fight.

The targets were set along the far wall, pinned to triple stacked hay bales. For a minute, there was only the muffled *thud*, *whack* of her shots landing.

Most of the Eagles in the tent had frozen, some going for their guns. When Angela lowered her weapon, they remembered how to breathe.

Her fingers flew over the hot metal, replacing the rounds fast in her annoyance.

Those in her line of fire quickly cleared it as she got set for round two.

Eyes shut this time, Angela pulled the trigger. The gun test had three parts: straight shooting, quickfire shooting, and blindfolded shooting.

None of those watching noticed new arrivals entering the tent.

Angela removed the expended rounds, gaze going expectantly to the blindfold lying on the gun table and then to Kenn.

Kenn wanted to refuse.

“Do your duty or someone else will.”

Her icy words got his feet moving.

The Eagles crowded around when he stepped behind her with the blindfold held out between both hands like a weapon.

Gun ready, Angela still felt uneasy when he wrapped it around her.

“On my mark.”

Kenn’s sullen order eased the tension a bit.

“Go.”

Angela opened fire.

“She’s a natural born leader.”

Marc left the tent before the call, but the cheer behind them echoed loud and clear. “I know.”

He and Adrian had come from the trucks, both eager for the shooting tests. Observing was almost as good as participating. Some of these people were amazingly gifted. *Like Angie.*

“It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“Yeah.”

Adrian felt Marc’s pain. After all those weeks alone, falling for her, the sight of strangers sharing these moments had to be torture. “You could be right there, by her side and welcome. There’s room here for everyone.”

Marc’s anger flared to life. “I’m not everyone. All I want is her.”

“Do you think just being the center of your world is enough for a woman like that?” Adrian’s tone sharpened. “Wake up, grunt!” He rotated toward the loud tent. “She already had a Marine who couldn’t support *her* wants and needs. I’d stay as far from that as I could get.”

Adrian ducked inside. Marc had better wise up before it was too late. She wasn’t meant to be just some lucky guy’s perfect match and she was realizing it now. If Marc pushed too hard, she might let him go.

Isn’t that what you want?

Adrian shoved aside that voice of inner desire. She wanted Marc. Adrian planned to support her needs.

Angela couldn’t stop her fumble as she noticed Adrian enter the tent. She snapped her attention

back to the test, but she knew she'd blown any chance at the break down record.

"00:35. No record. Next time..."

"I'll pay attention."

Kenn was satisfied that she'd shown a weakness. "Pass. Next."

"Angela to the cage."

The loud call sent ice over the tent.

Angela's calm heartbeat switched into a frenzy of panicked thumps. She went casually, trying not to appear as nervous as she felt. Hearing the words of the men already inside the tent didn't help as she neared it.

"He won't hit her either, bet on it."

"Should have Kenn take his place."

"Do that and he'll be strung up."

"He should be anyway!"

Angela stepped through the flap.

All conversations ceased. Everyone had lingered for her match. She'd expected that.

She schooled her face into the impassive mask she'd learned and joined those by the cage, where a battle was finishing. Other than the two men in the ring together, all attention was on her, and even those two were distracted by the sudden quiet. Everything was about to change; every one of them felt it.

Red bandana swaying temptingly from his belt, Adrian ducked through the flap a minute later, noting that she stood alone. The leader kept his distance. They were all waiting for him to prove his

words, one way or the other. He strode toward the ring with a blank face. *Never let them know what you're really feeling*, was a rule he'd led by all his life.

"If you just came in, draw a name from the hat." Doug gestured as another large group of men filed in. Except for the two shifts on duty, all the Eagles were here now. None of the camp was here yet, but they would find out. So many mouths wouldn't all stay shut.

Angela joined her team to get a number. Due to Kyle's men being so good, their level tests were given by Adrian, Doug, Neil, or Kenn. Waiting to draw from the hat was nerve wracking. *What if I get Kenn? Will he take the dive?*

It was a common thought. The noise level remained low as they all waited to hear who would fight her.

Angela took a slip of paper quickly. "Doug."

Surprised mutters filled the warm canvas.

The big man stiffened as everyone stared at him. He hated being the center of attention.

Doug didn't take his eyes from the two men in the cage as they finished with a pair of brutal hits that sent blood splattering across the mat. "Pass."

Billy grinned at his victory as he helped Neil up. They both stilled as Doug limped toward Adrian.

"Get someone else. I don't hit women."

His words rang through the tent, bringing more tension.

Adrian looked around. "I need a man for FND."

More awkward quiet came, where normally there would have been dozens of responses.

“She is a rookie in my army. Will no man support this?” Adrian was prepared to do it himself and risk the camp seeing her injuries afterwards. There would be no magic allowed in the cage and no pulling punches.

Catching the thought, Angela opened her mouth to issue her own handpicked challenge.

“I’ll do it.”

Zack’s call brought instant mutters and protests from around the tent. Few people noticed when Kenn slipped inside, unwilling to miss her first match. He settled in a far corner, away from Marc. Standing alone in his coat and guns, Marc’s body language suggested he might kill Zack the instant he entered the ring.

Adrian ignored them, considering. Zack was following Kenn’s orders, but the truck driver also had his own agenda. With no love lost between them, this was as close to a fair fight as her first match could be...and she’d set it up on her own.

Adrian stared at the graying man. He had no doubt Kenn’s man was trying to give the Marine what he wanted, but after their lesson last night, Adrian wasn’t as worried as he might have been. Zack was an easy mark for someone who knew how to work him over. “You will be exempt from our rules for this.”

“It’s a level Test, nothing more.” Zack was prepared to accept the anger of the other Eagles

when he broke her nose and sealed his place with Kenn once and for all. He was tired of sharing that place with Lee and Allan.

Adrian removed his dog tags and tossed them into the far corner of the 8x8 cage. He spoke to Angela as Zack took his place in front of the shiny metal. "Get my property and return it for a pass. Time starts now. You have ten minutes."

Angela unbuckled her gun belt and let it gently drop to the floor. She'd been swallowing butterflies all day, but now that the moment was here, she felt cold all over. "I'll try not to hurt him too badly. I know he has a shift later...babysitting."

Surprised chuckles floated through the crowded area. It was a punishment for the trucker refusing to do the gun class with her.

Angela kept her focus on Zack as she entered the bloody cage, noting the leer that was meant to frighten her.

"I'll try not to mess up your pretty face too much."

Angela ignored the men around the cage answering Zack's taunt. "I'll still be cuter than you, even with another fat lip."

Zack scowled as laughter rang out.

Angela spotted his weakness. He was easy to goad. She was female. Knowing how to use that to her advantage came naturally. "So, how does it feel to be right hand man to someone with no power anymore?"

Angela's words had the desired effect. Zack strode toward her angrily. His first wife had been like her, before the training years.

Understanding Zack had no intentions of taking a dive, Angela got set with the first sloppy stance she had learned from Marc. It kept her hands balled up and hips twisted.

Zack immediately underestimated her. "Eagle, my ass!"

Angela let his fist get in the air and then slid into the second stance she'd learned from Marc—the nose breaker.

Ducking under his swing, Angela brought her hand up with her ass behind it, remembering to brace her wrist like Neil had shown her. It cracked against Zack's face.

Thud!

The impact made her wrist scream in misery, but Zack was the one howling as he hit his knees. Blood rained down his shirt in thin ripples.

Angela fought the urge to help him as she darted by and retrieved the tags. She took her time returning. The trucker wasn't going to challenge her progress. He was too busy bleeding and moaning.

All around the cage, there was silence.

"Want me or not, I belong here." She dropped the tags into Adrian's hand.

"That's a pass." Adrian let his full pleasure flow through the surprised canvas. "You are now a level one Eagle."

Angela felt relief enter her heart at the slow cheer that grew into a roar. It echoed through the tent.

Angela grinned wildly, high on her success. *I did it on my own!* “I won’t be there long. Kyle’s job keeps calling me and hanging up. I think it likes me.”

The Eagles laughed. Even Kenn was unable to stop a snicker.

Angela wiped her bloody hand down her jeans and found Marc’s indifferent face in the rear of the tent as Lee and Allan helped Zack to the medical tent. She moved that way, taking a path next to Adrian while he was distracted by something Doug was saying; she reached out to snag the coveted bandana from his belt.

Adrian wanted to give it to her, but he’d promised to be fair. He took her wrist in an iron grip before she could get to it.

To be certain his men understood he would show no differences, he twisted Angela’s hand a bit, enough to bring her to her knees. “Keep trying.”

Angela laughed as he let go, happy to be treated that way now. *Damn, I’ve changed!* “You know it.”

Jeremy made his way through the men, stopping at her side as she stood up. “I believe this is yours.”

Angela slid the jacket on, missing Marc’s quiet exit from the tent. “I would have missed this the most.”

2

“He says you’re to help me or I’m to kill you.”

Maria paled. “No. Please. I can’t.”

Rick sighed in mock resignation, climbing into the dark semi while the Eagles were busy. “That’s what I told him too, but you’ll find out how wrong you are. I did.”

The traitor shut the door and slid the lock home, eyes glittering. “There is no escape from Cesar. You knew that when he sent you here.”

Maria understood then why he’d come and tried to run, but he was right. It was much too late. The guard on the area wouldn’t be enough.

Rick grabbed the cook’s arm, pulled her up against his hard body. “You scream, I’ll snap your neck.” His fingers wrapped around her throat and she stilled.

“Good girl.”

Rick ground his mouth against hers. His harsh breathing filled her ears as he unsnapped his jeans and pushed her against the counter.

3

Hours after the camp had settled for the night, Angela met Adrian in the rear of the training tent. A large bonfire illuminated the top Eagle teams celebrating their graduation. Like them, she had aced all of her tests, even scoring a record on the game she’d drawn. Then she’d been invited to the private party.

“How does it feel?”

“Better than I’d hoped.”

“But...”

Sensing now wasn’t the time for doubts, she squared her shoulders. She was a level Eagle. She would act like it. “But nothing. What’s first?”

Adrian led them to the waiting men and waved Jeremy forward. “First, is the real jacket.”

The Eagle handed her a heavier replica of the one she was wearing over her jeans and red tank top, giving her a nod of respect. “Congratulations, and thanks. You did what we’ve all wanted to since Zack rolled in.”

Angela laughed as she examined her new coat. The differences between it and the other one quickly became clear. Made of sturdier materials, it had her initials and a US flag ironed on the inside pocket. On the back, was a fading Eagle.

“Next, the old one gets burned.” Adrian gestured at the fire.

Angela checked the pockets of her rookie jacket and went to the toasty flames. Feeling a bit sad, she tossed it into the fire. “Goodbye, old world.”

Flames shot up around the cloth, turning green. They burned fast and furious until the jacket was gone.

Angela met Adrian’s eye, aware of the surprised talk of the men around them. “That happen often?”

“Only Seth and Kyle.”

“At least I’m in good company, right?”

“Yes. Now, we celebrate. Get a drink and relax.”

Angela headed for the coolers, feeling how welcome she was. Breaking Zack’s nose had created a bond.

Angela twisted the cap off the beer and scanned the small gathering. There were only three levels here. No Zack or Kenn—only the men who were closest to Adrian. Also, no Marc. Even though he’d passed his own test, he and Dog had point over a small group of survivors who had been settled into the QZ not long after evening mess.

Angela joined Kyle in his place under the tree that the others were gathered around. Even during off times, he was high speed, low drag. “So, I hear you’re the best. Will you be the...entertainment?”

Kyle understood she had heard stories about the parties after each level test. “Seth has that honor tonight.” He handed her the blunt that Jeremy tossed their way.

Angela noticed that Neil and his XO were trying hard to avoid looking at each other. *That’s what happens when two wolves scent the same female. First, they circle and watch, and then they try to stake a claim.*

She scanned the tent, listening, mingling. Taking her own hit, she tossed the blunt to Daryl, nodding at his gesture of recognition of a good matchup. He was perched on the fence that ran the length of this farm, half a dozen Eagles around. She lingered near his group for the joke.

Cris grinned as he finished. “I didn’t know how many it was gonna take to whip my ass, but I knew how many they was gonna use.”

The men burst out laughing. Angela smiled. “Blue Collar Tour?”

Cris held the smoke in, making his voice sound harsh. “Here’s my sign.”

“Hey, I’m a redneck, too!”

There was more laughter at her joke. Kyle’s XO raised a brow. “Your turn.”

She could feel them expecting something weak and predictable. They didn’t know her yet. “Okay. I saw this on a terrible show once. There’s a 96-year-old woman on the witness stand. The judge asks her if she has anything to say in her defense.”

Angela switched to an old woman’s shaky voice. “I’d like to explain, your Honor.”

Angela frowned. “What explanation could you possibly have for throwing your 94-year-old husband out of a 12th story window?” A stern, very judgelike voice coming from her mouth, it was already pulling grins.

She switched back to that innocent old woman’s tone. “Well, you see I had just come home from my church social and there was my Henry, in bed, making love to another woman! So, I just picked him up, and threw him out the window.” Angela paused, sniffing innocently. “’Cause I figured, at 94, if he could fuck, he could fly.”

They exploded, Cris sliding from the fence to hit the dirt at her feet.

Angela made her way to the next group. There was no limit to the help these men would give her when she was through creating these bonds.

4

Even though it was so late, the happiness of the celebrating teams was loud. Kenn grimaced as it echoed again. He had just gotten off point over this area and—

“Got a minute there, Mr. Second in Command?”

Kenn grimaced at the voice. “Not really.” Despite the feelings he had found for Tonya, Kenn had avoided her for most of the last week. He wasn’t in the mood for the jealous tirade she was sure to deliver. He had yet to figure out if Tonya fit into his plans to earn back Adrian’s respect.

Instantly hurt and then mad, Tonya put out a black boot to trip him.

Kenn fell awkwardly.

“To hell with you, then!”

She spun around and marched off.

Kenn sat up, gawking. There was another pain in his ass. Too stubborn, too sexy, too determined... Kenn stilled as his mind revealed a way out of his mess. Maybe he could honestly try again, instead of pretending. “Wait up, Tonya! I’ll walk you to your tent.”

It was only the second time he’d ever shown a public interest in her; she stopped, surprised. “Okay.”

Kenn came to her side and shocked everyone in sight by placing a courteous hand on her arm. "Let's take our time. We have some things to talk about."

"That's a match made in hell, right there."

"I agree." Adrian waved at the mess table he had covered in papers. "Sit?"

Samantha did. "I hear Angie's test went well. The camp can't believe she did that to Zack."

"What about you, Samantha?" Adrian was eager to settle another of his council into place. "Any secret desires lurking?"

Samantha wasn't surprised by the person who came to mind. "Maybe, but I'll handle it in my own way."

The last of the party Eagles came from the shadows and headed into the main camp. Adrian switched tactics. "Doug says the garden is growing. That's great."

"Yeah, we weren't sure if it would with all the settling the dirt does during travel times."

"We?"

Samantha shrugged, blushing. "Jeremy's been helping out."

Ah. That explained Neil and his XO not talking to each other. Knowing Jeremy, it was all to get Neil away from Becky. "Good."

Samantha had expected to deal with accusations of playing games. She was surprised again by his reaction. "Why is that good? You like your men distracted?"

“A bit of competition is healthy after all they do each day. Without something to shoot for, they’ll get weighed down with the misery and hardships.”

Another layer of that onion, Sam thought, remembering her observation upon first joining Safe Haven. “You’re so careful with them. It’s...”

“Hard to accept?”

“Yes.” She lit a smoke. The former government hadn’t cared if its soldiers were happy or even healthy. *Just get the enemy in the crosshairs and blast away.* Flashes of the old world were haunting her tonight. The MASH quote rolled in her mind like thunder.

Adrian understood. “It had to change, Sam. It was destroying everything.”

“I know. I just haven’t adjusted yet.”

“Still not sleeping?”

“It’s been better this week.” She shrugged. “I’m staying busy.”

“That helps?”

“I’m also a vampire, so these third shifts fit well.”

They shared a laugh.

Adrian held her gaze as familiar footsteps approached. “Are you glad to be here, Samantha?”

She smiled. “Absolutely.”

Adrian leaned in. “Tell me why.”

Neil saw them deep in conversation and pasted a politely bored expression on his face as he entered the truck for a mug. Not spotting the cook, he

lingered, going over what to say. He had a problem with their mistaken encounter, only he wasn't sure how to bring it up...*and what the hell is she and the boss talking about so intently? Does Adrian want her too?*

The dooming sensation was ugly.

As Neil came from the truck, Samantha was standing up to leave. He quickened his pace, already knowing the answer before he asked. "Can I have a minute, Samantha?"

"Nope." She didn't ease up on the curt tone she'd treated him to all day. He'd stopped by the garden area half a dozen times. "Don't have one."

Neil's face fell, eyes going to Adrian as she left. Reading the amusement there, the trooper sighed. "I'm in her doghouse."

Adrian held in a snicker. "Maybe you should go find out why."

Neil sighed. "I've got a good idea already."

Adrian took pity. "It's a funny thing with females. They automatically put men into two groups as soon as they meet. They're nice to the ones they classify as friends, but to the men they might want, anger and coldness are often signs of attraction."

Realizing the boss was trying to help, Neil considered those words. The moments Adrian had with the camp's women were few and far between, but Neil had no doubt the leader knew what he was talking about. He'd never met a more accurate judge of people. So far, Kenn was Adrian's only flaw, and

even there, Neil thought maybe he'd sensed it too and chosen to handle it only if it became a problem.

"How do you deal with it?" Neil was restless to go after Sam.

Adrian let out a sigh that was full of male patience worn to weary. "As best you can, but don't lie. They find that unforgivable."

Samantha wasn't sure what she was going to say, but she knew Neil would follow. Adrian was trying to give her what she needed, and she was grateful.

"Hey, Sam, wait up!"

What I want, Samantha corrected herself, stopping in a dark part of the shadows. She didn't need any man now, thanks to Safe Haven's rules, but she did want Neil. How much was unexpected.

"Wait up! I think I'm pregnant."

Nervous laughter shot out of her. "I'm not the momma. Who else you lovin'?" Samantha winced at the serious note under her joke.

"Officially, no one." Neil stopped by her, taking Adrian's words of honesty to heart.

She glared. "And unofficially?"

Neil sucked in a breath, wanting to give her what she needed...and wimped out. "I'd rather not say."

"Why?"

"Because I haven't decided. There's someone else I'm drawn to, even when I don't want to be."

Samantha quickly tired of the game. "What do you want?"

He dropped his head. "I don't know."

"You in love with her?"

"No."

The fast, sure answer surprised Samantha. She raised a brow. "Lust?"

Neil hesitated, unsure of the right answer. "I guess."

"What do you want, Neil?!"

Her tone said she was losing patience. His gaze dropped to her lips.

Samantha snorted bitterly. "To figure out which one you like more, because you know you can't have both." She turned away, muttering, "He wants to shop!"

"It's not like that."

Samantha rounded on him. "Then what's the deal?!"

He reddened. "It's that... I didn't even know it was you until it was over!"

Sam felt her pulse race. Neil wanted a kiss he knew was coming, did he? She stared at him, thinking despite the pain he had already caused, she'd chosen to play this role anyway. *Am I crazy?*

"Samantha." Neil's voice deepened. "Can I kiss you?"

She shook her head, body lighting up from the sexual tension flying between them. "I don't think that's a good idea." As she said it, she leaned toward him against her will, fingers itching to rip that hat off and play in his sexy brown curls.

"Just one. I'll be quick."

Samantha's tongue darted over her lips nervously.

Neil groaned as fire flooded him. "Please, Sammi!"

Her nod was short. Neil pressed his mouth to hers urgently, lost.

The guards turned their backs in satisfaction.

Under the passion was a feeling of completeness. Samantha moaned into Neil's mouth at the sensation, arms locking around his neck. *Mine!*

Neil couldn't stop the male inside from lunging forward at the bolt of need. He snaked an arm around her waist to tug her up against his hard body. Hand sliding to her hip, he deepened the kiss, tasting her.

Samantha trembled, grip tightening; she let her fingers tangle in his soft hair.

Neil groaned at her almost rough touch. His hat slid unnoticed to the ground.

The warning crunch from his radio brought them back to reality. Samantha shoved out of his arms. She retreated, hands clenched into tight fists. "Compare that to little Miss Virgin...and tell me if she still stands out in your mind."

"Wait, can't we—"

"No. Go away now, Neil. I'm on duty and you're definitely a distraction!"

Chapter Twenty-Six
The Killing Fields

100 Miles Southeast of Chadron, Nebraska
April 28th

1

Shortly after morning mess was called, Angela ducked into the training tent, eager to work out before they left. The wolf mission would be her first scheduled trip as a level Eagle and while she was looking forward to it, her nerves needed to be settled down.

Apparently, she wasn't the only one who felt that way. She joined the teammates who were already crowded around the gun table.

Kyle and Cris slid over to make room without pausing in the betting as Daryl and Billy put on blindfolds. Both of the highest levels were going on this mission. It was a comfort to spend these few minutes with them before all hell would break loose.

"On my mark..." Neil checked his wrist for the time. "Angie has winner. Go!"

Half an hour later, Angela pulled off the blindfold, grinning at Seth's surprise. They had joined the lower levels outside after she took the

new rookie score on short shots. She was now enjoying the feeling of having a talent they didn't expect her to have. "That's another record, right?"

As the other men congratulated her, Seth nodded. "You also tied Kenn's record for the fastest medium range bulls-eye set." Seth clapped her roughly on the arm.

Angela leaned in, voice low. "We have an audience. Be friendly. She's thinking about signing up."

Seth had to study hard to discover the single red curl that didn't belong among the corn. He studied Angela with a horrified grimace. "Are you trying to sink the Eagles?"

Angela sniggered, allowing him the instinctual use of a hand to guide her around the muddy corner of the tent, but no more. "Not at all. Have you seen her shoot?"

Seth started to deny, but stopped, remembering a contest not long after he'd become a rookie. "Once. She did pretty well for a kid."

"She's a pre-woman who needs to be handled with care, lest she explode in front of the herd and give away secrets that these people shouldn't find out yet."

Seth heard the scold, but more, he understood it would protect Adrian. "If she's one of us, that won't happen?"

Angela pretended to study his freckles more intently than she should be for friendship. "It's not

all for that reason. I wouldn't mention it if I thought she'd be the usual disaster-in-waiting."

Her opinion already held weight with him. Seth gave her a charming gaze. "How far should this go? I don't want to get anyone pissed."

Angela smiled as if she might be interested and saw his pulse increase. "Not far. It won't take much."

Neither can I. It had been a lifetime since Seth had held a woman. "Okay. Want to work on a dance?"

Angela felt her own needs rise up at that; she agreed but had to toss in a concession. "No touching. That *will* piss others off."

And it would, she realized with dismay. She might be an Eagle now, but even for something as simple as a dance in a friend's arms, she was still forbidden.

Some freedom, the witch muttered.

Angela sighed. *One step at a time.*

Becky studied the group of men who were joking and working out with the lone female among them, accepting her as one of the team. They understood Angela was more than a girlfriend or a cook, and they liked her for it. They gave her respect.

Do I want that? Becky ignored the urge to itch her leg. She definitely didn't want to be a doctor. She couldn't even stand to give someone a shot. She forced the discomfort away, trying to be perfectly

still. Did that mean she couldn't shoot anyone either?

The teenager's cheeks darkened as Angela and Seth began a dance that put them too close together. *If anyone from the camp sees that, they'll think the pair are dating.* Something in her gut twisted. What did she care? She was chasing Neil and Rick at the moment and frankly, Seth had always scared her a little. He'd never once talked to her outside of his duties.

Becky slipped out of the restricted area with confusion and jealousy raging. *Who can I talk to?*

Someone else was also studying the dancing couple. The hurt in that gaze would have been unmistakable had Angela or Seth noticed. Marc knew they were playacting for something, and still, the jealousy was riding him in waves that kept sloshing higher. Seeing her flirt with the cop was painful no matter her intent. It drove home not only how different she was becoming, but also how manipulative. Adrian had given her a goal—get accepted as an Eagle no matter what—and she was following orders.

Marc left the area, easily avoiding the sulky teenage girl also leaving the scene. This mission was dangerous, but Marc had steeled himself against interfering again. It was a final test, not of her, but of his limits. He'd just watched her flirting with Seth to get something she wanted, and that agony was fresh. He'd watched her get stabbed and

that pain was slowly healing. Now, he was set to let her risk her life to kill some wolves and maybe get Max and Lenore to come back with them.

Marc went to his tent to gather his gear. He had a feeling a lot of things would be cleared up by the time they returned, but instead of relief, there was only dread.

2

Angela came from the bathroom camper to find Becky hovering nearby. She didn't speak as she zipped up her thick jacket and lit a smoke. The first steps had to be Becky's idea, or she'd never make it.

"Do you like Seth?"

Angela smiled at the childish question. "Sure. Who doesn't?"

"That's not what I mean!"

Angela took in the defensive stance, the mind braced for a confirmation. *So that's where Becky fits...* "No. He's not my type and I'm not his."

"Oh." Clearly not convinced, but unwilling to challenge her, the girl stared at the ground.

"Walk with me while I get ready?"

Becky agreed, relaxing the smallest bit. "Okay."

Angela led the way to her tent and ducked inside without inviting the girl in. She verified her note to Charlie had been read, and emerged, duffle bag in hand.

The wolf would protect him while they were gone and when she came back, the coldness he'd treated her with since she'd come to Safe Haven would be over. He was full of a teenager's impatience and confusion, restless to help Adrian in the ways she was, even though he wasn't ready yet. She understood his needs, but he had no idea how much she'd gone through to get here. It was about time they acted like mother and son again, instead of two strangers in the same camp. She'd given him all the space she could stand.

"You're an Eagle today?"

"I'm always an Eagle." Angela motioned to the men loading gear into jeeps, and double tapped her wrist. She held up two fingers and knew by their grins and confusion that she'd gotten it wrong.

Her radio crackled with Kyle's patient voice. "You double tapped. Do it again."

She ran through the lessons mentally. Two minutes, not twenty. One tap.

"You messed up?"

Angela repeated the motions, getting it right, and then seized on Becky's surprise. "The signals are simple. Remembering what each one means, not so much."

"Aren't you embarrassed?"

"A little, but so are they when they make a mistake. No one knows this stuff anymore. We have to relearn it."

“I’m thinking about joining up.” Becky’s face twisted. “Sign up, anyway. Probably be told I’m too young to join.”

“Not if I mentioned to Adrian that I think you belong on a team.”

“Why would you do that for me?” Becky stared. “We don’t even like each other.”

Angela was finally catching a flash of the no-nonsense adult this brave little girl would eventually become. It was too bad she was destined for Seth. Angela had sort of been eyeing the girl for Charlie or Matt. Angela returned the honesty with surprise and a foundation for the future, when she would pick her own team. “Samantha says good things about you. I value her opinion.”

That shocked the girl into silence.

Angela rotated toward the trucks as if they were done. She paused. “I didn’t say I would. Only that’s what it would take.”

Realizing Angela wanted something from her, Becky frowned. “I don’t know if it’s what I’ll be good at. I can’t promise not to embarrass you.”

Angela was convinced of the teenager’s sincerity and character. Her company, though... “To be an Eagle, Becky, you have to give up Rick. We’ll never let you in while you play games with our enemy.”

Adrian was nervous as he watched the Eagles pack the vehicles. "Code Raven is a go."

Kyle was expecting it after the last minute switch of driving schedules, but he was unprepared for the anxiety in their leader's tones. Realizing how much Adrian was counting on this made Kyle determined to give it to him. "Does Neil know?"

Adrian shook his head. "No one does, officially. Many people suspect. Do the best you can. She insisted both men be there."

Adrian hoped it went well, but he was sure there would be trouble. The dreams, the feelings, were crowding his thoughts, making it hard to concentrate. He was putting all of them at risk to short track her training.

Kyle hated Adrian's anxiety. "I'll take care of it."

Adrian knew when Angela entered the area by the way the mood of the guards around them picked up. "And her?"

"You know it."

Angela joined the lone man smoking a cigar in front of the last jeep. She lingered nearby, lighting her own bad habit; they both studied Rick as he walked by.

As grungy as ever, the man had the nerve to wave happily at Mitch as he reentered the more populated area. *Where is his guard?*

She could feel other Eagles wondering the same thing. Had he been listening to the teams? Did it matter?

Maybe. She would have to talk to Adrian when they got home. In the meantime, who did she warn?

Angela spotted Zack. He was the highest ranked Eagle not going, and he was good at his job, but he hated her. They hadn't exchanged a single word since she'd broken his nose. Even now, his bandaged profile swung her way, grimaced as he verified everything was okay in this direction, and then moved on. Anything she told him would be ignored unless she made a scene. It would have to be Kenn. "I don't trust him at all."

Surprised she was talking to him, Kenn grunted in reply, not sure if she meant Zack or Rick.

"He's bad news."

Her attention was on the traitor. Kenn frowned. "You're the second person to say that to me today."

Kenn didn't tell her Adrian had been the first. He'd made arrangements with Zack to have Rick under an extra guard while they were gone, but he had little faith in the truck driver since his timid Angie had drawn blood so easily.

"He'll be under guard?"

"He has been all along, but as more time goes by without us catching him at something..."

"Yeah." Angela's gaze was stormy. "He's slid right in with these people, been very careful."

"Too careful." Kenn's voice matched hers...aware and displeased. He glanced over at her, tone strangled. "Can't you see anything?"

Angela shook her head, keeping her tone calm. "Just darkness. *Some* people are wired that way."

Kenn glowered at her. "You do that to me?"

Easy, careful. "Sometimes."

His displeasure grew.

The guards nearby registered the change.

Kenn scowled. "*He* tell you to?" Meaning Adrian.

"No."

"He know you can?"

"Yes."

"Stay outta my head!"

Angela sighed. Kenn was about to learn the hard way that when Adrian wanted something, he got it. It was a lesson he should already know by heart. "You make the real choice yet, Kenn?"

He flinched. It was tiny, but it was there and pleasing to her.

"I spent a lot of years in the bear cage. Knowing how he thinks kept me alive, wouldn't you say?"

Kenn flushed guiltily.

Angela studied him. "Are you still a threat?"

Kenn hated it that he couldn't ignore the power behind her demand. "Not to him."

"To his dream."

Kenn's anger was replaced by frustration and worry. "Maybe."

Angela ground out her butt with her boot. "If you kill the dream, the man dies. You know that."

Kenn kept his mouth shut. Of course, he knew.

"Find a way to make peace with all the changes."

"I'm working on it!"

Angela followed her instincts. “Tonya would be a good mate if someone could...rehabilitate her.”

Kenn froze. It was the first time Angela had let on that she knew of his affair with the whore.

“I’m sure you’ve thought about it. She’s much easier to control than I am because she’s so selfish.”

Angela had leaned in; Kenn found himself listening even though he didn’t want to.

“She’s also determined, strong. If your loyalties became hers, imagine the respect you’d get for saving her.”

Kenn stayed silent.

“Change takes time. People get hurt, but the results are worth it. Pick Adrian and make everything else second. We all belong to him now; most of us know that. You should, too.” Angela strode toward her Blazer, aware of Kenn gaping at her with a dumbfounded expression. The biggest part of the fighting between her and Kenn was over now. This mission would settle the rest of their issues.

Make peace, save Tonya, pick Adrian. All things Kenn might think were possible if not for one obstacle. Marc was earning his place and if things continued as they were, Marc would be second in command. Then, Angela getting stronger, becoming more like the other Eagles each day despite the crusty wound that had to hurt during workouts. It gave Kenn an unexpected source of pride to have the men say his ex was worthy. That was part of the final problem with him letting go.

He still wanted her. More so now than when they'd met, and that was the anger. Marc was his jealousy, but Kenn knew even if Angela had come alone, there wouldn't have been a second chance for them. Tonya often brought out his bitterness and now, his mind was full of confusion. How was he supposed to make peace with all of that?

"By priority." Kenn concentrated. *Which one do I want more? Which one can I not live without?* Adrian was the immediate answer.

To keep my place, I'll have to sanction Angela and Marc being a couple, and in power.

Kenn was glad for the distraction when the other team members began climbing into the jeeps. Maybe somewhere in the future he could reach that point. Right now, he hadn't completely given up hope on driving her out of the Eagles. If she failed on this first turn out, there was still hope.

They took three jeeps and two Blazers, Angela driving her own. Adrian fought the urge to cancel the mission when his bad feeling grew stronger. He planned to go to the mess and surround himself with the warmth of his remaining herd instead.

He spotted Samantha's dismayed face also watching the convoy leave from her place atop the fire truck. That team was learning how to use the bulky equipment.

Adrian let his feet go that way. Samantha had been keeping tight company with Neil and Jeremy; she would be tense while they were gone. He would

lend a hand on the crew and distract them both from their worries for a bit.

4

“Is there a problem?”

The mission team had just crested a short hill and found themselves on a narrow, two-lane road that sloped downward. They’d only been traveling for an hour.

Angela glanced in the mirror at Neil’s question. “They’re arguing behind us.”

“That would be the usual for those two.” Neil wished he were there to support Kyle against the Marine. Kenn didn’t want her in the Eagles. He would loathe the very idea of her leading a team, let alone having to follow her orders.

“Uh-huh.”

Neil grinned at her suspicious tone. “What?”

“There’s something going on.”

Neil scanned the stalk layered landscape instead of answering.

Angela snorted. “That’s what I thought.” She kept track of the angry men in her rearview mirror as she followed the jeep ahead of them, aware of being protected in the center of their convoy.

Neil also watched the men behind them. He and Angela recognized the motions of real anger a short time later. Both of them considered stopping to switch passengers or drivers.

“Keep rolling.” Marc hadn’t looked back once.

Angela frowned. "But if they're fighting..."

Marc yawned. "Kenn's driving. He won't stop for that." He pulled his hat down to block out the dim light. "When we hit Chadron, it might be a different story."

Realizing he was right, Neil relaxed. He used the distraction technique that usually succeeded so well on rookies. "It's time for a check in with base and each other. You do it."

Angela didn't hesitate despite being the one driving. She had aced the radio courses so far. "This is Liberty. Check in, by 7."

To her relief, and Marc's surprise, when Neil changed the channel, it was already lighting up.

"Independence, clear."

"Justice, all clear."

"Freedom, all clear."

"Caboose, clear."

Angela grinned. "Copy, standby for a base check."

Neil switched them to another channel, one the camp stayed on regularly between broadcasts.

Angela keyed the mike. "This is Animal Control. Come in, Safe Haven."

"Gotchas loud and clear, Darlin'."

Angela rolled her eyes. The men with her expressed disapproval at the unprofessional response from their radioman. He sounded drunker than usual.

"Everything is 5-by. Same?"

"Rogers that. Happy huntin'."

“Copy, out.” Angela hung up the mike, feeling pleased with herself, but it faded as she noticed the argument behind them had already resumed. Kenn’s violent hand gestures and red face said he was beyond pissed.

“Kyle can take care of himself.” Marc didn’t glance up from the maps he was scouring for potential future escape routes. “They have some things to sort out.”

Neil and Angela were both concerned at his words.

“How do you know that?”

Marc circled a location on the map. “Adrian redid the vehicle arrangements for this mission right before we left. He wanted Kenn and Kyle alone together.”

5

Kenn wasn’t happy. Before he could insist on seating arrangements, Kyle had stepped in front of him. Kenn knew his plans to prove Angela unworthy during this mission weren’t going to succeed at that moment. He’d had the right words on his tongue, was ready to restart the old war with her, and then Kyle had appeared and said four words.

“Let’s have a talk.”

It had gotten ugly fast. Now they were riding in tense silence, both too pissed to keep arguing when they couldn’t stop and fight it out.

Kyle lit a cheroot, blowing it his way in disrespect. Kenn had told him not to smoke the little cigars when they rode together.

Kenn fanned the cloud, putting the window down. "Asshole."

"That's me." Kyle was discovering he actually had respect for this Kenn, the one who spoke his mind. "Look." Kyle pushed back into the battle, determined to win. "Pretend it's someone else in charge. Do it for Adrian."

"No."

Kyle sighed as they rolled by a weathered sign announcing the Antioch limits. It was going to be a long ride to Chadron. He hoped things were going better for the boss.

6

Hisssss...

Adrian's hand jerked up; he leaned away from the burlap sack lying on his cot.

Hiss...

The snake sounded angry.

Adrian snagged the drawstring and gave it a sharp jerk. The bag shut tightly, drawing a louder noise. The sack rippled from the snake's angry movements.

Sitting with the other papers and kits, half buried under other envelopes and boxes the Eagles had put here for him, the bag had given the impression of being harmless. With Kenn only gone

for half a day, there was already no organization. It had allowed someone to slip in an attempt on his life.

Adrian sat down in the closest chair, thinking hard. Such a simple and smart attempt implied the person knew camp routines. It was also indicative of someone pissing on another man's property, an insult meant to wound mentally.

This had been done to hurt him. Even if he didn't get bitten and die before Angie could get... While she was out of camp, her tent was unguarded!

Adrian shoved himself to his feet, but he took an extra minute to gain control of his emotions. He would have Jeff and Kevin handle this. Those two were more reliable than Zack.

He moved toward the training tent, glad Doug was still here to help maintain normal order. He kept his pace calm and his face friendly. His mind, however, was in a dark place. The next attempt would be bolder and try hard to kill him. His herd might be caught in the crossfire. Like any good shepherd, Adrian was working on a plan to spare them. They would be on the road for the next two days and the highest teams would be away the whole time. That was plenty of opportunity for their mole to poke his head up again.

7

“You could sneak into his tent, be waiting when they come in.”

Becky didn't jump at the voice. She'd known Rick was nearby, but she did flinch at the image of Neil returning to discover her in his bed. "Yeah, I can imagine that working. There's nothing like being tossed naked from a man's tent."

Rick's hands plunged into his pockets at the word naked.

Becky stared at him. "You've got something else, right?"

Rick nodded. "If you were found together before he could throw you out, it wouldn't matter, would it?"

Becky wanted to swear that she'd never trap Neil that way but couldn't. "Not to the camp. He'd have to marry me, maybe."

"That's what you want, right?"

"Yes!" Becky answered quickly despite no longer being as positive.

"I know how you can make it happen. Without the naked parade."

Becky recognized the careful control and almost desperate need. Rick was dangerous. Again, that delicious shiver made her react more boldly than she felt. "And in return?"

The traitor advanced, but he didn't take his hands from his pockets. "A small reward."

Angela's voice ran through her mind. "*To be an Eagle, Becky, you'd have to give up Rick. We'll never let you in while you play games with our enemy.*"

"Are you really the enemy, like she said?"

Rick nodded. It wasn't necessary to lie to the teenager. In fact, it was crucial that he didn't.

"What do you want here?"

"Samantha."

Becky's stomach churned with jealousy. *That blonde bitch again!* She struck back, hard. "I won't be your toy. If I go to his bed, *he'll* be my first."

Rick shrugged. "Your choice, always."

Fooled, the teen paused. "What kind of reward?"

Rick didn't wait any longer to demonstrate.

Becky froze as he swept her up against his rugged body, suddenly terrified.

He hugged her.

Reluctantly, she allowed it. It was a much smaller price than she'd thought he would ask.

Rick knew the end of his time in Safe Haven was nearing, but that didn't mean he wouldn't return, or that there wouldn't be time for what he had planned for the young girl in his arms. Always one to set up the next move, he let go. "Sorry. I get lonely."

Becky's heart melted, as he'd known it would. "That's okay. I was expecting worse."

"I'd never hurt you."

"Promise?"

He let the sarcasm loose. "*You know it.*" Rick held out a small vial. "Half of this will put him in the mood. He'll take any woman in his bed, with or without her say-so. All of it will knock him out for

about eight hours and make him feel like he's been drinking for a week."

Feeling much like a traitor herself, Becky slid the bottle into her pocket. "This is wrong."

"Yes."

She waited for Rick to give her the speech she would have heard from the Eagles. When it didn't come, she surprised them both by moving back into his arms for an intense clutch. "Thank you!"

Pushing his luck, Rick held her again, pretending she was a taller, fuller blonde with a scar on her hip and fire in her touch.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Following Orders

1

Accompanied by steady rain, the Eagles drove straight through to Chadron. Thanks to half of their route going over roads they had already cleared for Safe Haven, they entered the city limits just twenty-five hours after leaving camp.

They'd stopped twice for driving changes, the others snoozing in the vehicles, and while the fighting between Kenn and Kyle never really stopped, it did pause when they took a short break in the rain.

Angela stayed by the vehicles during that moment, not wanting to hold them up, but she studied how the others handled the cramped conditions and horrible sights. Like when they'd rolled through Berea, Nebraska.

It had been five months since the war, and the runny corpses they'd all shied from in the beginning were mostly gone now. All that usually remained were graying skeletons in tattered bits of clothing. In Berea, however, the bodies had been fresh through the rain-washed windows. Their convoy had driven by these reminders of human insanity with tense profiles and guns ready. It was clear that

there had been a battle in this small town, but between whom? There were no signs of the government or the slavers, only residents of the town. All the Eagles swept the wet landscape harder after that. They'd left the mystery behind, but it wasn't until they made it to Max and Lenore's ranch that Angela connected the pieces. "The wolves did it."

Marc raised a brow, but he got her drift an instant later. He kept his mouth shut, thinking if the wolves were now south of Chadron, it didn't bode well for the mountain couple Angela had hopes of rescuing. Chances were slim Max and Lenore had lasted another month after they'd come through.

As the convoy rolled to a stop in front of the weathered ranch house, the rain stopped.

Angela's upset voice told him the odds had shrunk to nothing.

"No life survives in there."

Her words weren't doubted, but Neil had a small team verify it anyway. The sooner they were out of this stalk filled graveyard, the better.

"I need to go in."

Marc opened his mouth.

Angela swung herself from the Blazer without waiting for his protest. "I'm not asking." She slammed the door.

The remaining Eagles split off into two groups. Kenn stayed with Neil's men, patrolling their vehicles while Kyle's team followed her inside. She

didn't know how they'd gotten him to play along, but she was glad.

The smell of the corn was much worse than when she'd been here before. Angela strode quickly through the reeking home toward the kitchen, holding her sleeve over her nose. One of the doors in the long hall drew her attention; heat spread up her face. That was where Marc had helped her conquer some of her fears.

Angela pushed away the memories, and the disturbing version that wanted to change the players in that moment. *Now is not the time! Sex and death are not supposed to mix!*

Moving into the next room, Angela spotted bodies in the bed, their exposed, purple skin covered in tiny teeth marks. She clenched her fists against the guilt. Blinking away tears, she kept walking. There was nothing she could do for them now.

Angela stepped through the curtains and grabbed the ornate Caller from the wall peg. She hadn't known the mountain woman very well, and Max, she hadn't liked, but they had been full of life when she'd been here four weeks ago. It was impossible not to feel weighed down.

Why she took the wall ornament was only clear to Marc, who frowned at the thought of who might wield it.

The Eagles followed her back outside. When Angela loaded herself into the Blazer's passenger seat, they exchanged gestures, eager to be rolling again before the sun sank. The wolf den was only

thirty minutes from here. As soon as it was destroyed, they could rejoin Safe Haven.

2

Lost in her guilt over Max and Lenore's terrible deaths, Angela didn't feel the waves of unease moving their way until it was too late.

One minute they were rolling steadily by row after row of molding cornstalks, the sickly, knee high plants all they could see in every direction of the Walgren Lake State Rec Area. The next instant, a wall of death thundered from the corn and washed their convoy away.

Angela struggled to breathe, smothered between the two men as the Blazer rolled. They were hugging her tightly, trying to keep her away from the debris that was pounding dents into the reinforced steel.

Slam! Crack!

Another flip—this one beat them against the front seats and then each other.

CRACK!

The rear window was hit hard, sending spiraled fractures through it, but none of the black mud that had swallowed them.

Rip! Thud!

Even reinforced, the 4x4 was giving under the onslaught.

Smash!

They came to a sudden, jarring stop against something hard. It flung them along the roof as the mud wave parted to flow around them.

Angela wrenched her head up, gasping air into painfilled lungs. "Hold on... Not done."

Their grips tightened, feet bracing, and then the Blazer was hit in the side by something big, spinning them back into the chaotic mess.

The flash flood raced over the land in a roaring torrent. Leaving a trail of destruction that was nearly two miles long, the wall of mud carried the Blazer along brutally. Slowly losing power, it finally let them go deep in a cornfield, with muddy silt up to the tires.

At a shaky gesture from Angela to confirm it was over, the trio inside untangled themselves.

"You okay?"

"You all right?"

They asked it at nearly the same time. Angela wiped blood from a scratch across her arm. "Think so. Might be sick." Angela swallowed a groan as she noticed how many other small cuts she had. If this kept up, she'd be a hideous hag by the time she got to Kyle's level. "Can we get out?"

"Two minutes."

She nodded at Marc's words, and then held her head as it spun. "One...two...three..."

Marc grinned at the countdown. He and Neil were also bleeding from many places, but none of them were serious. Being men, they didn't worry

about it now that they'd assured themselves of her safety.

"There's light." Neil pointed.

Marc slid toward the passenger window. "Good. That means we're upright."

The Blazer's engine wasn't running, denying power to the switches. It took both of them to force the glass down.

Mud rolled into the Blazer in small rapids, leaving a limited vision of their surroundings. The battered vehicle was sunk partially into the dark, dank mud.

"Help her with the gear and I'll do a quick check." Neil was already sliding his thin torso through the window.

Angela didn't wait for Marc to help her from the slippery opening, moving smoothly out and then onto the roof before jumping clear of the mud path. It wasn't that she didn't want Marc to touch her. She just wanted to hold her own and be treated like any other Eagle no matter what happened.

Marc followed her. He'd been sure seeing her on this mission would be hard, but he was beginning to suspect that it wasn't because of anything she might do, only his reaction to it. He had himself under tight control right now, but later, when she was busy proving herself, that might be another thing all together.

“Come in Freedom.” Neil waited, still fighting half an hour later to get his guts under control from their wild ride. Thanks to the extra supplies they’d brought, their injuries were a large number of scrapes and bruises from bouncing off boxes and bags instead of sharp metal, but Neil had little doubt they’d be sore from it later.

There was only static as the mud-splattered trio listened. Neil tried again. “This is Liberty. Come in Independence.”

Angela halted Neil when he would have tried a third time, certain they’d been heard. The adrenalin was still pumping through her body, making it easier than usual to pick up Kenn’s bad vibes. “They hear us. Radio’s sparking. This is the same street we were on when the mudslide swept us out. They’re on foot now, too.”

“We lost all the vehicles?” Neil was incredulous.

She shrugged. “Kenn thinks they’ll have the Excursion back when it dries out.”

“Ours may work too, in a few hours.” Marc lowered the hood. “Needs more settling time.”

“Tell them to meet us by that silo. It’s high enough to be visible in every direction.” Neil pointed.

Angela carefully tapped the message out in code, and then listened mentally to make sure they’d gotten it. She planned to do as much of this as she could without help from the witch.

Neil surveyed Angela, thinking that even with mud in her hair and dried blood on her face, she was still so pretty it hurt... Like Samantha, with dirt in her hair from gardening. "You've got the basic foot formations down?"

Angela unslung the rifle she had gotten for passing the level tests. She ran a finger over the initials burned into the stock. "Yes, sir!"

Both men smiled, but Angela didn't. She veered to take point without being told. Neil's thoughts were full of giving her the lead. No matter how well she did or how exact her copy was, it always brought surprise or amusement instead of respect or acceptance. Knowing they still didn't consider her an equal made Angela even more determined to be perfect. She reluctantly brought the witch forward to walk with her as the two males took her flank.

The formation for three people was a shifting diagonal, led by the point man. The Eagles in the rear automatically adjusted the line as she walked, searching the empty stalks that surrounded them.

Marc kept track of the distant sun that would soon sink below the skyline. He was glad when she set a fast pace. They only had a few hours before dark and then they would be out here with no shelter and roaming wolves.

Angela was surprised by her lack of fear despite their situation. The feeling of being right where she belonged was settling over her.

When she caught movement in the distance a bit later, she pointed. "There they are."

The double diagonal line of Eagles was much larger, appearing like soldier ants marching neatly to their own beats.

Angela looked at Marc. “You remember, I’m sure, what happened the last time we were here after dark.”

Marc hunted through the shadows of late afternoon as his mind lingered on the note of excitement in her voice. Where was *his* Angie? “Yeah. We’ll have to get ready.”

She gestured at the farm they were about to reach. “We can set up in there.”

The barn was faded red with a top window and a narrow deck that was easily 40 foot across. The two front doors were open; Marc lit a smoke, eyeing that ledge. *I want her right up there when it all goes crazy.*

Neil slowed down to be even with Marc. He made sure his voice was low enough so Angela wouldn’t overhear. “I want to give her lead of this mission. It’s my call.”

Marc’s sudden flash of intuition was sharp. “You want it, or Adrian does?”

Neil didn’t flinch, expecting the accusation. “Both.”

Marc grunted. “When will you tell her?”

“She knows what we want. Probably has since before we left.”

Marc stiffened, tightening his control. She hadn’t mentioned that. “As long as she’s safe, I’m on board.”

It was clear from the set profiles of Kenn and Kyle that their leadership transition hadn't gone as well. Marc observed as the rest of the tense, scraped men joined them in front of the barn. *Will Kenn fall in line for this?*

Neil wondered the same thing, but he didn't change the plan. It only took the Eagles a few words to understand what he needed from them.

"Angela's been through here in the last month; she knew the people we found. She'll tell us what to expect tonight."

"It'll be easier to show you. It's behind the barn." She sounded calm to her own ears, but inside, the nervousness had returned with Kenn's hard face.

Marc was surprised she had known they were so close to where their battle with the wolves had taken place. Only half a mile away, they might have been able to make their stand in the big red shelter if they'd known it was here.

Angela led the way at Neil's motion. Hearing nothing behind her but steps, she spun around. "Who has guard duty?"

Neil hid his surprise. He'd expected to have to remind her. "You pick it."

Angela smothered the grin of power that wanted to fill her face. "Daryl and Jeremy. Password is mud."

There were snickers at that, and disapproval from the more serious among them as the two chosen men took up positions around the barn.

Aware of Kenn's glare burning holes through her back, Angela strode toward the corn, but she didn't try to lead them in a formation. Neil and Marc could handle that, but the rest of these men were as unsure as she was.

Watching them follow her rookie lead with no protest, and then seeing Kenn's shocked face, made Marc understand Kenn was about to be taught a lesson. This mission would take more of the power from him and return it to the victim. Adrian was trying to give her justice.

Marc was suddenly flooded with guilt and respect. He hadn't been kind to the leader, but that man had been great with Angela. Instead of the abusive lifestyle they'd feared, the leader of Safe Haven was giving her the freedom to be whatever she wanted.

Aware of the day quickly fading, Angela kept them moving. The corn was up to their waist, growing even though it should be dead. To travel through it, to be touched by the slimy brown stalks, was a revolting feeling and there was little conversation. It had gotten a lot worse here since she and Marc had fought for their lives.

They found the ring of burned stalks less than ten minutes after leaving the barn. The charred circle and decaying animal skeletons were mostly untouched. Angela waited without saying anything, letting them recognize the spot for what it was—a killing field.

“Questions?” Neil guided things, setting them up as Adrian would have done. He ignored Kenn’s scowl.

Billy studied the broken stalks. “There was a third person here, right?”

Angela supplied the answer when Marc didn’t. “Yes. Max was the man in the bed.”

“You used gas for the fire?” Neil was able to smell it even after a month.

“Max did.”

“What drove them off?” Daryl knew from all the tracks that these three or four dozen carcasses hadn’t been the entire pack.

“His wife, Lenore, had the Caller—the thing I took from the wall before the slide.”

“She was the woman?”

“Yes. They were part giant, I think.”

A few quick scoffs faded at her next words.

“The wolves tracked us, ambushed us here. Max said they’d killed most of the survivors in this area.”

The Eagles exchanged pointed glances.

Angela confirmed their thoughts. “They were sure the wolves planned each attack, like an army bent on destroying the enemy.”

It fit with what they had observed on their own. Angela instinctively built them up. “They’ve been unchallenged since the war. That changes tonight.”

She pointed at the center of the charred circle, where used brass flashed dimly in the grudging sun. “Marc will show us the setup and then we’ll get ready.”

Kenn was stunned as the Eagles crowded around Marc at her orders. He hated it that leadership was yet another thing she was good at, but his mind warred with his guilt at that thought. *I could have helped her be this strong.*

4

Five minutes later, even Kenn had to admit it was a solid plan, except for one thing. “What’s the bait?”

“Blood.”

The Eagles turned away from Marc’s glare.

“Mostly noise.” Angela gestured. “They were drawn to our workout.”

“This time, they’ll find an army waiting.” Kyle was eager to get rolling on it.

Angela’s eyes glowed vividly in the coming darkness. “Adrian’s army.”

“Oorah!”

It was a chorus response, and again, it shocked Kenn. He’d tried to take charge earlier, the way she was now, but only Kyle’s words had gotten the men moving after the slide. It was as if they were dead set on her being in charge. It was... *What Adrian wants*, Kenn realized. They were following orders.

Angela pushed. “Wish you could too.”

Kenn flushed angrily. “I can. Just not yours!”

Angela shook her head when Neil would have confronted him. “Let’s get back and set it up.”

Angela went by the sullen Marine without any sign that his anger bothered her; the others did the same.

Kenn blew out a frustrated breath and brought up the rear. *This isn't turning out at all like I planned.*

5

Two hours later, purple and yellow dusky skies stretched above them. The men were in their places, with Marc and Angie in front of the barn. They each took occasional shots at the battered soda cans they'd lined up, but it wasn't distracting them from their perusal of the four-foot brown stalks around the yard and behind the barn. With their movements, the shallow cuts on their arms left drops and splashes of crimson—blood and noise. Marc had only tolerated it because she'd used the moment to clean her injuries from the mud roll. If she'd tried to cut herself, he would have interfered.

The wind gusted as full dark settled over the flat land. Everything around them blew wildly in the chilling wind.

Angela didn't jump, but she wanted to. She exchanged a look with Marc as Déjà vu flooded them. "The corn sounds different, and it's already later. Do you think they've chosen a different area?"

"No."

"How can you—"

"They're in the corn."

They both flinched at a loud crunch of double radios warning them of movement. Marc switched his off. He'd be close enough at all times to listen to her radio. "You ready?"

"You know it." Angela waited tensely, sensing the animals in the rows across from them. She understood Marc's training had allowed him to sense them first. She couldn't stop the almost desperate flare of longing to be that good without her magic. She had been about to waste some of that on searching and was glad that she wouldn't have to now. She wanted a reserve waiting if things got ugly.

"Here they come!"

The perimeter guard's call signaled the start.

Angela began to swing the Caller in a wide circle. She brought it up in a deep arc that caught the wind as it gained speed.

"Whhhhooooooooo..."

The sound echoed, whining and seductive at the same time; she swung it faster, instinctively knowing how to call them.

"Oooooohhhhhh..."

She let the last note die out slowly, almost able to feel the power inside begging for one more swing. She tucked it into her waist pouch instead.

"Wwwooooooooohoooo!"

"Raaawhwhoooo!"

The animals were answering her call now. Marc motioned toward the barn. "Go."

Angela reacted almost casually, expecting to be rushed. When the corn parted to her right, she drew and fired in a blur that even impressed Kenn. The big gray male that had been stalking her fell to the dirt.

The Eagles began picking them off, providing cover for Marc and Angie as they ran toward the barn.

In full battle mode now, Marc fired, spun, aimed, fired. These were the scouts. The rest would be along shortly.

Angela dumped the used rounds smoothly, still moving as she clicked the speed loader home. More hungry predators gleamed at them from the darkness.

“Base, we have movement on the south perimeter. Ten, maybe fifteen animals.”

“Same here, base. Ten large targets, moving fast.”

Angela increased her pace at the call from both sets of guards on the perimeter. The hair on her neck stood up as three large dogs appeared in the shadows by the barn door. They would get there first, trapping her.

Angela spotted the ledge. *Trapped? Not me, not ever again!*

Angela darted straight for the snarling animals, noting thin bodies and desperate jaws that wanted to maul her. Right before she was in reach of their coming lunges, she jumped.

Her hands caught the edge of the doorframe...she swung herself up and over the snapping teeth with a grunt of pain from her shoulder.

Running the instant her feet hit the dirt and hay, she climbed the ladder to the loft three stairs at a time.

Angela was relieved to find Marc moving in through the window on the ledge as she hit the top.

“Base...”

A thick pause made them all tense.

“We see the pack line... Stand by!”

Angela motioned to Kyle and Kenn, who stood apart from the others. “Nice and easy. Get set.”

Kenn reacted slower for her than he would have for Adrian, but the fact that he did it at all was a good sign.

The radios crackled. “Make that two pack lines, base. Roughly fifty animals!”

“Make that eighty, base. They’re everywhere.”

“Maybe we should get her out of—”

“Stop shooting until I give the call!”

That was Daryl, out in the field with the others who had suppressors to keep from scaring the animals away. Angela’s chin settled into a line that many of them now recognized. Like Adrian, when she made up her mind, it wasn’t likely to change.

Angela pushed the button on the radio. “We’re set here. Mission is a go!”

Marc pointed. “We have wolves in the barn.”

The animals were slinking in through the open doors, dogs and wolves of all shades and sizes padding in to fight with each other and snap at the chickens hanging from a center beam. They were thin and lanky, with matted fur and wild eyes.

“We’ll try to do batches of twenty. Doors shut in a ten count.” Angela finished her reload. She hated killing and always would, but today, she would do her share. These threats to the future had to be eliminated.

The barn doors were rigged with ropes; they swung shut slowly at first, drawing little attention. It was the same when the doors finally slammed shut. The wolves were too busy fighting over the meat and lunging at the Eagles on the ledge.

Angela felt the nauseating, thrilling chill of a battle settle over her mind. “Open fire!”

It was awful, bloody work and slower with the Eagles being careful not to waste their shots. Blood splattered the floor and walls repeatedly.

When the gunfire slowed, the Eagles reloaded without speaking. Billy was set to jump down and shove the doors open for the next set of animals that were sniffing and digging to get in. Trying to get out of range as the new animals came in would be dangerous. Angela gave the Eagles covering him a motion that said to guard him well.

Kyle snapped off a smart, joking salute in response.

Angela snorted, motioning. “Open us up.”

Billy dropped down and gave the unlocked doors a hard shove. He spun for the ladder as a large group of snarling wolves and dogs streamed through the doors.

A small, fast shepherd darted in front of the others, lunging for Billy's leg.

The Eagle felt it coming. He threw his body into the air as the animal flew under him.

Billy hit the straw covered floor and immediately jumped again, this time getting the ladder. He yanked himself out of reach, grinning.

"Can you find a way to push it?" Angela looked at Kenn. "He's not going down there again."

"We'll block the edge with a ladder and use more pullers," Kenn answered tonelessly. "But there's no guarantee that rope will hold after a few times."

"Understood." She did a fast count of the snarling animals roaming the bloody barn floor. "That's more than twenty. Let's do it."

6

Angela helped them take down the next two groups of predators, and then moved toward the window. Kenn's ladder idea had worked perfectly. "Inside is yours..."

Kenn felt her question, her need... He gave a curt gesture. "I'll watch their six."

Satisfied that he would, she eased out the window as he gave the call to open fire. Things had changed again. The past was finally over for them.

Now standing on the ledge with Eagles on each side of her, Angela saw the pack lines the outer sentries had warned of were about to arrive. Padding steadily through the moldy stalks, a vast number of predators were banded together to fight a common enemy—humans.

Angela swept the scene and found a lone white wolf in the yard where she and Marc had been earlier. It dwarfed most of the other animals padding through the zombie corn plants that refused to stay dead. Its eyes gleamed in the light from their torches.

The white wolf sniffed their blood spots as if it was memorizing their scents.

“That’s the alpha. Get her!” Angela pointed.

The Eagles on the ledge aimed, but the wolf darted under cover.

“Damn it!” Angela hit her button. “Get the white one! Perimeter, give us some sound!”

Gunshots echoed from the surrounding fields at her command.

Angela waited with the others for the rest of the lines to come into sight. The doors below them swung open; a large group of filthy animals rushed in, drawn by the thick, coppery scent of blood.

“Twice more and those weak-ass doors won’t hold.” Kenn’s voice echoed outside. “Let more of ‘em in.”

Their radios crackled. “It’s coming your way again, base. Jeremy winged it. Look for red on white!”

Angela keyed her radio. “Copy that. Get set for part two.”

“We’re ready, base.”

Angela noticed Alex’s slightly panicked responses to her orders and filed it away for later as gunpowder mixed unpleasantly with the other smells of the slaughter.

“One more time and we’re through in here!” Kenn called.

Angela pushed the button on her mike to let everyone hear her. “Copy. I’ll tell you when to shut them on this one. What’s the count?”

“Over seventy bodies inside, a dozen here, plus perimeter shots.” Neil stood to her left. “Roughly half of what Kevin and Doug counted.”

Another big wave of growling dogs and wolves surged into the barn, followed by a crowd of bristling, bloody pups. Angela made the call. “Shut the doors! Perimeter men start walking! It’s a go!”

Angela surveyed the constantly shifting mass below, glad of the torches. She found the white alpha, barely visible through the corn. Knowing what had to be done, she subtly distanced herself from the Eagles, distracting them. “That’s too far for me. Can anyone make the shot?”

Marc and Neil both shook their heads as gunfire rang continuously from the barn and the perimeter.

“Not without my rifle.” Marc shrugged. “She’ll have to come closer.”

Time to do what I came here for—face one of my many fears. She tapped her vest for good luck and pulled the Caller from her kit. “I’ll need cover. Who has my six?”

Neil and Marc moved her way, both meaning to stop her.

Angela dropped the ten feet to the ground before they could. She swung the Caller in a defensive flash as two snarling pit bulls lunged for her. Guns barked from the ledge; the former pets fell.

The sounds of the Caller wailed harmonically over the farm and spun out into the corn. “Whhh-whooowooo...”

Radios crackled. “People are in the yard! I repeat! Eagles are in your line of fire!”

Angela heard two men drop behind her. She strode into the corn with the Caller vibrating in her grip.

“Ooh—”

“Whhhoooooooo!” The alpha’s howl overpowered the Caller as the wolf rose to her challenge from a hiding place in the stalks.

Angela threw her head back and let the woman inside answer. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

It rang in the air. She triggered her wrist blade as the white wolf came through the stalks, baring bloody teeth. *Bloody? One of my men are hurt.*

Fury spiraled through Angela in a lethal surge. She waved her blade. “Come on!”

The wolf snarled in answer and padded her way.

The pack was uneasy, confused and whining. Kyle waved his Eagles to the ground to finish the battle as the last large group of animals was driven toward them by the perimeter sentries.

“Mind your lines!” Kyle opened fire.

Angela heard Marc and Neil take aim on the running alpha about to lunge. She slid into their path, preventing a clear shot. *I issued this challenge and I'll answer it!*

Marc spotted another problem. “Duck!”

The animals were all pack hunting, even the dogs. Angela hit the ground as a furry shadow came at her from the side.

Gunfire said Marc had gotten the foaming poodle. She rolled to her feet in time to meet the alpha's jump, bracing her wrist to absorb the impact.

The wolf's teeth slid against her, hot and hungry. Angela ripped upward as it bit into her arm.

She and the wolf cried out together, one gasping, the other struggling. They hit the dirt hard.

Angela rolled clear as the alpha whimpered a last time and stilled.

Angela got to her feet without taking any of the hands there to help her up. Wiping the blood down her jeans, she slid the wrist blade back into its holder and surveyed the yard. Her hands didn't shake as she pulled the .357.

In that moment, she wasn't his Angie. Marc's mind narrowed in on it. This bleeding woman was

a fearless hunter, a natural killer and marksman. This fierce fighter belonged to Safe Haven. *His* Angie, the sweet, innocent girl he'd loved for so long, had been left in that cabin in Versailles, along with her attacker's corpse.

"Marc!" Angela fired and hit the white wolf pup sneaking up on his rear.

Neil got the second white pup to Marc's left, marveling at how neat and cold Angela was. Not a shot was missed as she stood with a leg over each side of her prey. Neil knew he wasn't the only one grinning in admiration and now thinking she fit perfectly with the Eagles. They were also wild when they were out on runs.

The pack was thinned now, with most of the remaining animals running toward the perimeter men who were in a tight net. The Eagles in the yard linked up to meet them. Careful not to trim each other in the crossfire, they came to a stop near where Angela still stood over the alpha. She hadn't been attacked since killing it, telling everyone these animals had accepted her leadership.

It was a powerful moment she wasn't aware of, but the Eagles recognized it. This woman would eventually be part of the chain of command. She was too good to be anywhere else.

"I think that's it." Angela's voice was full of the victory they were sharing. "Let's do a fast sweep to be sure." She didn't have to tell them not to spare any of the injured animals they came across. After

observing Kyle on the nun mission, she already knew they wouldn't.

Angela lifted her chin as Kenn and Kyle fell in on either side of her for the sweep. "Let's go."

Ten minutes later, nothing moved but the Eagles and blood streaked stalks.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Timing Is Everything

1

Standing by the revolting, blood splattered barn doors, Angela took her time washing, not listening to the argument going on above her. Her mind was on how it felt to win, to have beaten the alpha and won her pack. There wouldn't be a feeling to rival it, unless it was the moment that she was finally able to conquer her fear and give herself to Marc.

“Yes, you will! Get them to ease off.”

“It won't succeed and not just with her. With any female.”

“Where were you just now? She's like him.”

“No.”

“Yes!”

Angela moved away from the doors as the voices got louder, wrapping a thick strip of gauze around her newest injury. She was feeling restless and a bit frustrated. She should be hurting and probably feeling guilty, but...aroused? Again, the spilling of blood had her hormones swinging. Angela kept her profile away from the others as much as she could, not sure if the males might be able to read it on her.

Marc kept his ears on the loft and the fight that was about to start, but his attention was on the lone female wandering the battle scene like something was missing. She reminded Marc of his base commander. The big man hadn't come on missions often, but when he did, they had always ended with that dangerously good leader roaming the scene like Angela was doing.

Marc's gut twisted. He'd never been able to discover what caused that reaction in his commander. He doubted it would be any different with Angela. She had a wall up that he couldn't get through.

"It doesn't have to be this way, but I'm telling you right now, so listen. This is what she wants, what Adrian needs, and you will not let your allies stand in the way!" Kyle stormed out of the barn a few seconds later and drew the Eagles over to where Angela stood. "We're not done here. What's next?"

It took Angela a moment to realize he was talking to her. "Cleaning up, I suppose." She scanned them. "Anyone have gloves?"

Half the men raised a pair. Angela fell into the role more easily this time. "Okay. You guys are carriers. We'll put it all in the barn and burn it."

"What about the ones that got away? They'll come here and breed again." Kenn joined the circle, but only a far edge.

Angela met his eyes. "I could poison a few of the chickens, if you think they'll eat it."

Tone perfectly unsure, it eased his singed feathers enough to allow a note of real interest to finally enter his voice.

“You cook ‘em, we’ll scatter ‘em.”

Angela made a crude gesture. “Cookin’s woman’s work.” She was rewarded by scoffs, chuckles.

Kenn flushed. *How many times did I say that to her?*

Angela was gentler than he had any right to. “Leave it in the past.” She gestured at the barn. “Go get your meat ready and we’ll play doctor.”

There was an instant of silence where none of them knew what to say. They waited for Kenn’s reaction.

Kenn stared, dumbfounded at the suggestive joke.

Angela rolled her eyes. “Men!”

Her tone pulled an unwilling snicker from Kenn. “Women!”

Angela didn’t hesitate to give him another humility delivering blow. “Sometimes, they do mix.”

Kenn hated her for being able to draw it from his lips, but resisting was impossible. He grimaced. “And do it well.”

It was as close to a compliment for her success as she would get.

The others recognized the moment for what it was—a peace talk.

“And next time?”

None of them were sure if Kenn would answer her. When he finally did, it was like the end of a war.

Kenn sighed. “Maybe it will be easier or maybe it’ll be harder, but the job will get done.”

Satisfied, Angela allowed that deliriously addicting tone of command to fill her voice. “It’s time. Get them moving. Eagle Two has point.”

2

An hour later, Kenn had them reunited with the two vehicles they still had and set up a mile away from the burning barn. Everyone was glad to be out of the harsh wind and smells.

Wrist aching louder than the rest of her battered body, Angela let him keep point. Now that she’d done what she came to, the need to lead was fading. *Did Adrian know it would be this way?* He’d been reluctant to let her come along, but that wave of anxiety he’d released as they rolled out... Adrian had been hoping she would have another success to help push the goals further, but had he foreseen this tightly knit group of men surrounding her with their protection?

Angela scanned her fellow survivors. Some were playing cards, letting out the occasional quiet groan or snigger. Two of them had kits open, tending minor wounds. A few were reading, something she found surprising—not for men, but for the times. It was something the camp rarely did.

However, most of this crew were sitting quietly in a circle around the nicely crackling fire. Adrian had been certain they would support her, or he wouldn't have let her come.

Her gaze skipped over Kenn, who was dozing against a tree stump, and went to the men on duty. Kyle and Seth were taking the first post. She spent a moment trying to memorize their pattern. It was a light patrol for such a dangerous area, but those two Eagles were lethal. Anyone they met in the shadows wouldn't stand a chance. Neil was also out there roaming somewhere, saying he needed to walk it all off. The only thing better than that trio, was Marc.

She glanced at the vehicles, where a lone man was smoking and studying her through the Blazer window. Marc hadn't spoken to her since the battle, but he wanted answers, she could feel that. She would tell him the truth, but he wouldn't like hearing she had loved it; she wanted to go on every run.

Angela sighed. She was officially an Eagle. She had helped complete a mission. He wouldn't be able to take much more before he split or gave in.

He has run out of things to teach, the witch intoned.

Angela tensed against the pain that always came. Their two months alone together had become vague and blurry. There were times where she struggled to remember what it felt like to have his arms carrying her into the tent after her first kill.

How it had felt to draw him close, like she'd done with her attacker...

Only one memory of their two-thousand-mile trek remained vivid, but even that was tainted. The delicious chill brought from recalling those stolen moments now sent her thoughts straight to Safe Haven's leader. What was that man doing at this moment? Wishing she'd reach out to him, let him in for a minute? Likely that and more, but she didn't. With the top men out of camp, Adrian would surround himself with those left. He wasn't alone.

Unwanted jealousy seared its way down Angela's throat. Her grip in the damp dirt tightened. Clear headed from the adrenaline letdown, she understood what was about to happen if she didn't make a change. Marc was going to leave and this bond she had with Adrian would grow. Nothing would stop it.

Give up your new dream. That will.

Angela gazed at the fire. Not even for Marc. There had to be a way to get him to accept her choices. Once he did, they could be together and then her loneliness wouldn't keep trying to strengthen ties with Adrian. It wasn't what she wanted. He wasn't Marc.

Filled with sadness, Angela didn't notice how her mood affected the men around her. The jokes and laughter stopped, conversations trailed off, the men on duty increased their sweeps. None of them connected it to the only woman among them though, and the next hour passed slowly as she

continued to examine the hard truths that she'd been avoiding.

Marc was able to feel her unrest. She wanted his support, his welcome and encouragement, and she now understood that wasn't going to happen. It was hard not to go to her and give in, but it would only last until the next time she put herself in danger or did something he didn't agree with. As long as Angie was an Eagle, there would always be a wall between them.

Can I live with that? Between the missions and lessons, she'll be mine.

Fighting alongside her today had been awful, but it had also been enlightening. The girl he'd known was gone. If he wanted a life with *this* Angie, he would have to do it her way.

Marc didn't take his attention off her, studying each expression, each gesture. There was a strength in her that he'd denied. The warrior inside was finally able to be heard.

Any version of that bloody female will do. She had to be protected before. This is better. Now you can love her.

3

Dozing by the fire three chilly hours before dawn, Angela stiffened. "Something's wrong."

Heads rotated her way, few of them asleep.

Marc immediately came from his solitary seat in the Blazer at their reactions.

“What is it?” Kyle moved to her left as Marc came to her right.

“Something with the camp.”

The men around her nudged those who were still drowsing.

“It’s Adrian.”

Now the men began pulling on gear and following Kenn’s lead as he called for them to get rolling. None of them doubted her after the call they’d taken on the way here—a short, tapped out message Angela didn’t know about yet.

“Is he okay?”

“Is it the slavers?”

Angela stretched out a cold hand and placed it on Marc’s wrist.

“Sorry.” She drew hard.

Energy flooded her, sweet and warming... Her grip tightened as the images cleared. “Something happened during travel time. They had to stop in the middle of a road.”

“Where are they?!”

Kenn’s tone was loud and Marc frowned at him.

“Brakes went out, I think. He’s down in a ditch...”

“Tell me where!” Kenn demanded.

Marc snatched his hand out of her grip and took a step forward, still not satisfied with all the times he had spilled Kenn’s blood. “Why don’t you leave her alone? You think what she does is easy?”

“Why don’t you kiss my—”

“He’s okay. They all are. He had Kevin set up the tow rig.” Angela dug deeper. “Zack rolled out camp right there.”

Zack rolled out camp... Kenn groaned in frustration, breath streaming out in a rush. “Where?”

Kyle finished unfolding the map from his kit. “Can you show me?”

The mobster’s calming tone had always sounded like Adrian’s to their ears and it stopped the fight.

Angela’s next words brought relief and more worry.

“He felt us. He says everything’s 5-by and to get our asses home.” She searched the map for a fast moment, narrowing it down. “There, near Grant.”

Kenn snatched the map from Kyle’s grip and stomped to the vehicles he hoped were now dry enough to get them home. “Put her behind the wheel and everyone get in a seat.”

There was no complaint from the Eagles even when Kenn climbed into the passenger side of her Blazer.

Angela was told more than once not to worry about being too rough behind the wheel as Kyle, Seth, and a mix of the three teams got inside to crowd behind Kenn. She understood the message clearly. *Get us home as fast as you can.*

Angela slid into the chilly driver’s seat and fired up the engine. *Let’s break a record.*

The ride home only took twenty hours this time, with one short break to change drivers and use a tree. They didn't have time for more. Adrian needed them.

As Billy got them moving again, Kenn swiveled around to glare at Angela from the front passenger seat. "You've had your lead. Now, do what you're told, or you'll be in a tent with a guard." Telling her, telling them all, he knew very well she was still supposed to have a shadow. Because he hadn't said anything, didn't mean he hadn't noticed.

Angela yawned, not needing to view Marc's anger to know it was rising again. "Whatever you need."

Not expecting her to cooperate, Kenn stared.

Kyle took over. "You'll be with me and I'll be busy. Stay on my hip."

"I will." Angela expected Kenn to have a problem with her being in the middle of things upon their return, but Kenn only gave Billy a hard look that made the Eagle drive faster.

Seizing the opportunity to settle some things between them, Angela spoke to Marc without censoring her words. "Will you check on Charlie? I'd feel better if it was his dad and not just an Eagle."

Waves of ice filled the Blazer.

Marc gave her a quick nod, heart jumping. It was the first time she had acknowledged the boy's true parentage in front of Kenn.

The silence thickened as everyone waited for his reaction.

There wasn't one. Kenn had himself under tight control. If he snapped now, it would be over Adrian and no one else. The feeling of bad things happening had only grown in the last hours. Kenn faced the window as Billy kept them moving steadily through the darkness.

Marc shifted into the corner and gestured at the empty space along his side. "There's room here." He was also testing this sudden truce, trying to figure out how far she meant to go, how far Kenn would let them go.

Angela was worried about that too, but she was also sore and very tired. Connecting to Safe Haven from this distance was exhausting. With the extra space that would put her almost flush against Marc's side, she could stretch out. "Thanks."

Angela eased into the empty area and lowered herself carefully against his hip without groaning like she wanted to. His heat felt good.

Marc shifted again, making more room, and she sank against his side as if she belonged there.

"If Adrian's okay, what's the problem?" Marc led the conversation now, not trying to distract the others from her actions, but wanting them to come clean with her. If she were going to be one of them,

she had to know the truth. The reason they had kept it from her no longer mattered.

“We took a call.” Kyle was glad to reveal their deception before she found out from their thoughts. “Someone left a bag in Adrian’s tent. There was a pissed off snake inside. He almost got bit.”

Angela sat up. “Tell me everything.”

“That’s above her pay grade!” Kenn snapped, but it held little of his earlier animosity.

Marc let out a sigh as she pinned Kyle with those steel chipped baby-blues. It was too late to go back. He could only hope for the future, one that he still wanted, no matter which Angie it was or how upset she made him with her choices.

“Tell me. All of it!”

Kenn swiveled to glare at her but said nothing.

“We were told to keep you out of the loop.” Kyle didn’t avoid her glare.

Angela’s voice was tight. “Because I’d be distracted?”

Marc sighed. “Because you would have turned us around.”

“I don’t have that much authority...” She stopped, realizing that wasn’t true.

Kyle gestured. “He wanted this done and for you to handle it. As for the snake, you know as much as we do. No note, no tracks that Zack could pick up.”

“Rick?”

All their heads shook.

“No. He was in the kids’ area and under heavy guard, still has multiple shadows.” Kenn wanted it clear he’d arranged protection for Adrian before they left. “There’s no way he did it unless he killed Zack.”

Someone else, then. Did they have any other suspects? A snake. The vet came to mind, but there was no grudge there that Angela knew of. Tonya, maybe, but a snake? They were often dangerous to their handlers. That wouldn’t be her style.

“This might honestly be an accident.” Marc eased his boots off. “We don’t know what happened yet.”

“Zack knows.” Daryl gestured. “And he’ll run his mouth. We have to get there and calm the lower levels down before the herd picks up on it.”

“It won’t matter if tonight was an accident or another attempt on Adrian’s life.” Kyle agreed. “The reactions will be the same.”

Angela was able to pull the images from their minds. Her stomach twisted. Adrian needed them and they were still over a hundred miles away.

“Any threat to their sense of security will cause big problems. If the Eagles play this wrong and the herd finds out, they’ll stampede. Rioting didn’t end with the war.” Billy’s words were resigned.

Group conversation stopped as each of them imagined Safe Haven under those conditions.

Marc peered at Angela from under lowered lashes as they rolled by the corn, waiting for the pain pill to take effect and the energy rush to fade. When

her lids finally began to droop, he quietly adjusted himself and then tugged on her arm.

Angela flinched, snapping awake to find Marc grinning.

“You were snoring.”

Her chin stiffened. “Was not.”

His smile widened. “Were too. Rattled the windows like a fart.”

Angela’s groggy chuckle was interrupted by a yawn.

Marc indicated his chest. “I’ve got the bullets if you’ve got the balls.”

Her soft giggle drew attention. Kenn stared through the window as she slid into Marc’s arms and curled close. A deep shiver of hatred flashed, but it couldn’t compare to the need drawing him toward Safe Haven. Kenn turned his head, pretending it was some other couple.

Marc pulled Angela up onto his chest and held her, allowing his body to mold to hers. He was lonely and he’d missed her, but more than that, he had to remind her their bond had lasted through tragic betrayal and even nuclear war. *And it will survive her new life too.* Those few moments they would have between his waves of panic would be enough. Peace suddenly filled that dark space Marc had been nursing for weeks. He tightened his grip on her. Compared to what he’d had before, this would be more than enough. Marc slid his hand up her hips. “I’ve missed you!”

Angela felt her heart clench at his urgent whisper. She'd just given Marc his son, though the ripples on it would be slow. Now, maybe she could give him something else he wanted. "I've missed you too." Her fingers tightened on his arm.

Marc pushed harder. "You know I'm crazy about you, right? Even when you're risking your life."

His voice carried. Angela knew what Marc was hoping for. She wanted it too. They were about to find out if this new, controlled Kenn was for real.

"These weeks have sucked without you."

The pain in her voice was genuine. Marc pinned her with his own agony. "Is it over now or do we go back to the lies when we hit camp?"

Angela took a long minute to consider, the fear finally shouting, but she sensed only bitterness and resignation from Kenn. He would learn to live with things. He'd made his choice and it was the right one.

And what of you? the witch questioned. *Would you now try to have both sides of the coin?*

It was a long moment for all of them, but it was agony for Marc and a struggle to keep waiting. He had never wanted anything the way he did her. That hadn't changed. "I can't promise to always react the way you want, Angie, but I can try harder. And I can wait a little longer if you're not ready."

His willingness to sacrifice was the final straw. She gave him a slow smile. "It's over now. We can be ourselves."

Needing to know she meant it, Marc leaned up.

Angela let him capture her lips in a gentle kiss the others glanced away from. She was Marc's woman now.

Marc shifted again. Angela settled onto his hard chest with a sigh of pleasure that filled him with happiness. "Night, honey. See you in a few hours."

"Yes, you will." She snuggled tighter.

Marc knew she wouldn't linger once they arrived. Wanting a few more minutes with her then, he set the alarm on his wrist and let himself follow her into a light sleep.

When Seth began to hum lowly, the hotel ballad one of Adrian's favorites, all but a few of them dozed.

Kenn braced to be full of the old rage every time he looked at their reflection, but after Angela handling herself with the wolves, the fire wasn't there anymore. The woman he'd observed today was out of his reach, but his place by Adrian was waiting and it was that member of camp that he let himself obsess over.

Adrian had suspected someone might try something with so many prominent Eagles gone, so they'd increased the guards on him. With any luck, they would return to discover the traitor already in custody, or even better, dead. There was a small chance this latest mishap really was an accident, but Kyle didn't think so. Kenn knew that, and it was enough for him. The mobster's loyalty to Adrian's safety rivaled his own.

Seth kept humming until everyone except the driver was asleep; he met Billy's eyes in the mirror. "Keep it rolling and don't be afraid to wake one of us."

Billy gave a fierce grin. "I'm runnin' on full right now."

Seth shut his exhausted eyes. "Good. You go straight to him as soon as you get out and stay with him until I relieve you. Even if someone else comes to take over, you stay until I get there."

"You know it. His six'll be covered." Billy's tone was firm despite Seth not being his team leader.

Seth smothered the feeling of desperation and went back to humming until he fell into a restless sleep.

5

Shortly before they arrived, Marc's wrist alarm woke everyone with an obnoxious rap song from the past. He swung an arm over to silence it.

Angie hadn't shifted away during the ride. In fact, one of her legs was now wrapped around his, holding him in place. She was his. When they made it to camp, everyone would find out. No more hiding and being careful. Now, they could be what they were—in love.

Angela stretched against him, body stiff.

Her small groan drew eyes toward the cargo area.

Angela's first thought was of the potential problems waiting for them. She ignored how good it felt to be in Marc's arms, concentrating. What was going on in Safe Haven?

Angela picked up flashes of a fight and other Eagles rushing to break it up. The people blurred by, the herd sounding mostly normal. Her chest eased at another glimpse of Adrian standing beside the medical bed of someone she couldn't identify. She broke the contact.

"Everything okay?"

Angela glanced up impatiently at Kyle's question. "It's calmer now. How long before we're there?"

"Twenty minutes or so."

She didn't smile. "Good!"

The longing in her tone echoed their own need to be there. When she let her head settle onto Marc's chest, there was an easy quiet broken only by the sound of someone waking enough for a gear check.

It was always like this on overnight missions, but Marc knew in a few short minutes, these men... *These Eagles*, he amended, shifting under her to keep his grip as Billy hit bump after bump in his haste. These Eagles would be alert and moving. He marveled over it a bit. The ability to doze and snap awake was something he'd learned in the Corps. It came naturally now. It was a survival skill he'd been glad Angie picked up quickly, too. There wasn't much she didn't get.

It was okay for him to be honest with himself now. For the entire trip to Safe Haven, he'd thought of the witch inside her as being mostly in control, and therefore, responsible for her actions. He'd attributed her survival in Versailles to that power as well. He hadn't allowed himself to see her as a killer. After the wolves, that was impossible. She was his equal, and in some areas, better than a match. This was the way she might have been, had they been able to stay together.

"I think so, too." Angela eased carefully up his chest to allow semiprivate talking. "And I still want most of what we hoped for then, Marc. Except for the barefoot and pregnant part."

Marc snickered obediently at her attempted joke. He had stopped viewing her that way when she challenged the white wolf. "We'll make new dreams. Together."

Angela flushed, voice lowering to a nearly indecipherable mutter. "I didn't say never. Somewhere down the road, being a mother again might come up."

Marc tightened his grip, thinking he'd be ready. "Whatever makes you happy, Angie. I've tried hard to give you that, even here."

"I haven't made it easy, I know, but—"

"It's your life to give."

"Yes."

There was a note of warning. He let out a resigned sigh. "I'll handle it as best I can and when it's too much—"

“You’ll split.”

His sigh was full of misery and joy. “It would take a lot to get me to do that now.”

“What if I get hurt again and use it for lessons?” She moved her arm. Animal bites would be the next class topic and her injury would be the prop.

Knowing he had to be honest, Marc raised up on his forearms. “I’ll be pissed and worried, and you’ll remind me of this moment so I’ll ease up. Eventually, it’ll be better.”

Angela used her bandaged hand to gently brush the hair from his roughened cheek. A couple days stubble was sexy on him. “For both of us.”

“And what about our son? Am I allowed to openly be his dad?”

Angela didn’t need to read minds to know how important her answer was to these men. “Soon.”

She felt his happiness dim. Angela leaned in, hand still on his cheek. “Will you be able to live with all the times I’ll hurt you? This won’t be easy.”

Vanilla floated over him in a thick wave. Marc steeled his heart against it, needing to make this choice without any more influence than feeling her against him was already producing. “I think so. I don’t like it, but I understand the herd...*Adrian*,” he amended with a bitter sneer. “is your priority now, but your worries over how the camp will react won’t hold *me* back for long. I can help that boy avoid our mistakes and have the happiness we’re missing.”

“I want that, Marc. As quick as we can clean up our mess, you’ll have your son openly.”

Not satisfied, but unable to fight what she was offering, he shifted, making her fall against him. He was full of a new anger, this one bitter, and he made her prove it all by rolling them against the seat and claiming her lips.

Caught off guard and still full of the wolf battle, Angela moaned lowly at the feel of him, letting her worries go. They were together now. The rest would fall in line as it was meant to.

Billy snapped on the radio without covering his satisfaction. That conversation had sealed her place with these men. It was a close copy of the one each of them had anytime they began a relationship they were serious about. If the other person couldn't accept the structure, they didn't date them again. And after getting to know her for the last month, Billy was sure she would do the same. *Adrian will be pleased.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I Want Her

1

Before the beaten Blazer was in park, Kenn jumped out the door.

Zack had come to meet them, grateful Kenn and Angela were back. He gestured toward the training tent.

Kenn hurried that way. He wanted to be sure Adrian was okay before he did anything else.

Angela let Marc help her out, legs cramping. “I’ll be busy for a while. Catch you in the mess later?”

“Yes. Will you have John check that arm before you hit the rack?”

She grinned. “Yep.”

Marc ran his thumb along her cheek. He had expected to be considering which direction to go when they returned, not trying to find the best way to tell his son that he and Angie were now a legal couple. “Thank you.”

Angela gave him what he needed first, suspecting this was one of the few times she would be able to.

Marc lit up when she leaned toward him. He swept her against his chest for a quick, passionate

kiss that made those around them stare in surprised longing. It was official now; word spread immediately.

Angela drew back slowly, fighting the urge to hurry as Kyle and the rest of the team got their things from the cargo area. "I'll see you later."

Marc pressed another fast kiss to her lips, not wanting her to see how jealous he already was. "Yes, you will."

Angela moved to Kyle's side.

Marc went to check on their son. After that, he would join his team and get his own report about what had been going on here while they were away.

It was rare for any complete team to be gone. One member almost always stayed behind so they would know what had happened during their absence. When the mission team hit Safe Haven, the leaders hurried to get their updates. Neil and Jeremy were the exceptions to this normal returning home pattern.

They both thought the other would check in with their base man. It was a surprise for them to split up at the parking area and then meet again in front of Samantha's tent two minutes later. After listening to Marc and Angie, their own needs had filled them with the urge to make a claim. Finally acknowledging their competition brought those happy flashes to an ugly halt.

Neil stared at his XO for a long moment.

Jeremy looked back evenly.

"Jeremy."

“Neil.”

Inside the tent, Samantha froze.

“It seems we’re about to have a problem.”

“Our first fight.” Jeremy clenched his fists, tone only half joking. “How cute.”

Neil wasn’t about to keep playing these games. “I want her.”

“*Publicly?*” Jeremy questioned with a curl of his lips.

“Yes.”

“And what about Becky?”

Neil didn’t flinch. “That’s over. She knows.”

Jeremy regarded his team leader with pain. “So, that’s it. You’ve made your choice.”

Neil grimaced. “They made it for me tonight, the same as they obviously did for you. How could anyone listen to that and not hurt to be whole?”

“Loneliness is not love.” Jeremy was already certain it didn’t matter anyway. They didn’t get to pick, she did.

“What about your trysts with Cynthia?” Neil fired back. “You spent last night in her tent, but you think that’s better!”

Jeremy flushed. “That’s none of your business!”

“But it is Samantha’s.” Neil gestured sharply. “You think she’ll put up with that?”

“No, *I won’t.*” Samantha came from her tent, cheeks an alarming shade of red. “And I won’t put up with this either.” She faded into the shadows, walking by the lower level men guarding the tent area. “When you two are done deciding who my

new owner is, come by the vet area and let me know. I'll be waiting with my gun."

The two men exchanged rueful grins.

Jeremy patted the vest he hadn't taken off yet. "I'm covered."

Neil sighed. "We forgot to factor that in."

"Yeah. I guess she'll let us know?"

"Not before we do some begging."

Jeremy raised a brow. "Want to do it together?"

Neil started to say no, it would be too awkward, and shrugged. "Might as well. It can't get much worse than this."

Jeremy winced, spinning around to give the camp his back. "Really? 'Cause Becky just saw us...and I think that's Cynthia moving my way from the showers."

Neil tensed. "Can we go back and hunt more wolves?"

2

"I'm telling you it was cut! We checked."

"What was cut?"

The arguing guards hadn't heard Kyle's team arrive; guns came out in the next breath.

"Stand down." Kyle's appearance brought relief. Everyone holstered.

"Someone's trying to kill Adrian!" Kevin snarled in raw worry. "Zack may not have found any proof, but he's an ass!"

At those words, Kyle moved closer, ignoring the frowns from Zack and his team. "Tell me."

The unrest grew when Angela stayed on his right.

"The line we use to secure the vehicles when we shove them off the road was *cut*. We always make sure that rope is sturdy, but it snapped as we were hauling and almost took Adrian over the edge! Would have, if not for Ray. He pushed Adrian out of the way and got hit instead."

Kyle filed the information, vaguely wondering if his public denial of the gay man could now be reversed. He would have to talk to Adrian. They'd been hoping for something like this. "That it?"

"The sheep are fine." Kevin evened out his tone. He wasn't sure why Kyle was taking the report from him when Zack was only feet away. "They don't know. *Yet*." Kevin stressed the last word, shooting a quick glare at the truck driver.

"You've done fine." Kyle took over. "We'll cover it." Kyle spoke to Daryl and Cris. "Put fresh men out and take up a post on the perimeter. Continuous rounds. I'll send some relief as soon as I can."

"We can't figure out how someone got into that area. I know we're green, but damn it, there are almost twenty of us out there at any given time!" Kevin let out an angry sigh. "I'm gonna go talk to people again. I'll be around."

And that's why Adrian has us watching you, Kyle thought. Kevin would be another determined

shepherd to swell the ranks of leadership. “It’s gonna be a long night, boys. Someone tell the cook to roll out the coffee and make it strong.”

Angela followed his tense form into the shadows. Why does that make my stomach churn?

Despite wanting almost desperately to see for herself that Adrian was okay, Angela stayed by Kyle as he finished rounds of all the perimeter guards. He had the habit of talking to the men before the boss—to be sure he had both sides before offering advice to their leader—and she respected him for it. It made it easier to follow Kyle when he walked by the training tent without a glance.

“If you can scan the ground from your army’s point of view, you’re on top of things.” Kyle used the moment to teach her something new. “He can’t do it himself. We have to be his sight.”

Angela swept the unwelcoming darkness. “I’ll be listening.”

“Watch for the tones, nervousness, or even twitching hands. Adrian trusts us. We all have access to his tent. The traitor might be an Eagle.”

“Why not just ask her to look?” Lee’s voice was a low sneer of fear and anger. “If fact, why not ask her why she hasn’t already looked?”

Kyle let out an impatient sigh, noticing how Lee kept scanning her bandage, her scars. He might be one of Zack’s minions, but he didn’t like it that she’d been hurt. “Why don’t you get it over with instead of torturing yourself?”

Angela sensed what was coming. “No one’s on us right now. I’ve got the bullets if you’ve got the balls.”

It drew the same reaction from Zack’s teammate that it had from her. Lee came closer, but only a single step. “I... I want to know if you can find my wife. Adrian said I could ask.”

“Yeah, a week ago, you coward.” Kyle scanned the guards on the training tent and got alert nods in response.

Angela realized Kyle and Lee had come to terms; they weren’t enemies anymore.

“I... She was busy.”

Angela stared at him. “I’ll have to touch you.”

Lee’s jaw twitched. He braced himself. “Okay.”

Angela snorted. “Damn, for Eagles, you guys are squeamish, like this is PMS or something.”

“I’m not a girl, I don’t get that!” Lee stared at her nervously. “Can you tell me or not?”

Angela’s eyes took on that smoky, rolling blue they all associated with her magic now. “Let’s find out.”

Lee was full of dread. He was snapping at her in his anxiety, blaming her, but it was caused by fear of her words, not loyalty to Kenn or Zack.

“And if I can give you none of what you need? Will it go back to the way it was?”

Lee’s head snapped up at Angela’s demanding tone. “You’re about to crush me and you worry for yourself!” He revealed his fear without meaning to. “Just do it.”

“There are prices to deals like this, Eagle. Even you must know that.” Angela crossed her arms over her chest. “You don’t get this service for free.”

Lee stiffened. “What do you want?”

“Protection.”

He waved an insulting hand. “You have a whole camp of men willing to die for that.”

“I want *you*.”

The words had a ring that sank deep into his heart and echoed. “What?”

“You, on my side.” Angela captured his wrist in a tight grip. “Even if I tell you what you fear the most.”

Lee tried to resist, but his agony stopped him. He gave a short nod, breath rushing out in hateful acceptance. “Just don’t you lie to me! I want...*need* the truth.”

Angela already had the witch searching. She jerked, grip tightening. Doors flew open. “Omaha, after the war...”

“Her mom lives there. She was visiting for the holiday.”

“She was moving there because you slapped her.” Angela’s voice was merciless. “She also filed for divorce when she left.”

Caught in his evasion, Lee tensed for her to act as anyone would.

“She was guilty of the adultery.”

Lee heard the question in Angela’s voice—*Do you still want her?* “More than my life.”

“Lincoln.” Angela fought to get an exact location. “She made it to Lincoln... Shot! She was shot!”

Kyle waved the others off as she gave Lee what he needed and pulled him into her corner.

“She’s on the west side, where it’s flooding.”

Angela’s eyes popped open; Lee found himself talking with the witch directly.

Bring only your wife. The others she’s with will not be allowed inside Safe Haven for their crimes against each other.

Lee nodded, unable to speak.

Angela pulled the witch from view. She let go of Lee’s wrist, fighting a wave of weariness. “Don’t take Zack. He’ll bring the others back just to spite me, but they really don’t belong here.”

Lee wanted to argue, to say Adrian would want those people, and nodded instead. *Who am I to question such a power?* Lee turned to Kyle. “Permission to grab a team and go?”

“Get it set and you guys can roll as soon as we return from McCook.” Kyle would have understood if Lee insisted on going right now, but it would be without backup.

Lee didn’t want to wait but going into a city like Lincoln would take gear and planning. He left with a last searching glance at Angela. It could be a trick to get him out of camp and make him look like a fool, but he went to gather a team anyway. *If there’s a chance my Candy survived, I’m taking it.*

3

Kenn had headed straight for Adrian when they hit camp, along with Billy, who took over shadowing the leader. Once satisfied of Adrian's well-being, Kenn went to the person he was worried might have tried something like this.

"No, I didn't."

Tonya's voice was indignant, telling him she wasn't lying.

"How would I know what to do? I barely drive."

Kenn thought differently, but he was too pissed over the attempt on Adrian's life to be side tracked. "Swear it!"

Tonya's voice rose a bit. "I've told you. If you can't accept it, that's your problem."

Kenn's profile tightened as if he wasn't convinced "We'll be through if you're lying."

"I didn't do it and I don't deserve this." She raked him with a sharp glance. "Maybe we should change our plans for later."

"Why? Guilty conscience?"

Fed up, Tonya delivered a nasty sneer. "Sure. I spend a lot of time biting the hand that feeds me. I'm that stupid. *Jackass*."

Kenn let her leave in relief. He'd been hard on her, jerking her into the garden truck to interrogate her, but he had to be certain she didn't do it. He couldn't be sleeping with the enemy, especially not when he was trying so hard to earn back his place.

It would be rough, adjusting to Marc and Angela being together so soon after he'd threatened her with death for it, but the old rage had left him the instant he pulled the trigger on Dean. He didn't like their relationship and he never would, not to mention there was still a wall of bitterness about the whole Charlie affair, but he had his place as a top-level man in Adrian's chain of command and that mattered more.

Tonya stormed through camp, making people move out of her way long before she got to them.

The guards tensed when someone finally stepped into her path.

"Let's have a drink."

Tonya started to say yes but veered around the reporter instead. "Catch me in the shower. He's got people on us now."

Cynthia acted as if the redhead had been rude and entered the mess with her usual frown, causing interest to switch back to the better story—Marc and Angie.

They would be stopping near McCook, Nebraska for supplies. She and Tonya had signed up for the supply run. While Tonya supplied a distraction, Cynthia planned to slip off for an hour and do some digging. McCook was large enough to have records, maybe even old photos. The Eagles had already scouted the area and declared it abandoned, but more importantly, they'd said it was undamaged. Adrian and his men would clean out

the basic supplies they needed and then members would be allowed in for personal runs. Maybe she would find what she had been digging for in every town they passed close enough for her to search. Busy getting set to take her shift, Cynthia didn't see the extra shadow moving by or register Maria's absence.

4

Rick slipped into the dark supply truck behind the mess while the Eagles were occupied with updating the returning teams.

Maria cringed into the corner, face a mask of fear as his hands went to his...pocket?

Rick pulled out a small vial and slid it under a nearby potholder. "Top team of Eagles. Put it in their popcorn bags the next time he calls a two-day break."

Maria shook her head.

Rick fingered the knife on his belt. "No one will know."

"W-why?"

"So I can have some alone time with the boss." Sneaking out was getting harder and harder. He might only have one or two more night-time ventures left before he'd have to figure out a way to get his tent replaced. The ends were too frayed to keep lining up evenly enough to avoid notice.

Rick picked up the coffee mug she'd been filling for Adrian's tray and moved toward the door.

He took a small sip of the hot pain. “Do it the next time we take a two-day break, Maria, or I’ll tell Cesar you’re a convert and he’ll kill your little boys. *Slowly.*”

Rick moved back to the tent he’d been scouting when the mission team rolled in. The sex was finally over. He wanted the cuddle conversation.

5

“So, was it an accident?”

“No. Someone’s trying to take him out.”

Tonya snorted. “Like I’d know how to rig that up.”

“Yeah. Sorry, I was pissed.”

“But you remembered me suggesting we cut his brakes and send him over a cliff.”

“Yes.”

Tonya giggled. “I think you need to be punished for that.”

Kenn’s shadow grabbed hers. “You know it.”

Rick grimaced in distaste, moving away. He wasn’t the only one plotting against Safe Haven’s fearless leader. Wouldn’t it be great if he could kill Adrian and frame his second in command for it? The camp would lynch Kenn without a second thought. *It’ll be a twofer!*

Rick’s stride lengthened into a steady stalk as he prowled, dressed like an Eagle thanks to Mitch’s boy, Matt, needing a bottle he couldn’t get on his

own. Rick grinned. *Maybe I can find a way to involve Neil and make it a threesome.*

6

“You can go now, if you want.”

Angela ignored the soreness invading her shoulders. “I’m good. Go about your business.”

Kyle snickered, moving toward the new Com truck. They’d been on rounds for hours, going over the wreck, securing things, getting updates. They had no idea who the traitor was, but they were sure they had one. Kevin was right about the tow line being cut.

“I’ve got two more stops and then we’ll call it good.”

Angela followed Kyle without comment, mentally searching the people walking around them. The camp was uneasy. The Eagles acting so alert wasn’t helping. If they had returned earlier, when more people were awake, there could have been trouble.

“What do you want?” Mitch growled at Kyle.

It caused Angela to stop and stare in surprise.

Kyle glowered back. “You already know.”

The slurring radioman let out a frustrated bellow. “Damn! He ain’t been around here. He did wave to me once from across the camp. Quick, arrest him.”

Angela realized Kyle must have been the one to reprimand Mitch for having Rick in the Com truck when the quake hit.

“Stop it!” Kyle pointed. “If you keep acting like you’re on the other team, Mitch, you’ll end up there.” Kyle left the drunk sputtering indignantly.

Angela followed, frowning at how Rick had been able to con the people here. They didn’t have any real proof, but who else could it be? The man had admitted he was a spy. Where else would they look when things went wrong?

At him and no one else... He could have someone else doing his dirty work. “Have there been any reports of him spending time with anyone? Does he have friends here?”

Kyle’s thoughts were along the same lines. “No one that we’re aware of, other than Becky. He does his shifts, eats and showers, and stays quiet.”

“Too quiet. And that’s suspicious.”

“Intentionally done to draw us away from his accomplice?”

“That feels right.” She grunted. “And it’s smart. He has to know we’re onto him. That’s why we can’t catch him. He isn’t the one doing it!”

Kyle’s pace quickened. “Let’s grab a cup of coffee and go over the duty sheets for the days we were gone. Maybe we’ll come up with something.”

Two hours later, they were both tired of the background noise of emerging cicadas and of searching through the papers. Angela stood up with

a groan. "I'm done. Dawn's over the hill. I plan to be asleep before it gets here."

Kyle swept the papers together. They weren't any closer to an answer, but he was hopeful about the morning, when he would check the accident scene again in the dim light of day. Maybe he would find something the others had missed. "Goodnight."

"Good morning, you mean."

"That's one of our rules. If we haven't been asleep yet, the day doesn't change."

Angela snorted, thinking it might come in handy if she ever wanted to steal some personal time. "I'll remember that."

"You did really good." Kyle handed out a bit of praise, feeling it was well deserved.

"So did Kenn."

Kyle nodded. "He'll adjust. I believe that now."

"Me, too." Angela went toward her tent, feeling Marc's eyes on her. It was unmistakable, especially now that his anger had been converted into happiness. "You coming, Marc?"

"What?" Marc was her shadow until dawn.

"I'm tired. Aren't you?" Implying they would share a bed.

He hadn't expected her to be this open. He was relieved when she laughed. He wasn't prepared for that yet. Hell, he wasn't prepared for the gift she had given.

"Night, Marc."

"Night, honey."

Angela ducked into her tent, leaving him to chuckle.

One day, it wouldn't be a joke. They would share a life together. He fell asleep with those images a brief time later. His happily-ever-after was coming.

Chapter Thirty

X Marks The Spot

Swanson Rec. Area Nebraska
May 1st

1

“Your aim improved.”

Samantha reloaded, but didn't answer.

Neil understood she was still pissed. He and Jeremy had followed her after the wolf mission, hoping to apologize, but she'd refused to speak to either of them. She had finally called in Hilda and the other females to run block. So he and Jeremy had taken up places outside the shower camper. Hilda had gotten through to them both with only a single question, *“How's the boss?”*, and they'd left her alone.

Now, two days of traveling across the eerily deserted Swanson State Park had gone by and this was as close as Neil had gotten to Samantha.

“I meant that.”

Samantha sighed. “I'm nowhere near Xena, over there.”

Angela was at the range. As they watched, she stepped up confidently, fingers hovering, and then she drew and hit everything she aimed at.

“Showoff,” Samantha muttered good naturedly.

Neil heard the loneliness behind it. "Sam..."

"No."

"We'll wait years if you make us."

"You know why I can't!" Samantha jerked her hand toward the peaceful camp. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"You already know." Neil was helpless against the truth. "You're a fire burning in my blood. I want you, Sammi."

Samantha opened her mouth and then snapped it shut. She couldn't lie and say she didn't feel the same, but she didn't have to confirm it. "You don't even know me." Samantha moved around him.

"Sam."

"No, Neil." She left him standing there with stiff shoulders and a red face.

How much rejection was one man supposed to take? Neil caught a glimpse of Marc moving toward the mess, happier than the trooper had ever seen. Neil's gut twisted. *More. To get that, I can stand a little more.*

But not like this. Neil went to clean up for the next shift of students. Samantha didn't want an open relationship. *What does she want?*

Jeremy waited until Samantha was out of Neil's sight and then fell in step.

When he kept his mouth shut, Samantha let him stay. There were things they needed to get straight. It was different with Neil, who would become more determined with every *no*. He delighted in the game,

the chase. Jeremy had tried to give Neil happiness and his own feelings had come as a surprise. "I guess this backfired for you."

Jeremy knew he was more like Samantha than Neil was, and therefore, a better match. He wore button downs on his off days, unable to escape that sense of appearing professional to the public. He was quick to be a gentleman or break up an argument before it could get started. He tried to keep the peace, and the camp rarely saw him bent out of shape. He also loved being an Eagle. He had been a sickly child, always weak and isolated from anything that might trigger an illness, but inside, he'd dreamed of being an explorer and he had gotten his wish. It was a big source of pride for Jeremy that he had come so far from that lonely little boy. He was now a man without an ounce of fat to spare and one of the few people in Safe Haven who was honestly grateful for the end of the world. It had given him a life he'd never dreamed of. *But it can't give me Samantha.*

"Cynthia's suddenly warmer to me than she's ever been and the questions about what we do have stopped," he finally answered. "Something good came of it."

"Plus giving your team leader what he thinks he wants."

"Neil knows what he wants now. We both do after listening to Marc and Angie." Pain flashed across Jeremy's face. "He'll be good to you."

“And if I don’t want him after all the trouble you’ve gone to?”

Jeremy knew better. “If he had said love back there, would you have given him the same answer?”

She didn’t respond; Jeremy pushed harder. “I give it a month, maybe less.”

“For what?”

“For him to wear you down.”

Sam snorted, thinking of her tortured dream last night. She and Neil had made violent, passionate love and at the moment of climax, Rick shot them both.

“I mean it, Sam.”

Samantha used the same rough tone she’d just hit Neil with. “It’s more than *your* wants at stake here. I’d never endanger these people that way.”

Jeremy let her go on. What did her relationship with Neil have to do with endangering the camp? Did Neil know? Would he share her secret?

Jeremy found the trooper getting set to enjoy a bit of quiet before they left, fishing pole and a beer on the muddy bank. *He’s changed*. Jeremy settled down next to him. The Neil he’d first trained with had been an uptight prig who always followed the rules. Having a beer was something he wouldn’t have done before.

“No luck?” Jeremy tried to start a conversation.

Neil glanced over coolly. “I could ask you the same thing.” He’d circled around and saw Jeremy’s attempt.

They stared at each other for a moment where a fight seemed inevitable; a loud call from behind them interrupted the tension.

“Hold it higher. I can’t get it to stop squirting!”

Both men, and most of the camp, swiveled to find Kevin and his team helping Marc with the fire hose. They were using it to flood the ant holes around them, getting practice and hopefully killing the larvae of the mutations.

“Anyone got a condom marked supersized?” Jax joked from his place on top of the truck.

“Someone ask Doug!” Kenn called, shocking everyone in hearing distance into a fit of laughing.

Jeremy and Neil stared.

“Did that just happen?”

Neil snorted. “Yeah. Super-dick made a joke. It might be his first.”

“You think he’s okay now?”

“Yeah, I do.” Neil began reeling in the line he expected to be stripped of the worm he’d dug up last night. “And if he can do it, so can we.”

“Why won’t she let you claim her?”

Neil tensed. “Or maybe not, if you keep being so stupid.”

“I know she has a secret that would endanger these people.”

Neil wasn’t sure about telling Jeremy, but being an Eagle came first. He quietly filled in his XO.

“...and you can’t tell anyone, not even the rest of the team.”

Jeremy was shocked. *Samantha's government!*

"Does it matter to you?" Neil couldn't help his instant need to protect her, from everyone.

"Yes, it matters." Jeremy bristled. "We have to keep an eye on her. If these people find out, she'll be in danger..." *That's why she can't be Neil's mate!* If it came out, her secret wouldn't just hurt Neil. It would damage Adrian's dream. "How do we fix that?"

"*You* don't." Adrian was right behind them. "She's had the worst trip here of any of these people, but you two have spent the last weeks playing games. What about getting her accepted, instead of trying to claim a woman who doesn't want to belong to anyone?"

The harsh tones were unexpected, but well deserved. The two men slumped under the weight of Adrian's disapproval.

"Effective immediately, you will both stay away from her. When she needs a shadow, someone else will do it. The only time I want you two around her is during mess, classes, or if she comes to you." His voice hardened even more. "If you can't do that, stay here instead of escorting the supply mission."

Considering the cold shoulder that they were getting from Samantha, there was no choice. They both agreed to stay away, but neither of them knew if they could honestly do it.

“I need you to talk to Tonya.”

Moving by the fire truck, Angela glanced up at Kenn in surprise. “Why?”

“Adrian wants it... He said to ask you.”

Angela understood then. Adrian wanted to be sure Kenn wasn’t abusing Tonya, and who better to know than his former victim? “I’ll do it before we leave.”

“Report to the boss, not me.” Kenn stiffly returned to the hose they had wrapped in duct tape to stop the leak.

Angela could have assumed it was because Kenn was scared of more transgressions being revealed, but she thought it was really about trust. Tonya was a snake that would strike a man if it suited her needs. Kenn wouldn’t have to do anything for her to say it was true.

That’s why Adrian is sending you, the witch enlightened. We’ll know if she lies.

Angela changed directions, heading for the small hooch the whore called home. Tonya was set up in the rear, under sparse trees that were chirping loudly with young cicadas. Angela knew from her time with Kenn that it was to cover the noises he made during sex.

She tapped on the flap, ignoring the dozen or so members watching her in surprise.

“Come in.”

Tonya’s expression tightened when she saw the Eagle stepping through her flap. “What the hell do you want?”

Angela picked out the new clothes, jeans, and a t-shirt with a flag on the front, then the clean tent and strands of red scattered around the vinyl floor. Kenn had taken her advice. He was trying to reform Tonya.

“Well?” Tonya’s snarl was more misery than threat.

Angela entered further, letting the flap drop. “Is this a chopping party?”

Tonya snapped off another large chunk with the scissors and tossed it onto the floor next to her chair. “I’m making your Marine happy, as I’m sure you know.” Tonya glared at her. “And I agreed to it, so go tell the *guardian* I’m fine.”

Angela stared in surprise. Was Kenn sharing that much information? “Why does the hair have to go?” Angela thought she already knew, but she had to be sure.

“He said I’m vain about these.” Tonya snipped another clump; a tear rolled down her unpainted cheek. “I guess he’s right.”

Angela knew not to say anything yet. The cicada song-filled tension thickened.

Tonya kept her nasty comments to herself, following Kenn’s orders. “*Get along with them or get away from me. If I can do it after everything that’s happened, this should be easy for you.*”

“Well?”

“I’d like a prescription.”

Tonya stopped mid-snip. “A what?”

Angela gave her a pointed look.

Tonya snorted. "You want a bag."

"A prescription." Angela moved toward the broom in the corner. It still had a tag on it, and she had taken offense at the unwelcome reminder of their old world. She ripped it off and crumbled it up. It joined the red hair on the floor. "Right now, you're a drug dealer." Curious as to how smart Tonya really was, Angela didn't add more.

"But if I'm a pharmacist, the camp might go for it."

"Yes." Angela made a note to tell Adrian that Tonya could be more than a clerk or a whore. She was sharp. "Most of them come to you in secret now. If it wasn't a backdoor transaction that reminded them of the past, they'd be willing. Especially the non-drinkers."

"Why would Adrian agree to this?" Tonya was confused. Had Kenn's attempts to get her accepted been approved?

"Because it solves problems, of course. Why does he do anything?"

There was silence for a minute where Tonya scanned the newest bandage Angela was sporting. That alone would earn any other Eagle a free joint at least. *To those I don't have a vendetta against*, Tonya amended. And other than a sharp remark during her first day here, this tough female hadn't bothered her even though she knew about the affair with Kenn.

Tonya let out a deep sigh that Angela recognized. Whatever deal she and Kenn had made,

Tonya was willing to do what it took to uphold her end of it.

“I’ll drop something off later.” Tonya continued cutting her hair, tears replaced with fast connecting thoughts.

Angela didn’t linger. The woman wasn’t being abused. If anything, they might need to put a guard on her. Tonya was sharper than Adrian had given her credit for. *Maybe*, Angela conceded. He had been able to keep the woman on ice for months.

Reaching the parking area, Angela slung her rifle over her shoulder with a feeling of power that she knew was shared by the nine men coming through the vehicles around her. With Zack and Kevin’s full teams on duty, plus the two rookie levels, Kyle’s team was free to go hunting for supplies. By the time they returned, Lee would have a small crew of friends together and be on the way to Lincoln to collect his cheating wife.

Angela climbed into the Excursion without looking toward the bonfire. Marc was there, drinking and hanging out with his team, but his eyes hadn’t left her since she’d come through the trees.

Kyle shut the driver’s door.

Angela followed his lead. She and Marc had already said their goodbyes. She blushed at the memory of being in his arms, of kissing him in the middle of the clapping mess. Different was an understatement.

“Eagle four, signing off.”

“Copy...”

The pause filled itself.

Kyle shared a grin with Angela. “Mitch wanted to say be careful, but he knew Adrian wouldn’t like it.”

“Yeah, he didn’t enjoy being told what to call us on the air, either.”

“You mean you’ll miss being little...*hick up!*...little Darlin’?”

Angela snorted laughter at the copy of Mitch’s voice. “No more than you’ll miss being *that damn Italian!*”

There was another round of laughs at her words. Mitch and Kyle had a hate-hate relationship. It was often entertaining to watch them butt heads.

The other Eagles switched into check mode around her. Angela did the same as Kyle pulled them out of the light and into the hard darkness that always surrounded their lives now.

Kyle pushed the button on the mike. “Eagles by three.” He switched the channel and hit the button again. “Fifteen. Vests and guard, the new rotation. Billy has point when we land; Daryl on Drag.”

Angela ran over it mentally as she got comfortable. They would arrive in fifteen minutes. They were to wear their vests and run immediate patrols from the moment they arrived. They would be using the new formations they’d been practicing for the last two days, with her in the center, Billy in front, and Daryl in the rear. Neil and Seth were riding with Adrian. Their two teams surrounded the convoy.

Angela lit a smoke and listened to the banter of the men around her. She was definitely learning, and the benefits continued to please her. She slipped an adoring hand over the shiny barrel of the newest rifle to have her initials burnt into the stock. It was her replacement for the one lost during the wolf mission and mudslide.

Kyle and Billy saw the motion and exchanged looks in the rearview mirror. When she fell into battle mode, she wasn't a woman. She was an Eagle in Adrian's army; the feeling was better than any of them had dared to hope for when they'd found out Adrian planned to bring women in. Now, there was hope for that future too.

3

Nothing moved around them.

The teams swept the dim buildings and shadowy streets of McCook continuously, but other than a cleared path through the middle of Norris Avenue, there was no sign anyone had been here recently. Rifles in hand, they rolled tensely by a block that still held a generous bandstand covered in shredded red tinsel and dark bulbs.

"Comin' up now, boss." Kyle slowed.

Adrian held up a hand as they came to the Amtrak hub, indicating a full stop of all vehicles. The brick walls of the train hub had been defaced with ugly slogans. The most disturbing was the dark red message: *Fresh Meat!* All of the windows were

broken or missing, the huge antenna had collapsed and was hanging over one side of the tall roof. Debris covered the path to the front doors.

There's food in there?

It was a common thought as everyone got out of their vehicles and fell into battle mode. It was too quiet. Not even crows were circling, but the sense of being watched was clear.

Adrian looked to Angela. "Anything?"

She shook her head, searching. "Not yet... It's darkness again."

Adrian motioned them forward.

Kyle led his team inside.

Neil and Seth stayed around their leader, and so did Angela, as per Kyle's instructions before they left. Adrian didn't usually go on runs. The herd liked having him in camp, but since the attempts on his life, Adrian had become determined to draw out their traitor. Kyle wanted him covered by someone who might be able to sense an attack coming.

"5-by, ground floor." Kyle was tense as they cleared the first level, hating the alien environment around them. There wasn't any debris blowing or even wind whistling. The silence was disturbing. The team quickly cleared the rest of the filthy rooms.

"5-by ground floor, moving to the basement."

The supplies they needed were on the bottom floors where the trains came in, and the teams went that way without any of the lowly muttered chatter that usually went with their runs for supplies. It felt

bad here to all of them. They stayed alert, though the halls were empty. Nothing slammed, moved, twitched...except the Eagles at their own noises.

“This feels hinky.” Daryl scanned for trouble as they swept the storage room they needed and then took up guard positions around the door.

“Yeah.” Kyle hit the button. “In and clear, from ground down.”

Outside, Adrian motioned again.

Seth’s team hurried inside to clear the remaining top floors. His fear went with them. The horrible feeling of waiting, hoping they returned when he sent them out, never changed.

Angela gave Adrian an understanding smile as they entered with Neil’s team flanking them. She could feel his worry grow as they jogged down the stairs and joined Kyle in a long room stacked full of crates. She opened her mouth to give him comfort.

Thump!

They all looked toward the third-floor stair sign in concern. Seth’s men were up there now.

Adrian keyed his radio. “Check in, Redbird.”

“Redbird clear.” Seth sounded out of breath over the radio. “Be careful of booby traps. Someone tried to make a stand up here.”

Angela’s mental alarms blared to life. “It’s not safe.”

Adrian pushed the button on his mike. “Get down here, double-time.”

“Copy.”

Adrian went to Kyle, who had his men prying open the shipping pallets. “Five minutes.”

Kyle motioned to a dusty clipboard hanging on the wall. “It says these are all full of cereal and water. We’re set for another month.”

Seth came through the hall with his team a minute later, closing the door to the third-floor stairs. “There’s a kitchen setup. Someone’s living here.”

Adrian raised his voice a bit. “Maybe they’ll come with us when we leave. We welcome all survivors.”

Message delivered to anyone who might be lurking, Adrian went to help Kyle’s team gather the supplies.

Seth and Angela stood outside the door, surrounded by two teams. Their lights were all trained on the only unsecured hall.

Clang. Clang!

Everyone flinched; those who didn’t have guns drawn did so now.

More noises came...footsteps and voices.

Seth waved Angela toward the workers as Neil’s Eagles tightened their line of defense. “Stay with him.”

Seth waved his men forward as soon as Angela was out of sight. He wouldn’t let the coming people get close to Adrian without knowing if there was a problem. This station only had one other exit through the train tunnels, but Seth thought they

were likely flooded by the thick smell of mildew down here. Right now, they were rats in a trap.

Seth's unease made Angela's grip tighten on her gun as she went to Adrian. She couldn't get a read on the survivors here. That was a bad sign. "We hear them, half a dozen at least. Sounds like they're coming this way."

Adrian was eager to welcome new people. "Will they talk to us?"

Mind suddenly flooding with fear, Angela pressed Adrian toward the rear of the room, where Kyle and his Eagles were now jerking the crates out in a rush. "It's all darkness."

Adrian recognized the danger and let her push him behind the working men. When she would have gone back to stand at the door, he captured her wrist. "Stay with me."

Angela nodded at the order, not about to argue. She'd only wanted to make sure Seth and Neil were all right before returning to defend him. "No worries. We'll get you back to camp, safe and sound."

Adrian loved her no-nonsense attitude when things began to roll. He grinned. "*You*, Angie. We'll get *you* back to camp."

She flushed, remembering her place.

And then Seth screamed.

It wasn't a shout or warning yell, but a desperate cry of pain. Angela shuddered.

"Grab him!"

"Get to the boss!"

“Open fire!”

Gunshots echoed through the building like thunder.

Adrian stuck to Angela’s side as she darted out the protected doors and into the chaos.

“Get them back!”

Neil’s shout was ignored as Angela slid to her knees by the bloody redhead. The Eagles were lined up in front of him. She ignored the body nearby, assuming the naked man was responsible for Seth’s injury.

“Stabbed. Guted my leg!” Seth gazed up at her in shock. “I only said hello...” He groaned, hands covered in blood.

Adrian helped stem the flow with his bandana.

Angela examined the ugly wound. “It’s deep.”

“Pickaxe.” Adrian pointed to the bloody weapon he assumed had dislodged as Seth fell. He ducked under Seth’s arm to get a grip, steeling himself against the man’s painful shout from the movement. He’d heard that sound too many times to count, but it never got easier.

“Here they come.” Neil felt nothing but cold, hard anger.

Adrian scooped Seth up and over his shoulder as the strangers rounded the corner of the hall. He registered blood running down his side, but he didn’t feel the warmth as full survival mode kicked in. “Do not waste bullets!” Adrian backed them toward the room where Kyle’s men waited to surprise their attackers.

The line of Eagles followed him, making sure Angela was covered too as she kept pace and tied the next bandage around Seth's gushing leg.

The new arrivals came up the hall in a mad rush against the glare of the lights. Their clumsy, angry steps bounced off the walls and sounded like a mob.

"On my mark." Neil got ready to kill them. He had no interest in letting anyone into Safe Haven who would attack without a reason.

Adrian didn't correct him. The sense of wrong was too strong to ignore. He hadn't found survivors, only more walking dead.

"Maybe we should—"

"Too late," Angela interrupted Daryl. The witch was whispering for her to open fire. These were not good people.

"I get dibs!"

"Don't hit the heads!"

"The woman! Get the woman!"

Bloodlust had filled the mob. They charged.

"Stand your ground, Eagles!"

Rusty weapons raised in hunger, the people slid to a stop, more at the command than at the sight of so many armed men. Their naked skin was covered with streaks of red war paint, their black eyes under crimson layers glared insanely.

Silence fell over the dusty station. The residents were unsure of challenging the armed strangers despite the promise of fresh meat. The pause gave the Eagles time to catch vital details.

Jeremy caught the odor of decay as he stayed in front of Adrian; his stomach dipped as he placed the smell. It wasn't paint.

"What the hell are they?" Daniel saw that every iris was solid black.

His horrified question broke the spell over the two groups.

Fresh Meat!

"Cannibals!" Angela snarled in revulsion. "All this food and they eat each other!"

Adrian spotted gruesome decorations that proved her words, jewelry made of teeth, ears, and even fingers—some so small they could only be from a child. Hatred rose up in dizzying waves. *They've been hunting the refugees who've come through here...and they ate them!*

"Get them!"

The order came from a bald man wearing only crimson and a necklace of tiny bones. The mob charged forward eagerly at the encouragement.

Adrian slid Seth's weight onto Angela's shoulders; the words fell like dust from his mouth as he drew his gun. "Take them out."

4

When it was over, Adrian swept the scene in disgust. *What is it about the human brain that allows this deterioration of basic right and wrong?*

Angela plunged the syringe into Seth's leg and hit the plunger.

“All clear.” Neil wished he’d opened fire before Seth got hit. He’d been trying to act like an Eagle when the killer inside had been needed more.

Adrian motioned them back to the mission as Angela started a fire in the corner of the room. The Eagles began to carry boxes and crates of supplies out to the waiting semi. Adrian usually only took half of what they found, and then 10% of what was left for their reserves, but this time he had them empty the rooms.

Angela chose a pipe from the debris and cleaned it with alcohol wipes from her bag. Near the door, Seth held the bandage on his leg and sucked in tight breaths while the morphine began to take effect.

Needing something to keep herself from thinking about what had to happen next for Seth, Angela looked up at Adrian. She hadn’t shot any of the cannibals, but that didn’t make it easier. “Is it a punishment? Taking everything?”

Around them, the laboring slowed a bit. She wasn’t the only one who wanted to know, but she was the only one he would give those answers to right now.

“No. I suspect they’ve been using the food to lure survivors out of hiding. This will be one less stockpile for any survivors left here to use as bait.” Adrian’s gaze lingered on the dirty windows. “I’d sweep this town with fire if we had the time. It’s improbable that any good people are living here.”

Angela hated herself for not being able to keep quiet. Her witch had already shown her how to

ensure this town wasn't ever used this way again. It would allow for no survivors. "Maybe Cesar will do it for you..."

She felt Adrian's mind immediately start developing a plan to make that happen. Angela turned to Seth before her guilt could begin shouting. "You ready?"

Seth grimaced drunkenly, morphine easing his pain. "No, but do it anyway, Ang."

She gave the required grin at the shortened name and stuck the red-hot pipe against his skin.

The Eagles turned from his agony; their guilt over the most recent executions was eased.

Adrian knew it would be. Angela tried to hurry with the gaping hole in Seth's leg. That was why he hadn't ordered her to do this outside. The image of those animals would always come with Seth's screams now and ease some of their nightmares.

Angela pushed the wound together. "Ready?"

"Stop...warning me!" Seth gasped, in agony. "It's like training with someone's nervous grandmother."

Angela didn't stifle the tears as she shoved the pipe against his leg again.

5

"You'll be taking over Seth's morning post until he's back up on his leg."

Kyle's words sent a smile over Angela's face. They'd only been back in camp for an hour. "No problem."

"Not for you." Kyle moved around her before she could question him.

"They don't like the idea of your life for mine, or vice versa." Adrian had come out of the bathroom as Kyle entered. "How's Seth?"

Angela gestured toward the medical tent. "Better now. John's got it covered."

"Lots of antibiotics?"

"You know it."

They spent a quiet moment, each studying the area. There were dark skies all around, but the lights of Safe Haven were hope in the apocalyptic nightmare that surrounded them every minute.

Angela felt that golden power next to her stir.

"There isn't anything I won't do to keep them alive."

She shivered at his words. "Even sacrifice yourself."

"I..." He stopped, the words stuck.

Angela felt his terror. Their time was short now. She flinched when their radios sparked.

"New arrivals at the QZ. Both doctors report."

Angela keyed her mike. "Copy." Flanked by Adrian, she moved under the green canopy over the reception area a minute later.

John gave her the lead without being told. He lit his pipe and settled nearby.

Angela scanned the small group of nine women and one man, lips tightening at the sight of their grungy leader. *Stick around. He's hinky.*

Adrian sent that with a single hand gesture. The Eagles on duty moved closer.

Angela stepped to the long table and took the place next to John. "Welcome to Safe Haven. I'm Angie, one of two doctors you'll visit during quarantine."

The only man in the group scowled at her. "Doctors, quarantine. You government?"

"You're kidding, right?" Angela was insulted. "Those bastards are gone. Safe Haven is an American red cross convoy offering shelter to survivors."

"Oh. Okay." The man's tone lost some of its edge. "Well, I'm Ernie. Came from Omaha. Travelin' merchant, ya know? Picked up my women 'round there."

"You heard us all the way in Omaha?" Angela acted like his choice of words hadn't bothered her. She was glad when the guards around her did the same. She needed another minute to pry in and then she'd know what he was guilty of.

Ernie beamed. "Sure did. Couldn't answer 'o 'course, but I went where the signal was strongest."

Angela studied his folds of extra flesh, and then the thin frames of the women cowering near the filthy RV. She flicked her glance over their bruises and small wounds, then returned to the smooth skinned man before her. Ernie might not be from

Cesar's camp, but he was a slaver, just the same.
"How'd the girl get the black eye?"

The man flinched. "Not from me!"

Angela hated what had to happen, but she wasn't about to let this evil inside their den.
"You've lied to me twice. We have no room for you."

The Eagles were stunned. Kind, forgiving Angela had refused someone entry—herself! He had to be evil for her to do that.

"But I didn't hit her! She fell down—"

"Running from you. You raped her anyway."
Angela moved toward the now terrified women as Adrian, Neil, and Doug surrounded the sputtering man. They spun him toward his RV with hard grips and menacing words.

When Ernie motioned at the females to follow, Angela stepped between them, hand sliding to her holster. "No."

"But them's my women!"

"Not anymore!"

Even the rapist froze at her furious tone.

Adrian observed it all in pride. Her righteous anger, when it came, was a sight to see.

"They are now members of this refugee camp and you are living on borrowed time!" She motioned to Kyle, already sure which Eagle handled these things when they came up. "Tick...tock. It's all hands on a clock for you now, Ernie from Omaha."

Her voice rang out in a taunting cruelty that was very unlike the Angela they all knew.

The doomed man paled.

Angela turned her back to him as the Eagles sent him away. Clouds of dust rolled over the parking area.

When Kyle would have waited until Angela was out of sight, Adrian waved. "No more hiding now. None of it."

Kyle went to his nearby jeep with a matching feeling of satisfaction that he was confused by. *Why does Angela's sudden willingness to order someone killed give us all pride?*

Angela took a minute to calm down while she studied the females. She hated the pathetic way they held themselves, as if resigned to taking whatever abuse their newest owners wanted to pass out. And at the same time, she knew them. *Each one is my sister.* She welcomed them with deep sympathy. "This is Safe Haven refugee camp, ladies. We offer you aid and protection. You have my word that the things you've suffered through will *never* happen here."

Marc listened from the shadows; he was one of her many guards. It was easy at that moment for him to understand why she had been chosen for this. Adrian recognized hidden talent and he had placed Angie perfectly. He'd also made sure everyone accepted it. There wasn't an Eagle in camp who wouldn't listen to her warnings now. No one voiced protests when she joined the workouts or one of

their lessons for something she'd missed. She had won them all over. The only thing that bothered Marc was where it would lead. *What does he have planned for you?*

Marc locked in on her as she joked with the new arrivals. They'd only been around her for three minutes and even strangers felt her draw, were following her...

Marc's curious demeanor flipped to uneasy in an instant. It was a struggle to keep still. Maybe he was wrong. *Angie won't want her own team of Eagles...*

6

Kyle and Neil waited until the camp was settled, then made a short visit to the mess, where one off duty Eagle was enjoying a private moment with his boyfriend.

"Oh, man." Neil started complaining as they caught sight of the cozy scene. "Do we really have to do this?"

Kyle grunted. "It's what any other Eagle here would get."

"But he's not an Eagle, he's—"

"Worthy and you know it. If not for him, Adrian would be gone. The only reason Ray isn't dead is because he weighs less and the branch he landed on held up. It's time to let him in."

Neil pushed his hat up. "I'm surprised to hear you say that."

Kyle sighed, letting his own weakness and strength out in the same sentence. "I feel the same way, but I can admit when I'm wrong."

Neil didn't like the images that brought. He nodded in resignation. "You lead and I'll follow."

Ray and Dale broke apart guiltily as the senior Eagles came around the corner of the mess, putting space between their bodies. Instantly expecting trouble, the two men stayed tense as Neil and Kyle got mugs and came toward the table they were sitting at.

"How's it going?" Kyle slid onto the bench across from them, Neil at his side.

"Fine." Dale glared. "What do you want with him?"

"How do you know it's him and not you?" Neil hated how he felt when he was around these two guys. He swept Ray's scrapes and bruises, the casted arm, and stitches. *Why is he even on duty yet?*

Dale's beady eyes narrowed. "It's always him. You ran me out, and now you're trying to get rid of him."

"No, they aren't." Ray sighed. "Not these two."

"You're still having trouble with the others?" Kyle frowned. "Don't lie."

Dale gestured, ignoring Ray's head shake. "One of them came by to thank him last night. They threw a pile of dogshit in his tent."

Kyle's mind went straight to Allan. He'd been on dog duty last night.

Dale read the anger and realized Kyle wanted to punish someone openly. He quickly backpedaled. "You'll only make it worse. Leave it alone."

"Dale, don't tell him what to do. He gives the orders." Ray didn't want his friend to get in trouble. It would be easier on everyone if he just quit, but Ray also felt the need and now he knew he could do it. He wouldn't have stayed so long where he wasn't wanted, but this pull!

"Fine!" Dale pushed to his feet, voice growing loud. "I'll leave. Enjoy your talk."

Neil and Kyle studied Ray as he stared at Dale, noting how familiar, how caring his gaze was. It made them uncomfortable, but for Kyle, who was changing his inner self, it was painful. The camp and Eagles had denied these men happiness. And for what? Because they were gay? Out of all the things they could be in this new world, how was liking men a threat?

"Is he okay?" Neil didn't like the mood.

Ray flushed a bit but didn't censor his words. "He's jealous."

Neil opened his mouth to defend his manhood and was shocked by Kyle's chuckle.

"He's got little to worry about."

Neil stared at Kyle as Ray snorted.

"I wouldn't exactly say that."

Again, Neil wanted to make it clear that he had no such urges.

Kyle was fast to cut him off. "Because of the time you spend with us, not because you're hot for Neil, right?"

Ray blushed a dark red that made Neil snap his mouth shut. *Damn Kyle for changing my mind!*

"He knows it's more than that."

"Because you'd go straight to keep your place now." Kyle guessed and hit his mark.

"Yes!" Ray let his own emotions out. "I would have died for Adrian! That feeling was more than I can stand to lose!" His voice dropped in shame. "There isn't anything I won't try to do. If you insist, I'll try hard to act it."

Kyle didn't answer, making Neil feel the devotion. Sexuality was another of those things Adrian would have to handle in time.

"It starts with you." Kyle was sure Ray understood. "You're the first, like Angie was. Everything that happens after, is on you."

Ray allowed a small smile to come to his lips. "Thank you."

Kyle grunted. "Don't thank me. Tell me you're sorry for all the heads I'll be knockin' over this."

Ray shook his head. "I can't do that. Some of those heads need to be knocked."

"Like Zack and Allan." Kyle saw by the tightening of the man's face that he was right.

"I won't tell." Ray's tone deepened. "Ever."

Unable to deny that he was being influenced by Kyle's choice, Neil had to protest. "If they've done something wrong—"

Kyle cut him off. "It won't work that way."

Neil frowned deeper. "How then?"

Kyle studied Ray, noting the set jaw and the calm pound of his pulse under the bruised skin. "You tell him."

Ray flushed again but spoke the truth. "You have to let me do it on my own, as much as you can."

Neil thought of all the times he'd ignored Kenn's extra hits and nasty words. "We have been."

"Yeah, but I'm still alive and I'm not pretending with the Eagles anymore, like she said." Ray slowly stood up. "I'm in love with Dale. You guys should know that. It'll kill me to give him up...but I will. I'll stay single forever if that's what it takes."

He headed to his tent for another lonely night.

A thick silence hung between Neil and Kyle. Before the war, homosexuality was a hot button topic. After, it only mattered once they'd come here. Now, it was in their faces again, running drills with them and eating mess under the same canvas.

"I'll support it because he saved Adrian." Neil acted as if he hadn't been touched. "But I don't want to talk about specifics, okay?"

Kyle grunted. They would probably learn more about it than either of them wanted to before it was all said and done. Getting gays accepted in the Eagles would make Angie's trials seem like nothing more than a bad dream and it would take much, much longer. Gays in Safe Haven had to be handled like the proverbial frog in the pot. They couldn't let

the water come to a boil too fast or they would lose the chance that Ray was trying to turn into a future for those who came after him. They would all step carefully and hope.

Chapter Thirty-One
Adrift In Hell
Kraft Cave

1

Kendle knew she didn't want to wake up, but the nightmares drove her to it.

She'd started out with the shark pulling her down, and then corpses with holes in them held her while glowing green teeth bit her repeatedly. Struggling to make sense of it, she also fought to remain asleep, instinctively knowing that some parts of it were really happening.

It was the sound of her own screams that jerked her into brutal consciousness.

"Aahhh...."

Kendle snapped her mouth shut as Ethan drew back, her blood dripping from his chin. Violent pain assaulted her body and she let the tears roll down her cheeks. She was still alive.

Slap!

His blow rocked her into the stone wall, drawing blood from a rare place he hadn't damaged yet and Kendle's bladder let go. She cowered in fear as he charged forward to deliver her punishment and she welcomed the grayness that swam over her vision.

One or two more of those and she could be with the shark.

Ethan's teeth sank into her naked thigh and scraped a layer of skin, taking her scream and turning it into a piercing shriek that had him delivering the two required hits and more. She was at his mercy now and he had none.

Kendle had lost all sense of time. Unlike her ordeal on the ocean, when she'd been able to mark the passing days, this time her world consisted of the tormenting nightmares in the darkness and excruciating brightness of the pain when she was awake. During those moments, she struggled to get to the soupy grayness that lie between both worlds, but always missed it.

Ethan's entire face was bloodshot. He hadn't slept much in the entire time he'd had her, too worried about extracting his pound of flesh, literally, before Luke found them. The gunshots had continued for two days and that meant only one thing. Her soldier had escaped and Ethan was determined that when he found the body, it would be unrecognizable.

He jabbed her harder, trying to jerk her awake again. Like with the others, it was getting harder and harder to do, even though he'd stopped spilling so much blood at one time, right after he dragged her from the tunnel. She was weakening.

If Luke doesn't hurry, he won't find me alive, Kendle thought, careful to keep Ethan from knowing his last jab into her cheek had pulled her

from the watery blackness. She knew he was scared of Luke, but—

“AAAhhhh!”

Ethan’s teeth sank deeper than he meant them to and her blood, sweet and warm, flew down his throat. Moaning in ecstasy, he let her bash her own head against the wall and black out again.

2

He isn’t coming.

I know.

Kendle had accepted it.

Luke had given her up for dead. She would stay here until Ethan finally bit too far and hit a vein or she pushed him into accidentally killing her. That last one gave her a small measure of hope that it would all be over soon and she swam through the darkness more determinedly. The shark in here with her no longer held any power, and when it snagged her wrist, she let it pull her under the comforting water where Ethan couldn’t follow.

Did you know they think you can’t die?

Kendle followed the salty voice as it spoke, not spotting its owner and not wanting to.

The townspeople thought it was a miracle you survived, at first. When they found out about the rest, the stories started.

Kendle saw the outline of a humanlike creature under the deepest rock on the ocean floor, but her

mind couldn't wrap around its size. How could a person fit under a rock?

We came to view you ourselves, the form under the stone told her. And we have found the rumors to be true!

"He's killing me even as I dream this."

Do you wish to die, child? the form asked in thick curiosity.

Kendle hesitated. "I want the pain to end."

Then you do wish to die, for all life is about pain.

"But he's eating me!" she shouted. "How can I survive that?"

There was no choice for the others. They had to let the blood spill. A creature such as you does not.

Kendle didn't trust the form under the rock but asked, "How?"

A trade.

The voice was greedy now and Kendle sensed right then that the father of all lies, in whom she previously hadn't believed, might be the miniscule shadow under the stone.

"My soul is useless," she haggled. "Impure."

But your blood is not.

The rock shifted.

Share with us willingly and we will rise to slay your tormentor. You shall be freed!

Kendle cringed at the open evil in that tone and was horrified to find her mind wanting to say yes. Instead, she forced herself to wake up by doing the

one thing she knew was guaranteed to make Ethan keep going until she was. She screamed for Luke.

It became a pattern of new agony, enduring as much of Ethan's torment as she could and then sinking down into the depths to be tempted with powers she had never dreamed of. Real or not, she was sure she would die as soon as the choice was made and the part of her soul that had kept her alive so far, stubbornly refused to give up.

3

Ethan's illness was getting worse. Even with the workouts that he was giving Kendle, the rage was overwhelming. He hadn't left the hiding place since bringing her here and his state of deterioration wasn't much better than hers. In seven days, he'd become weak enough to feel dizzy when enjoying his treasure and he'd come to the conclusion that he needed to go out for supplies. He was trying to keep her alive, make her last, and he was hungry all the time because of it. The others had gone fast, but with Kendle, he'd gotten his money's worth.

Ethan didn't want to leave her, but besides the supplies, he needed to know what had happened. If Luke was dead, like he should be by now, then Ethan would be free to go home and stock up before rejoining her in a final session of blood and death. If he wasn't, then leaving her unguarded was likely to cost him custody of the spoils. So he made sure

that if the soldier arrived in his absence, he wouldn't be able to take her away.

Kendle scowled at the shark as it pulled her upward this time, making her return. The voice under the stone had been telling her of a group of survivors in her homeland and of how much they needed her. It had been offering to help her get there and Kendle had been close to agreeing.

“AAaaaaahhhhhh!”

The pain was so severe that she hit the grayness head-on and floated there in limbo until she could breathe again. He had her chained, complete with a padlock. He'd left her here to die this way. Will collapsing, when the voice under the stone called to her, she took a quick fin down into the blackness and began fighting her own greedy nature as the devil tempted her.

4

Satisfied she wasn't going anywhere; Ethan spent an hour observing the jungle around the door and saw nothing but normal island life. Swaying—Luke hadn't even found this cave!—Ethan hit the button and let himself out.

The second the door opened, Luke was there.

Ethan flew into the small cave and Luke followed him inside with the certainty that the blood the sick playboy was covered in was Kendle's.

Luke didn't ask where she was, didn't speak at all as he slid his knife out and he moved toward the rotting monster trying to pick himself up off the floor. After so long, and Ethan about to skulk away, Luke was sure she was dead and he was determined that her killer would soon follow...after he'd been caused some pain.

Ethan grunted in agony at the knife, but didn't fight as Luke sliced him deeply behind the ankles. It was over now, and the pilot had lost. There was no way she would live through everything he had done to her.

Stopping any chance Ethan had of fleeing with the injury, Luke got set. He was going to enjoy th—
“Ugg!”

A gurgling moan from the rear of the cave froze him in his tracks.

“Kendle?”

Ethan's horrible laughter cackled out. “You waited! You waited and she was alive the whole time!”

Awful guilt flooded Luke and he punched Ethan with a powerful swipe that knocked him out. Luke kicked him in the ribs, nodded at the crack against his boot and then he rushed toward that awful choking sound.

“Kendle?”

The noise grew louder, more desperate, and he rushed into the darkness with his knife tightly in his grip.

Kendle tried to scream at the sight of the bloody knife coming toward her, turning purple, and Luke dropped the weapon in horror. He hit his knees beside her an instant later, already searching for the key.

Kendle's blackened eyes had long since swollen shut, allowing only small glimpses of her cell. She cowered away as far as she could, choking on the chain that was cutting into her neck.

Luke ran to Ethan's crumpled body, sure that's where the key was. He found it on a rope around the bloody man's throat and ripped it free. He delivered another harsh blow to Ethan's ribs and felt another crack. *Bastard!*

Kendle was gasping from her place in the corner, wild, and Luke didn't try to calm her down, not sure she would last through it with the tiny bit of air she was getting. He grabbed her under one arm, holding her bleeding body tightly while plunging the key into the lock.

"GGgrraaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Kendle's scream seemed to echo in the cave forever as the collar fell off.

Luke held her while she thrashed in pain and panic. "Jenna!"

The crazy woman stopped behind him. "My God!"

"Tie him up!"

Jenna stomped angrily toward Ethan's unconscious form as Luke staggered to his feet.

Afraid to let go, Luke swung Kendle into his arms and carried her fighting, bloody body out into the sun.

Too busy struggling to keep them upright, he didn't detect Ethan's glowing green eyes pop open with a jerk as Jenna finished and followed.

Do we have a deal?

Kendle was drifting along the bottom of the murky floor, held to the stone by a single finger of the shadowy form.

I have offered everything you want.

"But not what I need." Kendle's heart was bleeding with the losses she had suffered. "Let me die."

Finally tiring of her determination, the form let loose of her, but followed as she rose to the surface, once again guided by the shark. The form was a snake, and a man, and a beast with three faces that continued to tempt her.

I will remake your beauty until you are beyond compare. I will lay cities at your feet and men will weep in longing at the mere mention of your name.

Kendle let herself float to the top, weakening under the onslaught. She wanted that and this devil knew.

I will let your lover's life continue past its due time.

Kendle winced, but kept going. Not even for Luke. The thing she wanted most, no one and no

thing could give her. Dawn was dead. Her twin could never be returned.

5

Kendle's body shivered uncontrollably as she slid deeper into shock and Luke found his hands being shoved away.

"Get me a fire goin'."

Jenna knew he needed to be kept busy and gave him easy instructions that took his stare off the gruesome scene, but she knew it was a moment he would never forget, even if the woman lived, which Jenna doubted. She'd never treated someone with so many wounds.

Kendle thrashed under her hands, crying out, and Luke forced himself to hold her down so Jenna could clean and then smear gel over the bites. She came to abruptly as they were cleaning her wounds and she immediately scrambled to get away.

"Stop!"

Jenna's harshly female voice got through to Kendle where Luke's manly tones wouldn't have and she stared at them in shock.

"Kendle?"

She swung to Luke, cringing in terror. "Eth-Eth-Ethan!"

It came out as a piercing shriek that had Luke moving into the cave with determined steps. *This is why the sick bastard isn't dead yet*, he thought grimly. *She needs to watch it happen.*

Luke grabbed the still man by the arm, blinded by his fury, and he grunted in sharp pain as Ethan's knife blade sank into his shoulder.

Luke ducked, avoiding a second swing meant to render him unconscious, and threw his own knife.

“Ugg!”

It stuck in Ethan's gut and Luke resisted the urge to finish him off. He dragged the moaning man out to where Jenna had Kendle mostly cornered against the wall and was trying to calm her down.

At the sight of Ethan, Kendle began to scream again.

Luke swung, knocking the unbound killer to the dirt at her feet, causing her shrieks to be cut-off by surprise.

Luke used a vicious boot to the ribs to shove the man away from her, deftly retrieving his knife with a fast jerk that sent Ethan's mouth open in agony.

Kendle watched without blinking as Luke gave Ethan what she hadn't been able to. Blood flew from the playboy's face, spraying the rock wall and she stared at it. That was Ethan's blood. Luke was killing Ethan.

Jenna wisely moved when Kendle stood up, wobbling weakly on bloody legs. “Stop!”

Luke made sure Ethan was no danger. He was prepared to take him into the jungle and finish it out of her sight and he was surprised again when she held her hand out.

Luke gave her the bloody knife without speaking, worried when she immediately delivered

a nasty swipe down Ethan's arm that jerked him from the blackness to the sound of his own screams.

Kendle grinned evilly, justice flooding her devastated heart. "More!"

"Whatever it takes, Darlin'."

She was flashing forward before he finished speaking, letting the blade dig and then twist into the side of Ethan's nose. Blood splashed down his chest as he knocked himself to the ground to get away.

Kendle followed him forward, blade flashing relentlessly while Luke held the screaming man in place.

Scared by their behavior, Jenna slowly retreated, leaving the supplies. If they wanted her later, she would come, but not without a weapon of her own. *These Americans are crazy!*

Kendle kept going even after she had accidentally sliced too deep into Ethan's neck and gave him release. Her arms and naked body were covered in his blood and it was only as Luke witnessed those glowing green eyes fade to death that he considered the effects. Kendle had been exposed, presumably violated. She would catch the rage illness and he would have to lock her up to keep her from doing this to someone who didn't deserve it.

As if she caught the thought, Kendle stepped aside and threw up.

She wobbled violently, knife falling from her gory hand as she slid to her knees. She stared up at him with a shocked survivor's expression. "I'd like to go home now, please."

Luke didn't move fast enough to startle her, but he didn't hesitate either, coming to her side with a hurt-filled smile. He had no doubt of which home she spoke. "As soon as you say you can, I'll find us a way."

Her lashes fluttered, and Luke caught her as she fell over. He laid her down long enough to finish bandaging her wounds and get the blanket from his bedroll. He cut a hole in it for her and after sliding it over her, gathered her gently into his arms and headed for the well-used dirt bike that was still parked nearby. It would be slow going with her in his arms, and he had no idea how to help her. He also wasn't sure if the doctor in town would treat her or shoot them both on sight, but he flew toward town as fast he could. There was no other choice.

6

"Will she live?"

Kendle swam reluctantly toward the grayness, unable to remember what was there and scared to try. The voice below the stone was silent, but she felt him lurking, waiting for her to discover the latest horror and come rushing in. She didn't feel anything that hadn't been there already as she

pushed through the gray and she was extremely careful to not let on that she'd woken.

"Maybe. Her wounds are healing at an incredible rate and there's no sign of the infection."

"And your theory on that?"

"I'll share later, if she lives."

Kendle jerked at a sudden bright light and felt someone come to her side.

"Kendle?"

Sure the sound of Luke's voice was a trick, she squeezed her lids shut. "I'm sorry, Ethan. Please, I'm sorry!"

Luke growled his rage, spinning from the room and the doctor took his place.

"He's dead. You're in town. That was Luke."

Given the information she needed most, Kendle slipped into the darkness.

The next time she woke, it was to find a man in the chair by her side. She struggled to control her breathing and couldn't stop from begging again when he stood up.

"I'll try harder, please don't!"

"Son of a bitch!"

The doctor hurried to comfort her as Luke left the small room again. "Ethan's dead."

Kendle was trying to remember what had happened. She'd already placed the voice of the doctor, but that growl! That angry sound couldn't have been Luke.

"You sure?"

Harriet used a rough hand to check Kendle's skin for a fever. "You had too much of his blood on you for him to be anything else."

Kendle flinched, more from the touch than the words, and flashes of Ethan's torture hit her hard. She shuddered, gagging.

The woman had the basin in hand, and slid into position with a quickness born of repetition. "Try to stop yourself from thinking about it if you can and I'll give you something to calm those guts."

Kendle shakily took the towel as the woman went to dispose of the mess. She felt so... *Deformed*, Kendle supplied forcefully, making herself glance down at what would now be her body.

The sight of it stunned her.

There were teeth marks on nearly every inch of her skin and she was suddenly grateful for the IV in her arm that she was sure contained a painkiller. She was stitched in half a dozen places on her arms and hands; the tips of two fingers covered in thick bandages that she knew hid missing fingertips.

"He liked to bite," she whispered, tears falling onto the numerous scrapes and puncture marks. She would never be the same.

"Luke wants to come in."

"No!" Kendle shouted. "Go away!"

Kendle's ugly shout struck Luke through the chest even though he'd been warned to expect it,

and the doctor's chubby face was sympathetic as she left the room.

"Go sit with her now. Don't push, but don't let her push you, either."

Luke asked himself if he was strong enough to help her through this recovery, the likes of which her first trauma couldn't even compare to, and found the answer to be easy. He entered the room and shut the door with a firm hand.

Kendle watched him settle into the hard rocker next to the softly flickering fire, fighting the need to cover herself.

Luke stared, his guilt sparking the tension. "We have to talk."

"No, we don't. It's over."

Luke steeled himself for what had to come next. "I want you to come back to the cabin, let me help you like before."

Kendle had never been so hurt and she couldn't agree, wouldn't ever trust again. "No."

"Okay. I'll stay here until she throws me out, but I'm not leaving."

Kendle felt the tears roll down her cheeks and wiped them away angrily. "You should go."

"I love you, Kendle. Nothing's changed for me."

It was the wrong thing to say.

"Well, everything's changed for me!" she shouted hoarsely, tears falling harder. "I'm a broken toy now. Who the hell would play with something that belonged to a dog?"

“I would.”

Kendle snarled in grief and hurt, and Luke had to go to her, unable to stand her agony. “How can I help you?”

She trembled, so full of bitterness she couldn’t stop lashing out. “Go away!”

He ignored the doctor’s warning about pushing her, sitting down on the bed. Even done slowly, she cringed against the wall in a pathetic attempt at escape.

Luke slowly slid to the top of the bed and leaned against the wall, not touching her, but making it so she’d have to crawl over him to get away. He remembered his own horrors and how hard he’d fought to be left to his despair. Weak or not, he wouldn’t let her sink any deeper into her own mental hell without trying to show her a little light.

“The cabin, Kendle, our garden. It’s waiting, too.”

Kendle cried harder and Luke fought the urge to give her the space she was begging for. He held out a hand. “Please, I still need you!”

Flashes of Ethan’s death came again, but this time they were fighting for space with the memories of the life she had been sharing with Luke. Fishing holes. Hole-ups. Dark tunnels and nightmarish demons. Love and laughter, life at its best. Blood and pain, hell at its worst.

Luke’s grin, the one reserved only for her, broke through her trance and she gazed at him with more life than he’d glimpsed so far.

“He’s dead. We killed him.”

Luke’s voice turned into that harsh growl she hadn’t been able to place. “Deserved worse than he got!”

Kendle concentrated on recapturing the strength of their love. When she had it securely in her thoughts, she forced herself to keep going. “The others?”

“Already gone. The Mayor got wise to Higgins and sent a flunkey to get the girls out early. We missed the boat by enough time to see it fading into the sunset with the Mayor onboard.”

Again, the rage in his voice triggered her reaction and Kendle shivered. It wasn’t the Luke she knew and it didn’t match that memory.

“Kendle, it’s gonna be okay. Whatever it takes, I’ll be here for you.”

She pulled up the image again, letting it grow to vivid clarity. Deep inside, one desperate need was flaring out, becoming undeniable.

I am Kendle Roberts.

He is Luke Johnson.

We loved each other...

“Go slow, okay?”

Luke smiled in relief, showing a small part of what she needed and Kendle felt the final layer of her shock crack as that wave of need crested in her shattered heart. Ethan was dead and she wasn’t.

Her dreams came to mind, the evil voice floating to the top of her stunned brain.

Did you know they think you can’t die?

She shuddered at the knowledge that she could be brought to the brink enough times to wish it weren't so. Ethan had invaded every part of her. She would never be the same.

But maybe I can go on, she thought, concentrating on Luke's gentle face and the powerful demands of her heart. Maybe I can stop burning after a while and smolder until the pain recedes. If I can get that far, this time I won't stop with recovering. I won't rest until I get home!

Chapter Thirty-Two

Third Time's A Charm

Cedar Bluff State Park

May 7th

1

Angela's knuckles were white from her grip on the ambulance dashboard, but she didn't ask Marc to slow down on the slick, curvy road. They might be too late already.

"Wouldn't he have sent for John if it was serious?" Marc was aware of how worried she was. The message had come in as they sat down to morning mess together and she'd been a bundle of live nerves since.

Angela didn't respond. Marc was trying to calm her, but that wouldn't happen until she knew Adrian was okay. *I wish my team was here.* Kyle and the other men were in the medical tent, being tested for a mysterious illness that had left them incapacitated. John was trying to figure it out while Kevin and the rookies kept order.

Neil's team had been scheduled with the clearing crew this morning. They were the relief for the team that hadn't made it out of camp last night for their duty over the tow trucks, which meant the entire scene had been unguarded for hours. Adrian

had insisted on going out anyway. They needed the road cleared for the camp's next travel day.

Neil's mental call had come while Angela was busy deflecting camp members from the medical tent that held her team. He'd told her to bring rope, water, bandages, and a few other things. The item that had put the terror into her mind was this ambulance. *My team wasn't the target. They were a decoy.* Another second attempt had been made on Adrian's life. *Was it successful?*

The ambulance slid through a narrow curve, and found purchase on the muddy, crumbling pavement. Angela tightened her seatbelt. She wanted to search, just a quick glance to settle her heart, but resisted the impulse. If it was as bad as it felt, she might need every bit of strength she had.

"There they are." Marc pointed.

A small group of tow trucks and tense men came into view through the drizzle. The guards waved him through; Marc flicked the headlights in response.

Angela was out first, black bag clutched tightly under her rain slicker. Marc joined the group of men for an update, but Angela hurried by them, searching for Adrian.

Neil fell in step to lead the way.

She shivered at the feel of his fear. "Kyle and his team were all found in camp, unconscious but stable."

Neil made a motion to let the others know, but his expression held little relief.

“Where’s Adrian?”

Neil held bushes back for her to pass. “The truck went over the edge, along with a car we were moving. We’re fairly sure we can pull them up now that we have more rope, but not until we push the car off them.”

“Why didn’t you already do...” Angela froze on the embankment, stunned.

The drop was easily thirty feet. She could barely see the tow truck. Upside down, it was mostly hidden by a cracked and muddy wagon still attached by one thick chain. The partially crushed cab of the tow truck was near the edge of another gulch. Angela couldn’t see how far down that one went. Getting wedged against the trunk of a thick tree was the only thing that had stopped the vehicles from going over, but the tree was leaning out, with jagged cracks branching from the point of impact. *How long will that hold?*

Marc calculated as he joined them at the edge. “We’ll have to yank them out fast.”

“I need to get down there.”

Neil didn’t respond to Angela’s words or worried tone. Adrian had made it clear that either she or Marc would take charge.

“Not until we get them anchored.” Marc pointed. “That tree could go any time. Even shifting might trigger a slide.”

Angela accepted Marc’s decision. She didn’t want to be in charge. She wanted Adrian. “Have you heard anything from him?”

Neil nodded. “Right after. Nothing for half an hour or so. He said every time we yell, the vehicle moves. I figure he heard the ambulance and knows you’re here.” Neil was glad to be able to say that and even more relieved that she hadn’t tried to fight for control. Adrian was in danger. There wasn’t time for it.

Marc went to the waiting Eagles, motioning Neil to be Angela’s shadow. He waved the other men over, cringing inwardly at the crudeness of his two-minute plan. So many things could go wrong. “The line goes behind the motor—the side that’s exposed—and then around the tow attachment. We’ll anchor it to those two trees up there.” Marc pointed. “If they can come through the rear window, we’ll leave it all. If not, we’ll unhook the wagon and push it off. Even if the ground goes by ten feet, the truck will stay. Dangling probably, but it’ll be there.”

There were doubts all the way around, but everyone held them inside. Voicing their fears might encourage something bad to happen. They got to work.

Five minutes later, Angela and the rest of them held their breath as two slowly moving men neared the truck.

Marc watched them attach the ropes, wishing it was him and Kenn doing this.

The tree didn’t move as Alex and Daniel, the two lightest men here, wrapped the rope around it.

Marc looked at Angie, lips thinning. “Don’t yell or do anything to cause vibrations. You’ll be anchored, but your line could get snagged if the hill goes, so don’t fight if we yank on you. We can see things from here that you won’t be able to. You’ll have a second rope for messages. No yelling.”

Angela held still as Doug and Neil prepared her harness and lines. “Can you lower blankets and water, or should I take them now?”

Marc shook his head. “Neither. Get them stable enough to roll and you can treat them in the ambulance.”

Angela lifted her arms to allow the two worried Eagles to secure her anchor.

Neil stepped back. “She’s ready.”

The tension grew.

Two minutes later, Angela started her descent.

The ground was slick and treacherous. Twice, she lost her footing and slid, catching herself with trembling muscles. Mud gushed under her boots and then up her legs as she sank. Angela tried to move faster so it didn’t have time to suck her under.

The men above muttered as she sped up. If the hillside collapsed, she would be caught and smashed by sliding vehicles.

Everyone was relieved when she finally reached the cab of the truck and knelt down.

“Try not to touch anything.”

That drowsy voice sent waves of relief into Angela's heart. She carefully pulled on the door handle. "It's anchored now."

She slowly inched the dented door open. It slid easily despite the mud; she pushed it open and peered inside.

"Welcome." Adrian tried to smile as blood dripped from his nose onto his brow. Pale blue eyes stared at her through the cuts, blood, and scrapes.

Both men were still in their seat belts, faces dark from being upside down so long. She had assumed Kenn was with him when Kenn hadn't met them upon arrival. Angela wasn't sure why Marc thought it would upset her. *As long as he isn't dead...*

"Angela."

It was exactly the right tone to get her moving. She knelt, opening her bag.

"Kenn first." Adrian stopped himself from pointing, hurting all over.

Angela stared at the unconscious man. *Shallow breathing, lids fluttering, a soft moan. Not dead, but definitely hurt.* "We can't get to that side yet. There's a car in the way."

"The wagon?"

Angela felt what she could reach of him, checking for broken bones. "Yes. Is your vision blurred?"

"And then some. You found Kyle?"

"Yes, they're with John. Do you feel like anything's broken?"

“No.” Adrian shivered as she dug through her bag. “How long have we been like this?”

She frowned deeper. “Almost an hour. Are you allergic to anything?”

“No. What’s the plan?”

Angela wiped his bare arm with an alcohol pad. “Marc wants you stable so they can do a snatch and grab. The truck is anchored now. He’s getting everything set for the pullout. Be still; this will sting.”

Adrian grabbed her wrist before she could inject him. “Have Marc stay with us, him *and* Neil.”

His words were a hard command she had no intention of disobeying. “I’ll handle it.”

Adrian didn’t flinch as the medicine flew through his system, stinging and burning.

Angela began to wipe his face, instinctively knowing he wouldn’t want to appear too injured in front of his men.

“Will I pass out?”

She carefully wrapped a bandage around his head. *Stitches needed there for sure.* “No, but you won’t have much control. Marc said fast. If you’re not feeling it, you can’t react. If there’s something internal, well, you still have to come out.”

“You’ll be close.”

It wasn’t a question, but she answered it anyway, his fear drawing her loyalty. “Count on it. You’ll come out of this alive and so will your XO.”

“Here we go, Boss.” Seth lifted his arms. He nodded at Jeremy.

Jeremy unsnapped Adrian’s seatbelt.

Seth caught him.

Adrian groaned at the impact. He sucked in air and refused to puke.

Seth shifted Adrian through the opening and passed his top half out to Jeremy while he supported Adrian’s legs.

Adrian didn’t try to help.

Seth and Jeremy put Adrian on his feet.

Adrian tried hard to stand still and get his bearings, but his weakened legs and scrambled brain refused to cooperate. “Sorry.”

Angela motioned at his men. “We’ve got you covered.”

The two Eagles each took a side and began walking Adrian up the muddy hill.

Angela went up ahead of them, waving Neil to her.

“I have to leave his side again. I want you there.”

Neil stared at her. “This wasn’t an accident.”

Angela shook her head. “No. He needs someone he can trust right now; he’s drugged.”

Neil understood what she needed to hear. “My life for his.”

Comforted by Neil’s response, Angela headed back down.

Marc watched wordlessly from the top of the incline as guards swept the rainy shadows.

Wiping wet strands from her face, Angela slowly crawled into the muddy, bloody truck. Kenn didn't stir as she checked him out; his breathing was rougher than she had hoped for.

He came around as she was binding his broken ribs, chattering teeth giving him away.

"Good morning, sleepy." She pulled the wrap tighter.

"This is your chance."

"You're still needed." She pulled harder, drawing a moan. "Sorry. It has to be tight so that nothing gets punctured when we pull you out."

Kenn felt her cold touch on his hand. He tried to squeeze her fingers but couldn't be sure if he had. "You should hate me enough to do it any..."

His voice broke as his ribs flared to life.

"Yes, I should." Angela hoped to distract him. He didn't need to know how worried she was.

Kenn felt his arm begin stinging. Almost right away, his pain began to recede. Very quickly, all the other noises and miseries were gone, reduced to nothing but the sound of Angela's voice and the beckoning grayness. Fear filled his mind.

Angela felt it. "Go to sleep now, Grunt. When you wake up, you'll be back in camp, where you belong."

They were slower, more careful bringing Kenn up. Everyone was elated when nothing went wrong.

Adrian was waiting at the top of the muddy hill instead of in the ambulance. Angela was impressed with his stamina. He was allowing Doug to keep a big hand on him, but his speech didn't slur, and his steps were steady as Marc continued to run point over the scene. When he finally went to the ambulance, following Kenn's stretcher, Neil's team kept Adrian in a tight circle of protection.

Adrian spent a moment in low conversation with Seth and then made a motion. "Let's go home."

Angela noticed the tone and veered to Marc, keeping her voice low. "Can you come back and investigate this site after we've got them in camp? I don't want anyone else behind the wheel."

"You know it." Marc was worried, but not panicked as some of Adrian's men were. The boss looked fine to him.

She started to climb in the ambulance and then turned, suddenly feeling that familiar chill of trouble in her gut. "Why didn't I get called on the radio?"

"I assume to keep the herd from knowing." Marc hated the lies the Eagles told to the camp members.

"None of them work." Jeremy's voice from the perimeter made them both swivel around.

"We tried every one of them when it happened. They're all dead."

“Like he was supposed to be.” Angela climbed into the ambulance. “Get us back to Safe Haven, fast. Something’s happening there.”

Marc didn’t like the sound of that. He headed for the driver’s seat as Angela began treating her two newest patients.

3

Marc knew Angela was right about the trouble as soon as Kevin came into view. Waiting outside the tape, the level two Eagle went straight to Adrian as he left the ambulance under heavy guard.

“We’re having trouble and I can’t get ahold of it. Posts are short, *people* not being guarded.”

“Fires, fights?”

“Yeah.” Kevin scanned Kenn’s sheet covered body that was being brought out on a stretcher. “Zack blew his top when he found out Kenn’s dead.”

“He’s not.” Angela pointed the stretcher toward John. “Might feel like he is when he wakes up, though.”

Kevin surprised them with a tight smile. “Good. Maybe that’ll cool things down. They were turning out tents for proof a few minutes ago and accusing people. I sent my team, but we’re not enough to quell it.”

As they ducked under the tape, Angela was nearly overwhelmed by the difference in the atmosphere of Safe Haven. Even after the

earthquake, when they had all been thrown into shock, orders were followed, and posts were covered. Now, the waves of fear and unrest rolled over the dim camp like thunder. The golden bubble that usually greeted them was gone.

“Zack, Lee, Allan.” Angela picked up the worst vibes easily. “They’re at the mess. A dozen camp members, too.”

“Kenn’s boys,” Kevin confirmed.

“They think he’s dead.” Angela looked at the men around her. “Be careful.”

Furious, Adrian didn’t tell her it was the other way around. He just walked faster.

Uneasy Eagles fell in behind them without being called.

Roughly a dozen men made up the small mob, standing with their hands balled or guns already in their grips. They had Seth’s weary Eagles cornered at the mess table where they’d just settled down for a meal.

“Who did it?” Lee leaned on the splintery table.

“Are you covering for Marc?” Zack wanted the spotlight. “Did he kill him?”

Angela tensed at the words, at the dangerous scene in front of her. *This is bad.*

All around the mess, camp members were staring at the scene in the same way. Angela realized they were viewing this as Adrian’s failure for trusting Marc over Kenn. From all appearances, the work Adrian had done to bring these people

together had been destroyed. *How can he fix this? Can I help or will I make it worse?*

“Back off or blood is gonna flow, Jeff!” Seth glowered. “I won’t take this.” Seth’s team was tired, worried, and in no mood to put up with undue shit, even from a teammate.

Allan pointed. “You’re gonna tell us!”

“Who runs this camp?” The furious bellow cut through it all, making the mob and the victims look around.

Frank, one of Zack’s men, raised his gun.

Angela beat Neil to the place between it and Adrian.

Recognizing them, Frank lowered the weapon.

Adrian moved around his guards as if it hadn’t happened.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Adrian’s tone was almost casual now, deadly in its peacefulness.

Zack tried to backpedal. “We thought you—”

“You call this thinking?”

Zack flushed; his supporters tried to fade away, only to be the ones now cornered as Seth’s team stood up and blocked their retreat.

“We heard you were near dead and Kenn already was!” Zack tried to defend their actions.

“Do dead men talk?” Kenn limped under the mess canopy, supported by Alex.

Adrian’s voice carried in the loud silence that followed. “Is this how you would react? Like panicked animals?” His voice went up and down

with the weight of his disappointment, his frustration with them. “These are our friends, our family. How dare you!”

Zack and the ashamed people cringed at Adrian’s anger.

He surveyed the group, fighting with himself over the choices that now had to be made. Despite their flaws, he still needed Kenn’s boys. “Clean up *my* camp—every one of you who took part. Fix what you broke, apologize to everyone you upset or pissed off. And strip those Eagle jackets. You’re suspended until the moral board votes.”

There was dead silence for a minute.

Angela felt them considering a takeover and was glad when each man, Zack included, decided to suffer their punishment instead. They were smart enough to know they couldn’t do what Adrian could. Intelligence was part of why he’d chosen them.

Needing to be sure everyone understood this wouldn’t be tolerated, Adrian delivered a final threat. “Get out of line before I’m ready to take you back and you’ll pack your shit and get out.”

There was a sudden flurry of activity as the men hurried to do what they were told; the air filled with short, painful conversations.

Adrian perched stiffly on the corner of his center table, appearing angry to the rest of them, but Angela didn’t think that was true anymore. It felt like he was hurting. From his injuries or their near betrayal, she wasn’t sure. Unlike Kenn, who was

proud that people were falling apart at the mere thought of him not being around. She glanced at the Marine. "Should you be here?"

"No choice." Kenn kept his profile aimed toward Adrian, revealing none of the pain he was still feeling even through John's shot. "He needed me."

Angela stiffened at the ring of truth, past ghosts crying. "He would have gotten them under control."

"As fast and as painless?"

Angela sighed. "No, probably not."

"User error?" Kenn looked at his boss.

Adrian nodded. "Yes. Tell them we did something wrong. None of us were tow drivers before the war and we're learning from our mistakes."

Neil had joined Seth's Eagles. Angela tensed as a small group of rioters approached that table. Neither Kenn nor Adrian reacted. She tried to follow their lead.

Neil held both hands out. "I did it! Arrest me."

There was a round of snickers at the contempt laced tone.

Zack flushed. "We're sorry, you know? Got carried away."

Seth studied him for a minute, then shrugged. "Hell, I understand what drove you. We need them." Seth wasn't sure that was true of Kenn, but he knew better than to say so. "Someone forgot to lock down the tow bar and the weight snapped the

rope. It all happened too fast for anyone to do anything.”

Zack muttered another apology before quickly leaving.

Cynthia came over now that the chaos seemed to be finished. “Can I get an interview?”

Seth beamed at the reporter. “We’ll be in your new newspaper?”

Cynthia preened under the longing tone. She squeezed in across from him without waiting to be invited. “That depends on your story. Tell it from the beginning.”

Angela recognized Adrian’s subtle hand in that and stopped herself from protesting. He’d been expecting this reaction from his people. Seth had known and helped him cover it. Who was she to be giving advice to a man that smart?

I only knew to set it up because of your warnings. Don’t doubt your place with me, with them.

Angela followed his eyes around, noting that other than Zack and the suspended men, the Eagles had returned to their posts and duties, leaving her as Adrian’s open guard.

In their minds, you saved my life...again. Without being able to hear and bringing the rope, that whole hillside would have gone over and taken us with it. They understand you’re meant to be in this spot now.

Angela dropped her eyes to keep anyone from seeing her pleasure, her pride, at his silent words. “So, we’re here for a while?”

Adrian recognized her use of distraction to stop the spark. “We leave in the morning as scheduled. To do anything different would cause more unrest. We’re back to using apocalypse roads for a while.”

“And you’ll go out with them again if we don’t find the clues this time? You’ll keep putting your own life at risk.”

“You saw what it came to and how fast.” Adrian shrugged, carefully. “They aren’t ready.”

“Our time is about up for getting them ready.” Angela ignored Kenn’s disapproval at her offering advice. “The slavers are close, picking the right moment.” Angela shivered. “I can *feel* their hatred.”

Adrian nodded, hand resting lightly on his gun. “Let them come. After all the hell they’ve caused, *my* army can’t wait to make them pay.”

“And when the camp finds out?”

“It will be too late to run. They’ll have no choice, but to stand and fight.” Adrian waited for her to protest what might be mass murder.

Angela couldn’t. Without society, these families would die off one by one until America *was* nothing but a graveyard. Better to make a stand together and die trying, than to perish alone in cowardice.

Satisfied that she was on the same page, Adrian looked at Kenn. “You good for fifteen and a slow round of camp?”

“Drugs are workin’ now, Boss.” Kenn made sure to sound cheerful. “Probably okay for twice that.”

“Stubborn-assed men.” Angela glared at them both.

Kenn snorted at her. “Yeah, like *we’re* the only ones.”

Angela gaped, surprised at his joke.

Adrian realized their easy banter was having a calming effect already. He gestured at Angela. “Come along?”

“You know it!” The invite made it easier, but she would have trailed him anyway. Adrian’s attacker was still at large. Catching them had become her priority.

4

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember anything after starting my shift.” Daryl tried not to get sick again.

Kyle’s head weighed so much it took a real effort to lift and look over at his teammate. “Same here. None of us do.”

Chosen to be the guards on the cleared area, all of them had gone on duty at three a.m., but never made it out of camp.

“I remember packing for the trip because we were set to be there all night, but it’s like swimming through the fog. I’m missing details.” Morgan was green.

“I knew something was wrong and tried to go report it, but I felt so bad! I couldn’t find my set.” Billy remembered not to groan when his stomach cramped, but he couldn’t stop the grimace.

Kyle snorted, tan skin much paler than he was used to. “At least they found you guys in your tents. I thought a shower would help. God knows how long the icy water was beating on me.”

“What was it?” Greg sat up, slowly.

“Yeah, do we have something?” Billy looked around. “I don’t feel so funny now, just like I have a bad hangover.”

“You were drugged.” Adrian entered the second medical tent, followed by Kenn and Angela.

Angela became a doctor again and started checking them over, even though John had already declared them out of danger. They were her teammates.

“We have some questions.”

“I’m sorry, boss.” Kyle clenched his fists in frustration. “None of us remember.”

“We need to know where each of you were before going on duty.” Kenn took out his notebook.

The bandages on Adrian and Kenn, and the wary glances at people going by outside were clues. Billy frowned. *We missed some action.* “The mess.”

“Bonfire. Mess before that.”

“Same here.”

“We always hit the mess first and then spend a couple hours by the bonfire before we go out on

third shift duty.” Daryl couldn’t stop a flinch as pain shot through his brain. *No more talking. Okay.*

Adrian gestured to Kenn. “Who had that shift?”

“Hilda on second, until midnight. Maria on third shift. Assistants were Mike and Timmy on second and Cynthia on third.”

“None of them are the type.” Angela sighed. “Or that smart, frankly. Whoever it was, they did this as a test to determine if it would succeed or even be noticed.”

“*They*, is exactly right.” Adrian enjoyed the anger that was replacing the dead feeling from the medication. “One person doesn’t do all this on their own. We’re searching for at least two moles, maybe even three.”

“Then maybe it’s time we dug them out.” Marc ducked into the tent. He wasn’t surprised by all the shaking heads. “How about a new plan, then? Because this one isn’t working.”

“But, it’s your plan, grunt.” Adrian exposed him.

“It’s too dangerous now.” Marc met his eye, finally allowed to admit how much behind the scenes labor he’d been doing. “None of it went the way we needed it to.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Adrian also enjoyed Kenn’s reaction of shock and then realization.

Marc raised a brow. “You thought this would happen?”

“Your plan was good, but a bit simple.” Adrian winced at a new lance of pain from his bruised body. “It didn’t account for the reactions of the camp.”

“Because they’ve never been my priority,” Marc muttered, recognizing the dooming flaw.

“You tried to keep them out of it, but you also didn’t count on Angela’s reactions. Now, we’ll do it my way.”

“Can’t be any worse than mine.” Marc gave in with bitterness they all felt.

“Sometimes fate throws in a wild card.” Kenn looked at Angela. That’s what he considered her to be now.

They all stared at Angela.

She flushed. “That’s one of the nicer things I’ve been called.”

The tension broke with their laughter.

Marc ducked out to go back to the wreck site. He’d just wanted to be sure Angie was okay first. Some of the glares he had been getting upon arrival hadn’t boded well.

Angela, not finished with her checkup, looked to Adrian.

“We’ll wait.” Adrian was okay with keeping Kenn still for another minute. Those broken ribs hurt. Adrian knew. None of the times he’d suffered that particular injury had been fun.

“You guys will be cleared in a few hours,” Angela told her team a few minutes later.

“Bet you’re glad you had new arrivals to handle, huh?” Lee was starting to feel better with each bottle of water he kept down. He’d been scheduled to train with Kyle’s team. He’d stuck to them all night and mimicked their rituals to get ready for the run. Now, he wished he’d begged off or switched it out for a different day.

She laughed. Lee was a firm supporter now, and his wife, a hairdresser with bright pink stripes, was a nice addition to her growing list of possible female Eagles. They’d come in alone and settled into the QZ while she was on duty. She’d been about to scratch the scrappy woman from her list for being a cheater when Lee had apologized for the slap. Listening from the shadows, when Candy started crying, asking him to forgive her, Angela had reconsidered. If he was willing to let it go, so could she. “You bet your sweet cojones.”

That drew more sniggers.

“For evening mess, tell John you guys need something to help you eat. It’ll control the rocking and we’ll get to watch for reactions when you show up in perfect condition.” Angela issued instructions without waiting for Adrian to okay it. His wants were clear enough to her right now, since she was listening to his mind, too.

“What was it?”

“We’re not sure yet. Some type of party drug most likely.” Angela gestured toward the tray near the rear of the tent. “You’ll get another blood test before you leave and a few more over the next

couple days. Show up every twelve hours and we won't have to hunt you down and siphon it."

Kyle's tone firmed a little. "We'll be here."

Adrian gestured at Angela. "Next?"

Kenn frowned, notebook still in hand. He prepared to copy it all without being told, but he didn't like it.

"Double the sentries...talk to the men on the mess trucks, get a list of everyone who got supplies—including the cooks and assistants... All our stuff needs to be checked for tampering?"

"Yes. I doubt we'll find anything, but it has to be gone over anyway. Whoever did this knows our routines." Adrian gestured at the notebook. "Can you two take care of that list?"

One scowling, the other pleasantly surprised, Kenn and Angela nodded.

Adrian continued toward his next stop.

The tension was suddenly thick again. Angela shrugged. "It's only because you're hurt. He wants me to be sure you don't overdo it. You have serious injuries."

Kenn relaxed a little at that.

Angela gestured to his notebook. "Let's get this done and get you back in a cot with a sandwich, a beer, and a pill."

Kenn grinned, chest aching. "Best plan I've heard today."

Kyle and his team observed the gentle shift in power without comment.

An hour later, leadership gathered for lunch mess, except for Marc, who had gone back to examine the scene, and Kenn, who was in the medical tent resting.

“What’s she doing?”

Adrian glanced up at Neil’s question.

Instead of eating, Sam was rooting through a box of papers and folders. She had the table in front of her covered with them.

Adrian didn’t look up from the tray he was pretending to enjoy. “Searching for proof.”

Neil frowned. “She knows who it is?”

Angela shrugged. “She has a suspect list, same as us.”

“Should we get hers?”

Adrian shook his head at Neil’s eager tone. “I have it. She asked for schedules for the last month for Rick, Maria, Tony, Mitch, and Zack.”

Jeremy scowled. “Only one there I’d worry about.”

Neil nodded, eyes darkening. “Rick.”

Angela agreed with that suspect. “He’s on our list, too.”

Neil didn’t want to look away from Samantha. “Should we help her search?”

“No.”

“No.”

Adrian and Angela shared a smile at the overlapping answers.

“Tell him why.”

Angela didn’t hesitate. “They have a history. No one can make him more nervous than Samantha can.”

“Very good.” Adrian leaned in over the protests from his aching body. “Kyle and his team are coming now. Keep talking to me and *watch*.”

Nothing. There wasn’t even a flicker that didn’t match what it should; all of them were disappointed. Rick had been among the welcoming rush and they could find no fault with him, even when he spotted Samantha pouring over folders from a box marked *past schedules*. He hadn’t tensed, not staring in worry, and even when Samantha had looked straight at him, Rick had only given her a casual nod and hadn’t glanced her way again.

“Model citizen. He’s thinking about presidential assassinations right now!” Angela forced her face to smile, remembering Adrian’s very first rule.

“Thinking about next time?” Adrian stopped Neil and Kenn from moving that way with a shake of his hand.

“Yeah. He’s our guy.” Angela confirmed it, searching for anything in Rick’s mind that she could use as proof. Usually, she couldn’t get in the suspected traitor’s thoughts, but he was wide open at the moment.

“We lost some people, Boss.” Alex had been waiting for Neil to tell Adrian. He received a glare from the trooper. *Oops*.

Adrian's face iced over. "Who?"

Neil gestured at Alex. "You decided to add to his stress. You finish it."

Alex cleared his throat, face flushed. "The women from Omaha. Lee's wife tried to hold them, but she said they wanted to be with Ernie, that he had the sense to hide when the slavers came."

Normally, there would have been crushing loss, but this time, everyone at the table felt Adrian's anger.

Neil saw Samantha stand up and come toward them. Would she call it publicly? *I'll stand behind her.*

Samantha handed a single folder to Adrian before returning to her seat, leaving Neil disappointed.

Rick slipped out of the mess while everyone's attention was on the center table.

Sam left the folders and papers spread across the table without a second thought, following Rick while the camp stared in curious suspicion.

"Go on if you want." Adrian waved at Neil.

Neil did.

Angela studied Samantha's set shoulders. "She's sure."

"Yes." He slid the folder toward them, revealing Samantha's note.

He has to be in contact with them by now. We need better channel monitoring—search his tent and check for a radio on channel 24 or 83. Those are slaver standards. And stop Mitch from spending

time with him! No access to anything important, but especially not whiskey so he can't bribe our radioman. Herd him now!

"Checking his tent will have to wait." Daniel slid the inventory list over "His was one of a dozen burned during the trouble over Kenn. He just got a new one."

Angela's stomach clenched. "Convenient."

"Yes, but it won't matter." Adrian didn't hide the menacing tone they rarely heard from him. "Our last battle with his master is coming soon. After that, the need to be careful with Rick vanishes."

6

"I'll tell you again, Ms. Quest. I won't give you any details about his condition. That's private. Now, as you can see, he's resting and I'm busy."

"Are you hiding something, Doctor? It was a simple question."

"Please take your accusations and rudeness and get out of here."

Marc threw his body in front of the flap as the reporter came out of the medical tent. They collided; he grabbed her arms to keep her from falling.

Marc jerked Cynthia up against his chest, playing it as if they were about to fall. Her flowery perfume struck him in the throat, preventing the

words he'd wanted to say; she twisted in his tight grip.

"Watch where..." Cynthia fell silent as she realized who was holding her. The feel of Marc's hard body was enough to halt her power of speech. Cynthia had a thing for spying on him too now.

Marc had noticed. Taking a chance, he kept her close for a moment longer, making full, intense contact. Maybe the reporter could be convinced to switch sides.

Cynthia stared into those sexy eyes without a real thought, too absorbed in the feelings. She'd thought Adrian was the only one who held such magnetic appeal, but with his feathered black hair and smooth, gypsy-tinted skin, Marc was just as sexy. His best feature, after those amazing blue eyes, was his lips. Full and sexy, they promised pleasure—the kind that took its time and hung around for a while. Women had been trying in vain to snag his attention since they'd arrived, but it was clear that only Angela would do.

Marc slowly moved the woman back from the instinctive lean in she was doing, enjoying her blush. "You okay?"

His hands fell away from her hot skin. Cynthia shook her head. "Yes."

Marc smiled at her, stealing her breath again as he used the charm usually reserved for Angie. "Didn't mean to startle you, Cyn."

His voice was a low octave of chills over her spine. "I'm fine."

Marc leaned in to deliver the final blow. “Better than that, I’d say.”

A dark stain ran up her cheeks in a fast blur.

“Maybe I’ll run into you again sometime.”

Cynthia didn’t answer; she couldn’t talk through the lump in her throat.

Marc stepped around her with a satisfied smirk. Now, she would be distracted. That would give Adrian a little more time to get her under control.

Marc ducked into the Ben Gay smelling tent to find John chuckling in admiration.

“Very nicely done.”

“Just doing my part.” Marc scanned the doctor; John was so pale the white sheets next to him seemed darker. *He’s exhausted.*

Marc frowned as he glanced around the nearly empty tent. He’d been expecting to discover Kenn and Adrian here, along with Angela and Anne, but there was only Kenn, who had stopped snoring in favor of listening.

John wiped his hands, eager to be done for the day. “Cynthia wanted to know about Kyle’s team, but she moved on to Kenn pretty fast.”

“She’s connected the two.” *Where is everyone? What did I miss?* Marc was already certain something new was happening.

“As have others.” John wrote on a baggie and stored it in the cooler.

“Is it right?” Marc asked suddenly, unaware that he was going to. “Lying, manipulating, all this undercover shit?”

“I wish I could say no.” John answered tiredly, storing the cooler under his folding worktable. “But if you had been here five hours ago, I don’t think you would ask that.”

“Neil said it was tense.” Marc hadn’t checked in with anyone yet.

John snorted. “Tents burnt, fights, searches being conducted by Kenn’s allies, levels of Eagles confronting each other with guns. It was more than tense.”

Marc was surprised. “I didn’t see any sign of that.”

“Kenn went out there, even though that man has three broken ribs and a concussion.” John gave him a pointed look. “People thought Kenn was dead.”

Marc understood he had been accused in his absence. “Guess that means I’ll need a new canvas. Zack stirred ‘em up?”

“Yes. They’ve been suspended from the Eagles.”

“And order was restored.”

“Yes. If people knew it was an attempted mass murder, the peace and security here would be gone.”

“And I would lose them.” Adrian entered the tent, closing the flap.

Angela took up a place outside in the shadows with the other guards after a fast scan of the tent to verify there was no danger. Marc was in there; Adrian was safe.

“I’ll do *anything*, say *anything* to keep that from happening.”

Marc shrugged, not hesitating to voice his concerns now. "I just don't know that it's right."

To his surprise, the leader laughed.

"What's funny about that?"

Adrian joined him. "Right and wrong doesn't matter anymore. Only our survival does."

Marc conceded the point. If things had been that bad, that fast, it proved how unready these people were to be on their own.

"Find anything?"

"A shovel and some boot prints that were too tracked over to make a mold of." Marc let another concern out. "We're almost out of time."

Adrian nodded. "I know. I feel it too."

"Three attempts in two weeks." Marc's eyes darkened. "They'll come for her themselves now, since their mole hasn't been successful."

"We're as ready as we can be. And so is she, for the time we've had."

"When they come, Angie will expose what she is to protect these people." Marc glared. "I hope you've got that covered."

Adrian ignored his bitterness. "The Eagles are on board. She's worked hard, and the women here already regard her as a champion for them."

"That's not enough. They might still turn on her."

"Yes." Adrian took the pill John handed him.

"You have to stop that from happening!" Marc waved off a pill from the doctor when it was offered. "After all she's already done for you, you owe her!"

Adrian scowled, anger rising. “Don’t you think I know that? The herd needs more time that we don’t have.”

“Then you have to keep her from using her magic in front of them, even if the slavers attack us!”

“That won’t happen.” John locked the bottle back in his small safe. “Even I know it. The best you can do is to take the fight away from here so she doesn’t have to hold back.”

Adrian and Marc shared a long moment of silent admiration.

“We lure them away.”

“Yes. And what will do that?” Adrian already knew but he needed Marc to say it.

“Angie.” Marc hated it. “If she doesn’t leave, they won’t follow.”

“Yes.” Adrian sighed. “Dope it out according to the setup you gave me.”

Marc forced himself to pretend it was someone else’s love about to be used as bait. “I’ll have a final battle plan ready and in your tent before dawn.”

On a cot behind them, Kenn listened in shock. *Marc can have the XO slot anytime he wants it!*

Kenn hadn’t known those two were doing deep level work and it was another of those lifechanging moments to realize that Marc had been doing his job all along and hadn’t once tried to take credit for it.

I have now officially lost it all.

You never had it to lose, the witch inside refuted harshly. You were just keeping the seat warm.

Safe Haven rolled out of Cedar Bluff early the next morning with the annoying cries of mating cicadas ringing in their ears.

A few short hours later, the slavers rolled in and even the invading insects fell quiet.

They had been traveling for nearly a week, using the cleared roads to catch up. They'd made good time thanks to Rick's messages.

Cesar shook the dirt from the baggie and read the letter inside.

Headed to Georgia. They plan to use the caves. Made 3 attempts, all failed. Bitch keeps saving him! I can't do it from here—up to you now. Will listen at midnight for the next week.

Cesar scanned the men now taking over the muddy, cleared area. The fighters here were more than 300 strong, all seasoned killers. Cesar brandished his deformed fist. "In three days, we will have supplies and new whores!"

There was a resounding cheer from the Mexicans. The last three towns had been abandoned upon arrival.

Cesar strode toward the center of the unrolling camp, eager to examine more of Adrian's methods from the clues left behind. There had been problems among his own men without fresh females to enjoy, but he had broken into his harem and handed out the ones with no sign of pregnancy. It had calmed his

men and made him popular again, but it had also sent a hotter fury into Cesar's heart. *When my girls cry in pain, only I am to be the cause of it. Safe Haven will pay for every scream I have missed!*

Chapter Thirty-Three

Hands On A Clock

Near Hays, Kansas
May 10th

1

“I’m telling you, that is too much weight.”

Angela blew out a frustrated breath. “Unload half of it and we’ll add a box or two to each vehicle that’s left.”

Zack sneered. “What the hell do you know about it?”

He and the others from the mini riot had been taken back into the Eagles after just two days, but they were now level ones again and had to work their way back up. Zack wasn’t adjusting well to being the same rank as her.

Angela scanned the churning, debris filled river. “I’m smart enough to know that if the pontoon’s sinking, you don’t send the truck across anyway.”

Zack went scarlet. He waved an angry hand at the rest of the convoy that had already reached the other side and started up the hill. “We’re falling behind. We’ll get split up!”

Angela flashed those flecks of steel they were all familiar with now.

“What’s worse? We show up an hour late with the water, or go now and lose a reserve truck because you can’t stand to do what I say?”

They glared at each other for a long moment.

Zack finally dropped his eyes when she didn’t. “I know we’re low on water.”

Kyle joined her. “Is there a problem?”

“Not anymore.” Angela smiled sweetly. “Will you help us unload a little weight? The pontoon keeps going below the waterline with just the weight of the front tires.”

“Sure. Good thing you saw it.” Kyle meant that. “This truck is the last of our reserves after mess tonight.”

Zack stiffened.

Angela motioned. “Back it up, Allan; let the other cars go on. We’ll just be a little out of order for the check in.”

Allan was relieved. He glanced at Angela as she hung on the side of his truck to stay out of the way.

Kyle directed the traffic around them.

“Thanks. You...okay and all?” Allan swept her various scars in a quick glance.

It was another sign that she was making progress with the rest of Zack’s team. Angela smiled. “I’m 5-by. What about you?”

Allan grimaced at the choppy waves of the Smoky Hill River sloshing onto the pontoon. He hated water. “Right now, I need a drink.”

Angela pulled a beautiful silver flask from her pocket and tossed it onto the empty seat next to him. "Make sure I get that back."

"I will." Allan was surprised she would share the gift with him after the coldness a few of Zack's team had still been stubbornly treating her to. "If I don't, Lee will rack my knees for me."

Angela laughed. "You're probably right. He's a big fan now."

"He should be." Allan spoke from the heart. "You've given him his life back...and...I'm sorry."

"I forgive you." Angela moved his name to her side of the mental chess board. "Change takes time."

"I guess she don't have to work." Zack came by the driver's window with a large box of water bottles.

"Lay off!" Allan glowered at Zack.

Zack gaped in surprise as Allan finished declaring his loyalty.

"You were wrong. We all were, so lay off her from now on."

Zack stomped away.

Angela delivered a genuine smile. "Thank you."

Allan shrugged, uncomfortable at the kindness he didn't feel he deserved from her. "Zack might have gotten me killed."

Angela's thoughts were along the same line. She hopped down, catching Kyle's motion. "It's probably light enough now. Ease the wheels out and I'll let you know."

The truck rolled across the pontoon bridge with no more problems.

Angela resumed her post as the other vehicles continued. The last four jeeps were full of Eagles. When Neil stopped for her, Angela climbed inside without protesting there were still cars left. If the trucks had made it, so would the rest.

Angela felt them ease onto the floating pontoons, uncomfortable with the way the floating road sank and then accepted the weight. She tried not to stare into the river.

They were across a minute later; the last two jeeps of men quickly ran back to collect their equipment.

The bridge was loaded with routine precision and then all four vehicles were rushing to fall in behind their convoy of light in the barren wilderness.

2

“I hate these damn hills.” Angela was losing patience as the convoy slowed again for another sharp curve. The road was two lanes, cleared only an hour before, and it wound upward at an awkward angle. Complete with steep drop-offs on both sides, after Adrian’s accident it was a cruel reminder of how things could go wrong without warning.

Neil flipped the radio off, tiring of the female ballads she had put in. “Yeah. We’ll be out of them in another day or two.”

Angela narrowed her eyes against the lightning, not looking forward to the storm that was coming with it. Samantha had warned Adrian and he'd taken them to higher ground. Day after tomorrow, they would be in the clear from a slaver attack during the bad weather, but until then?

Angela shut her eyes, breathing becoming shallow; it was the only sign of magic.

Neil assumed she'd fallen asleep. He couldn't stop from glancing over to check on her every few minutes though, uneasy and not sure why.

Angela still hadn't moved when they finally stopped for the night. Neil killed the engine. "We're here."

"I'll catch up."

Not expecting a response from his lowly spoken words, he jumped. Her tone was...disconnected. When the dome flashed on, her pupils were too wide.

Instinct warned him not to disturb the power behind those empty sockets. Neil got out and shut the door. He did a fast sweep. "Who's her shadow?"

"I am." Seth was already near her door despite his limp. He motioned Neil on. "I'll handle it."

Seth opened the door with caution, able to feel the hum of the witch hidden within her. He covered the glaring dome light with his hand. "Is everything okay?"

"We look."

Her voice held an eerie double timbre. Seth put the window down, then quietly closed the door. “Take your time.”

There was no answer.

Seth scanned for people coming her way, but everyone was busy hurrying to get set before the heavier rain came. Seth sent a short message by hand code. *This is over my head.*

Angela blinked when the dome came on again; she took the bottle of water that was handed to her, but she didn’t open it. Adrian slid into the driver’s seat and shut the door. “When?”

“Tomorrow or the day after.” She tried to sound normal again. “In these trees, on this road.”

“Kyle checked in.” Adrian swept for perimeter guards. “They have spies on us, two groups.”

Angela was still looking, but she was almost done. “One in front, one in rear?”

“Two in front, covering the two main roads east. To run, we’d have to go south from here or be pinned in by the Interstate. That’s where he expects to trap us with the main group.”

Angela closed the cage door, stalling. “How will it happen?”

“Is that the question you really want to ask?!”

Flashing to her first day at Safe Haven, Angela sighed at the bittersweet memory. “No. I’d like to stay with you for the whole thing, no matter the risk or ugliness.”

“Why?”

Angela locked eyes with Adrian so he could see it was her decision, not the influence of her witch. “It’s my duty to help you kill him. It’s why I’m here.”

Adrian’s face twisted in hatred no one else had ever seen from him. “My life or his. Only one of us will walk away.”

“It’ll be you.” Angela touched his hand, muttering.

Adrian steeled his emotional response, accepting her protection spell for what it was—a descendant trying to ensure the future of humanity.

3

“...still using our old sites.”

Samantha stopped, staring at the two guards as they strode by.

“Makes us all pissed, but we’re not sure why.”

Sam climbed out of the passenger seat of Hilda’s minivan and shut the door, noticing, but not returning Neil’s friendly glance.

Using our old sites.

“You okay?”

The words jarred her concentration. Samantha realized Neil had joined her. “What?”

“I asked if you were—”

“I heard someone say the slavers are using our old campsites.” Samantha didn’t have time for chatter. Her mind was full of those beautiful

connection webs. It had been happening to her more and more since she'd come to Safe Haven.

Neil recognized the moment and her ability to do it like an Eagle. "It's bothering all of us. I'm sure it's meant to."

Sam's unease grew.

Using our old sites.

She'd heard that before. *Where?* Sam picked up the thread again, moving slowly toward the bathrooms.

Neil stayed with her, hoping she really was onto something.

"What would they gain? A cleared area? Leftover supplies?" She shook her head. "We don't leave anything, and sure, it's easier than traveling over the jammed streets but...they have to be getting more or they would take our cleared roads and try to ambush us. To do that, they'd have to know where we are..." She spun to Neil with fury. "I know how he's doing it. Someone has to go search our last site." Sam spun toward the last place she'd seen Adrian.

Neil grabbed her arm. "I'll do it. Tell me."

Sam let her discovery out in a fast, low rush. "Check where his tent was; dig if you have to. He's leaving them messages."

Neil believed she was right as soon she said it, but he needed more. "How do you know that?"

"One of the refugees from Trinidad said that was how they were beaten. One of their people was

leaving messages in baggies at their camping spots.”

Neil’s mind slammed it into place. He spun, picking a hard team. “Jeremy, Daryl, Jeff, Kevin—find replacements and mount up. Recon.”

He ignored their surprise, turning back to Samantha, “Tell Adrian, and then Angela. Let them know where we’ve gone.”

Samantha stared at him apprehensively, wanting to say things.

Neil felt the moment for what it was. “When this is done.”

She flushed, nodding.

Worried, Samantha stared until the jeep was out of sight.

Rick ducked deeper into the shadows as Sam stepped by, heart beating furiously. All of his attempts had failed. He’d caused damage, but not the chaos he’d been hoping for. Neil had even escaped Kenn’s broken ribs with the early morning switch so he could cover Kyle’s team. None of it had gone like it was supposed to and now that they knew, Rick couldn’t even go to his tent for the gun. He would have to sneak out to Cesar, emptyhanded.

The traitor frowned. *Do I have to go to the slaver? I’ve done everything I could to take out the leadership here. They’re too strong.*

Not that Cesar would care for his excuses. If he ran to the Mexican now, he wouldn’t view another dawn.

Rick's thoughts flipped to Samantha. Could he leave without her?

No.

Rick winced at the increase of guards now flooding the area. He would lie low, follow. He wasn't done with her yet. Maria had been a poor substitute.

What about the cook? Do I need to get her out of here?

Rick pulled off his grimy black bandana. No. They might be quicker to come hunting if they didn't have a distraction. *And who better to punish than traitor number two?*

4

Leveled out and covered with trees, it was cool and shady in the field where Safe Haven made camp. Dinner was damp, but calm. Adrian listened to his people. There was little time left for enjoyment now. It didn't matter if they traveled for another day or let it happen right here.

He stood up, drawing their attention. "Everybody ready for travel in the morning?"

There were halfhearted responses.

Adrian smiled. "My feeling, too. How about we start our break right now?"

The cheers were huge.

Adrian held up his hand, pretended to stumble. "I can take a hint."

He motioned at the corner, where two Eagles were sweeping the damp trees. “Kyle and Angela have point. Set us up.”

Adrian took his seat and resumed eating, pleased that the call had only drawn a little interest. Even the Eagles were going about lunch as if it didn’t matter. *Good*. He’d run out of time to get her ready. These men would have to teach her the rest.

Kyle and Angela had the camp set up in decent time, with the team leader mostly just guiding her. The effects of the drug had faded quickly, allowing the top men to support Adrian’s claims of coincidence. The camp thought the Eagles had gotten food poisoning. That was a common ailment when new supplies came in.

“You understand how it has to be?” Kyle led her through the mental parts too.

“Yes. Don’t rush them but use your approval to encourage the results you need.” Angela hadn’t questioned Adrian’s lessons, but when the witch muttered, she couldn’t help but notice that the observations were correct. Adrian had been doing it a lot. Training lessons, and even simple workout moments, always seemed to become leadership sessions. He was training her differently than the others. *This isn’t just catch up*.

Short hours before dawn, Neil rolled in; every guard who saw him knew there was trouble.

Neil took the baggie straight to Adrian, expression a grim mask of loathing.

When the boss gave an order he hadn't heard before, Neil called his team over and filled them in with a simple action. He let them read the letter he had found buried under Rick's tent space.

Where are you? The time is now! They'll be on Interstate 183 for the next two days, near Hays. Maria has enough powder left to dose the entire camp for a meal. They'll be out for 6 hours. We'll use it as soon as we hear from you.

Neil led his furious team in silence toward the tent area.

Adrian held his guilt in place, letting them do their duty. The fact that Maria was a woman wouldn't matter now. She would soon be another body on the side of a road and nothing more.

As Neil and half his team stormed to the men's side, the other half moving for the women's, Adrian also strode that way to start singing. The herd would be told Maria was being banished and escorted out. Only he and Neil's team would know otherwise. As for Rick, there wasn't a need for a trial. Once the camp read the letter, that shifty traitor would be killed on sight. His justice would come from the people he had betrayed.

"There's a call for you, Boss."

Kyle's tense voice told him everything he needed to know. Adrian changed directions after

motioning Kyle to get Kenn on the camp. The Marine would have to pick a tune to sing in his place. Another crisis had just sounded.

Still lurking in the shadows, Rick snickered softly. He also knew who had finally made contact.

6

“Rick’s gone.”

Adrian had known it, felt it, before each of the guards reported. He wasn’t surprised, only worried. Traitors had a keen sense of self-preservation. Likely, they’d tipped him off by sending Neil back. Returning to their old sites was something they didn’t do. “Keep the watch on double and put an extra man on Samantha.”

Jeremy’s expression said he would handle it.

Adrian let it go. He and Neil could fight that out later.

“What about the camp?”

“Tell them he was banished, too.” *We have bigger problems.* Adrian zipped his jacket against the chill.

The only one to frown at the lie was the one none of them had noticed in the shadows.

“I know who you are...who you were.”

Adrian spun to find Marc standing by the supply truck. Dread filled his gut. He wasn’t sure Marc was a convert even though he and Angie were a legal couple now. *Will this be the moment it comes out?* There was no worse time for it.

Marc studied Adrian without mercy, Dog at his heels. “When they find out...”

Adrian chose to act as if Marc was one of his all the way. “You’ll help her hold them together and finish what I’ve started.”

Marc grimaced resentfully. “I thought it was like that.” He swept the half a dozen shadows working hard under the cover of darkness. He had only a little sympathy for Adrian’s worry. Despite the show of confidence by divulging the truth, they weren’t friends. Marc secretly loathed the leader for making the Eagles more important to Angie than him.

Adrian read it, the time for truth fully here. *Let’s get it on, then.* Adrian lit a smoke as he leaned against the tailgate. “Tell me something, Marc. What did you expect to happen when you guys got here?”

Marc didn’t hesitate to give the same level of honesty. “I thought he’d hit her in front of me and I’d kill him. After that, we’d leave together, with our son.”

Adrian didn’t point out the obvious flaws. Again, Marc hadn’t accounted for the reactions of the camp or Angela, and they both knew it. The failures he wanted to expose were not the cause of his anger. Would Marc do it anyway? *He’ll lose her if he does.*

“I know that, too.” Marc didn’t glance away from Adrian’s guilty face. “I don’t need gifts to read

your mind. If I tell these people, Safe Haven falls tonight, instead of tomorrow when Cesar comes.”

Adrian didn't deny that the final battle was that close. “Do you have so little faith in your own plans?”

Marc's face twisted cruelly. “I have that little faith in *you*. All these lies and manipulations! And for what? So you can have a flock of sheep.” Marc kept his voice low even though he wanted to shout. “These people would be fine on their own. They don't need you.”

“If you believe that, then you've been lying and manipulating them as well, to get her.”

Marc shrugged. “I've never made any secret of how I feel.”

Understanding the man wouldn't be talked out of it, Adrian tried surprising him instead. “If your hatred of me is that strong after being here these weeks, then maybe you should go wake Hilda and the others now. They'll get the board together for a vote or a trial.” Adrian didn't bother with the warnings about Angie's reaction. Marc already knew what would happen.

“Why would you offer me justice?”

Adrian gave him an incredulous snort. “You're kidding, right?”

Marc shook his head. “These people worship you. The truth could have come out at any time.”

“Not with these results.”

“Yes. You underestimate them.”

Adrian knew Marc hadn't been here for the unrest, but he was growing annoyed with the man's lack of understanding. "I saved your life."

That hard tone was impossible for Marc to ignore. He'd lived too much of his life by it. "What?"

"They thought *you* were the traitor."

Marc slammed that into place with a loud click, explaining the curtness when he'd been the one to arrive driving the ambulance. "Why the hell would they think that? I've never given them any reason!"

"But you have." Adrian let it out tonelessly. "You've bucked the setup here from day one. They've tolerated your behavior because of her."

Marc frowned. "It was never openly."

"No. You've kept your head down and played it well." Adrian crushed his butt under his boot. "But they know a fake when they see one."

Marc snorted. "They missed you."

Adrian blazed with scorn. "I believe in everything we do!" He surveyed the very faint glow in the distance behind them, voice tinged with not only pride, but also the weight of it. "They need me."

"They need to care for themselves." Marc was unable to hold onto his anger. Neil had been right when he'd said the need to repay the debt would come after he and Angie became a legal couple. Even now, it was telling him things had to be this way.

“That is a slow process. I’m pushing them as hard as they’ll take.”

Distracted by Adrian’s unease, Marc returned to their plan. “What if you get them ready to fight? We can dig in here.”

“Come morning, that’s exactly what will happen.”

Marc lit a smoke with steady hands. “Morning? Why not now?”

Adrian’s heart thudded. “Look at them, Marc. Use that sharp military mind that can see so much and tell me how many of my people would grab their shit and take off for parts unknown before you finished talking.”

Marc did, taking his time. He spotted a large number of people still at the bonfire, all sporting their first guns. Five new members had graduated that class today. Tent lights were still on and the soft murmur of voices floated. They weren’t asleep.

“They’re scared.” Marc was surprised. He hadn’t felt it through his own new layers of happiness and heavy discovery.

“Look deeper.” Adrian’s chest easing a bit as Angela appeared in the darkness behind her man. “See *where* they are.”

Marc noticed it as soon as it was pointed out. “They’re grouped around the supplies, the ones we put out in case there’s an attack that pins them down.”

“Yes. They feel danger in the air the same as the Eagles do. And like my men, they’re making their choice to stay and fight, or run for their lives.”

Marc stared at him in shock. The camp knew, and yet they trusted him enough to pretend they didn’t. Adrian only had the illusion of control! What did that mean?

Nothing, Marc realized. All leadership was an illusion. Wrapped around a tyrant, that image would eventually shatter on its own. In Adrian’s case, it was a mirage of complete confidence coating a fanatical patriot.

Is that so bad, Marc? We’ve been led by worse.

Marc blew out a worried breath, but he refused to let her influence his choice either.

“I’m not here for that. I’m on duty.” She came from the shadows, sweeping Adrian the way the Eagles did.

Marc grimaced at the subtle warning that Adrian was to be protected, not fought against. “Until Seth’s leg is stronger?”

“And even after. Sometimes, I can hear things they can’t.”

Marc glowered at Adrian, fury returning. “I think the camp should be told everything. You, your *father*, the slavers attacking—all of it.”

“Go on.”

Marc frowned at Adrian’s calm answer. “What’s the catch?”

“There isn’t one. I’ve always known it would come out.” Adrian glanced at Angela. “I have no intention of running, from either group.”

Marc stared in disbelief. “They’ll kill you for it.”

I won’t let that happen!

Adrian ignored Angela’s silent words. “Yes.”

Tension was thick as Marc considered that. He’d thought Adrian would have him removed or send Angela to change his mind. He hadn’t expected Adrian to own up to being the son of the man who’d caused the war. Marc scanned the people again.

Adrian waited, giving him time to accept what Angela, and the others who knew, already had. This was the only way.

“But it was your own men who caused the problems...” And that was why Zack was an Eagle, Marc realized. *Keep your enemies closer.*

“Yes. What would have happened if Zack hadn’t been one of mine?”

“A real riot.”

“Yes.”

He understood the reasoning, but it was the sight of his son that finally sent that truth into Marc’s heart. Matt and Charlie were on third shift duty in the mess, keeping the coffee flowing. He was calmly leading the other boy through what was expected of them, and happy.

After their day together, their secret viewing of the past, those feelings Marc had tried to keep down

had grown instead. He loved that boy, but Charlie was only alive and happy because of Adrian's manipulations. If not for being found by Safe Haven, would his son be dead right now?

And what about the rest of these people that he wanted to take the blinders from? How many of them would also be dead right now or slaves? *Most*, Marc answered his silent question reluctantly. He wanted to expose the lies, but when these people found out, they'd hang Adrian and run. All that happiness would be gone, for all of them. *Just to ease my conscience*. The scales weren't even when he weighed them; Marc let go of his need to have Adrian out of control. "How do we get them to fight?"

Adrian let out the breath he'd been holding. "You, Marc. You'll get them to fight while we lure the main group out."

Marc's dismayed gaze went straight to Angela.

The V appeared in Angela's chin. "I'm going."

Marc steeled his heart against the panic. He'd vainly hoped she wouldn't leave Charlie here to go play this role. "What's first?"

Adrian didn't quite dare to smile, lest he push the man into changing his mind. "I'll tell you exactly how to make them work for you."

"What if the slavers attack this camp instead of following you?"

Adrian's answer was grim. "Then get my people to the trucks and send 'em out. At least they'll have their lives and their freedom. It's more than most

victims of this war have ended up with.” Pushing away his own needs, Adrian motioned toward the empty training tent. “You guys should steal a little time alone.”

While you can. Come tomorrow night, all of us will either be free or dead. Cesar’s call had been short and cruel, demanding the witch and camp be surrendered. When Adrian hadn’t agreed, the slaver had stopped responding. The attack was expected any time after dawn. Only a few camp members had heard the call and they were loyal. The story wouldn’t get around until dawn arrived.

Marc turned to ask if Angela wanted to take Adrian’s suggestion and found her already moving that way.

“I need a workout.”

Marc’s heart thumped in worry and desire. He followed her to the hay room, distracted from his fears of tomorrow.

Angela had her own terrors and she was grateful to Adrian for recognizing her need. He knew a few hours alone with Marc would help her steel her resolve.

She thought about calling Charlie and making it a family moment, but he would know what they were planning as soon as he saw their grim faces. *Let the boy have a last peaceful night with Matt and Dog before the world flips on him again.*

Emotions now brewing tightly, she hung her gun belt on a peg. “Kai?”

Marc gave her a warning look, unable to keep from glancing over her battle scars. "Only the moves."

"Agreed."

Her tone was so formal that it drew a snort from Marc. "Relax, will ya?"

Angela frowned deeply, stiffening with fear. "Not sure if I can. All I see is darkness."

Marc understood that was bad, but he didn't know what to say that would ease the panic lurking in her voice. He did know how to give her brief peace from it though. Marc grimaced as he realized Adrian had, too. *Is there no end to that man's manipulations?!*

"I wish you'd try to see it from a different view."

Not wanting to argue, Marc sighed in surrender. "Yes, dear."

Angela laughed, aware of him sweeping her for clues as to who she was now. He was studying her as if he was working a mystery. "How about we smoke one and play some cards? If you find us some mutated spiders, it'll be just like old times."

Marc let out a noise of amusement and felt his bitterness fade. Set up by Adrian or not, he wanted this bonding time with her more than he wanted to stand his ground. "How about we curl up in a corner with my bedroll and a joint, and wait for all Hell's Day together?"

Angela's body lit up at the thought of lying next to him and stealing the occasional kiss. "Deal."

Minutes later, that's exactly where they were.

Chapter Thirty-Four

All Hells' Day

1

“It’s almost time.”

They hadn’t slept much, just dozed and enjoyed their last few quiet hours together. “I know.”

“You’re still going.”

Angela didn’t answer. He already knew. Instead, she snuggled into his warm safety and felt his arms tighten around her waist. “I love you.”

Marc felt the terrors rise and pushed them away the only way he could. He rolled Angela against the wall and slanted his lips over hers.

She answered his desperation with a wild clutch of his broad shoulders, tilting her lips up. *My Marc!*

Adrian paused in the flap, feeling the waves of panicked passion flowing from the hay room. He turned toward camp. *At least she’s in good hands.* Adrian swallowed the pain. He’d promised her happiness here and her relationship with Marc had a place in that.

Adrian’s stomach tightened. If they survived the slavers, he would get to watch Marc and Angela fall deeper in love. Being an unselfish leader who put his people first had some serious downsides, but he wouldn’t be able to take much of it.

For now, he would try to be content that all the plans he'd made around her were safe. Everything was finally in place to create the world they'd been denied. All that stood in his way was one large group of Mexican guerrillas.

Dawn was still an hour away as Adrian slid into the mess to join Neil and Doug. He put a single sheet of paper onto the table between them.

We're going to war. Quiet excitement filled Neil's mind, along with questions as he tilted the paper for Doug to see. He kept his mouth shut, aware of a third party behind Adrian who was lingering near enough to listen.

Doug, Adrian's most overlooked man, kept quiet. He'd been waiting for this, sure their leader would strike out before the slavers struck this camp.

"We'll reach the mountains within ten weeks, even if we only travel half that time. We need to handle this before we settle in for the winter."

Adrian's tone was flat. Neil understood it was time to do what he had wanted to when Angie and Marc first came.

Cynthia edged closer.

Neil flashed a warning glower.

Cynthia stopped, but she didn't take the hint to go away. "Are they that near?"

Adrian was sure the rest of the camp would soon know. The reporter was very average in her white top and tan slacks, but he understood she was dangerous when she smelled a story. That was why she wouldn't be here for the battle. "Yes. Soon we'll

all get a cozy winter of relaxation together.” Adrian spoke to Doug and Neil. “We’ll leave right before lunch and we’ll need 3-4 days’ of supplies. Get on it.”

Doug and Neil left.

Adrian tried not to jump as Angela appeared at his side, pushing a cup of hot tea into his hands. She was getting better and he tried not to let her feel his sadness or his jealousy at the happiness in her step.

Angela nodded politely at Cynthia, who she still considered a stranger, then dug mercilessly into the reporter’s mind. Rick and Maria were lessons Angela would never forget and she was now searching all of them at every contact. It was exhausting.

The wind gusted as she and Adrian locked eyes.
“Be at the mess in an hour.”

She hated the bloody images filling his mind, the fact that she was condoning it. “I know we have to do something, but why does doing the right thing feel so wrong?”

He shook his head at the near mirror of Marc’s concern. “I never said we were doing the right thing. That wouldn’t succeed anyway. Those killers don’t play by the rules. We’re going to do the only thing we can—kill them or die trying.”

They continued on in silence, both aware of their follower.

She wants to go along.

Adrian didn't respond to Angela's thought. He was counting on that, but for now, he left the reporter hanging.

"You think they'll follow us?" Angela was worried over Charlie being left here.

"I do." Adrian gave her the truth. "Because *you're* going."

Angela was pale but determined. "So, I'm the bait. What happens when he runs with the line?"

"We yank the bastard up and cut his head off."

"Can I bother you for a minute?" Cynthia cursed herself for her lack of patience.

Angela felt Adrian's satisfaction, and had to turn away from the fake annoyed glance he gave the reporter.

"Are you leaving?" Cynthia got her notepad out as soon as Angela was gone.

Adrian did a quick sweep. *Clear... For now.* "We have some business to handle. Care to tag along? It'll be dangerous." Adrian knew that would be more than she could resist. After all, what was a reporter without danger to write about?

Cynthia was surprised at the offer. She was ignored by him as long as she pulled her shifts at babysitting and mess duty. "What should I bring?" She pretended his hard expression didn't make her feel like an outsider.

"An overnight kit and your gun. Be at the mess in half an hour."

Her shoulders had slumped at his words. "I don't have a gun anymore. I feel very safe here."

The words pleased Adrian, but he forced out a sigh of frustration, always playing the role he'd been born for. "Can you fire one?"

She shrugged, flushing as she remembered trying to bluff him down at their first meeting with a weapon she had found. "Just pull the trigger?"

"Eagles are getting the shooting class ready." Adrian pointed. "Tell them I said to give you a crash course and your own weapon."

"But won't they get mad? I'm—"

"Do you want to go or not?!" Adrian had forced the bark through the coldness sloshing into his heart.

"I'll be there." Cynthia headed for the class area. If the Eagles got upset because she wasn't scheduled for a lesson, she would deal with it. There was no way she would miss this chance to be in the field again. She had heard enough to believe that Adrian was about to do something the camp would either love him or loathe him for. *And I can't wait to tell them everything.*

Adrian did another sweep, seeing Angela had taken Charlie to the self-defense area for a fast lesson and words of explanation. He thought there might be a problem with the teen, but there was only a quick hug. Adrian was comforted even more when Dog came from the tall grass and sat down at the boy's heels.

The wolf's golden orbs were calm as he met Adrian's eye across the distance.

The herd will be here.

Adrian grinned. *You need a mate. It would be amazing to have all the camp's workers come from your bloodline.*

Dog sniffed the air curiously, but his tone in Adrian's mind wasn't interested.

With those common mutts? I'd have my breed die out before polluting it that way.

So, even animals are bigots. Who knew? Adrian shuffled that surprise to the rear of his mind. He went to his tent and the two men now waiting there, not responding to the people trying to catch his attention to ask questions. With him and Angela leaving, and a lot of supplies going with them, the slavers wouldn't be the only ones to think they were jumping ship. It was all a part of the plan... *Marc's plan.*

"I added a bit to your trap. Kyle and his men will be behind the razor wire." Adrian entered the tent.

Marc instantly felt a little better. The level Seven Eagles were deadly and all of them liked Angela, as well as having their own magic. They would protect her.

"What else do you need?"

"A way for Kyle and his men to view the mess meeting that starts in half an hour. I don't want the camp or the slavers to see them. We need everyone to think we're less than two dozen people choosing to run. Line up the trucks to block. For every four men who carry supplies in, only one or two will come out."

Kenn was relaxing in the corner, feeling better, too. Kyle and his team had been on numerous missions and done well, from catching mutations for John's tests, to executions of evil in the towns they passed through. They would handle this.

Catching the thought, Adrian hoped Kenn would keep quiet about the things the Eagles had done, but he didn't tell him to. Maybe it would be better if the camp had a day or two to think about it anyway; he left it to fate. These Eagles were about to be exposed to the people they had been lying to either way. Adrian hoped their success would help the camp accept the coverup. He had warned these men from the beginning that the people they protected might turn on them when they finally found out the lengths the Eagles were going to in order to ensure that safety. They had all said they understood, but Adrian knew they hadn't, not then. They did now. It would make them determined to not make any mistakes.

Marc, who already had his pen and notebook out for the instructions he knew were coming, began writing as Adrian spoke.

"We'll be on the coded setup, so you'll be able to keep track of us all day, I think, and some of the night. You two have to get this camp ready to defend itself. Do it quick and openly. You'll have a few hours before we leave. Be inventive. Make a strong show and encourage them to take us instead. They're aware that something's going on by now

and they're watching, deciding. It'll make our little caravan an easy target in comparison."

Adrian's instructions to Kenn were simple. "You're in charge and everyone knows that; they'll listen to you if you're careful with your words and always put them first. If we're not able to come back, get these people moving toward those mountains and make your stand there, not out here in the open. If we're not there in a week, you'll need the notebooks inside my mattress. I expect you to keep working on my dreams."

Kenn nodded, pleased and scared.

"Damn." Adrian blew out a sigh. "I wish I could take you guys."

"You sound like you're not coming back." Only fear of Angie's reaction was keeping Marc onboard with this suicide run. She wanted him here to defend their son. He couldn't deny her need.

Adrian began checking his gear. "Your plan is good—one of the best I've ever seen. If we execute it correctly, it's the slavers who won't come back."

2

"Everyone here?"

The mission team was gathered in the mess, sitting and standing around one picnic table in the middle as the rain tapped on the tarps. Everyone now knew they were about to engage the enemy; the mood was somber. Some of the familiar faces under this canopy might not return.

“The slavers are close. Mitch taped the call, at Adrian’s request. We’ve been expecting it.” Neil pushed the button on the tape player.

“You listen, and maybe I won’t kill all your Eagles. You will deliver food, water, and women two nights from now or we will come in and take them.”

Angela paled at the evil coming from the speakers. It was the first time she’d heard the enemy.

“And if we do this, do we have your word you’ll go away and leave us alone?”

Some of those listening in the mess frowned at Adrian’s answer, at his willingness to deal, but most of them understood he was trying to avoid more bloodshed.

“No, Señor. We will stay by you, and maybe settle with you when you reach the mountains. To seal the deal, you will send us the witch with the supplies. You have had the advantage for a long time, but now she will use her magic for us!”

The slaver’s voice held no warmth, though he chuckled like he was amused. There was static and a lot of noise in the background. Bikes, gunshots, voices, dogs barking, screams. It was menacing.

“We will give you nothing but coffins for your dead!”

There was a pause at Adrian’s defiance and then the accented voice came again, edged in wariness.

“It is the woman that makes you fight. She is strong, but is one witch worth all your lives? I know

you will think on it and we will talk again. For now, no one leaves, or we will kill them."

Neil put the tape away.

"He has something planned for us." Angela shuddered. "Something ugly."

"I think so, too. He says we have two days, but he won't stick to it." Adrian swept his arm. "Some of this camp will panic. Things will be said and reacted to as each situation deserves. It will feel real because most of it will be. He'll be tempted to take this camp, but Kenn and Marc will have enough open force ready by the time we go that they'll come after better odds of success—us. We won't be helpless victims though, and there are more of us going than what anyone will know. We'll lure them away and eliminate their leader—as a start."

There was agreement and no questions.

Zack lit a smoke, glad to have been invited on the mission. He was busy trying to get his place back. "Sounds like a good plan to me."

Adrian grimaced at the flippant tone but said nothing. Zack would understand how serious the killing was once it started; they all would. He waited as Neil unrolled a map.

Men's fingers held the ends as Adrian made sure nothing blocked the view of the camera hanging above them. "We can do it anywhere trees line both sides of the road, but the farther from here the better. If things go wrong, Safe Haven will need those hours to run. If that happens, they'll go to Stone Mountain."

Everyone saw the slavers were camped less than five miles from where they were standing. The mood dropped to ice.

Adrian pointed to a spot on the detailed paper. "We'll set up fast here, here, and here, and then get out of sight. When they get to the middle, we open fire from here and here, and pick off survivors." Adrian glanced around. "I mean to kill every one of them or die trying. Stay here if you can't say the same."

Kenn took out his pen and notebook. In just a couple minutes, he had sketched an outline where their site stood now and some of the surrounding area. Everyone was impressed with how quick and yet detailed it was.

Kenn slid the book to Marc, aware of the approving vibes. It was a shock to realize he didn't care about it at this moment.

Marc tuned everyone out and began drawing defenses, mind racing with the ideas he'd been brewing.

It took longer and it wasn't as neat as Kenn's, but it was easy to see he knew what he was doing as the picture changed. It was also obvious the two Marines had labored together on this kind of thing before. Kenn's eraser moved parts of the camp to more secure areas as Marc showed them what to do with the suddenly empty space.

Ten minutes later, the picture was completely different.

Adrian placed his finishing touch on the plans. “Put some cover on the sharp shooters in those semis; a gray tarp will work if they don’t move too much but put vests under it. If they take fire, they’re out in the open. Bring the armored vehicles up to close the gap.” Adrian scanned it again and nodded. “That’s good. You guys could last for weeks right here if you had to.”

“When do we leave?” Kyle asked through Adrian’s earpiece.

Adrian helped Neil roll the map. “One hour. We’ll meet at my semi. This is the important part, gentlemen. Deflecting members out of the loading zone is key. The slavers are watching; we can’t have them see even one wave from a member to Kyle and his men. The element of surprise will give us the advantage and maybe decrease the number of men he follows us with. If forty men leave here, he might take his whole army. If twenty ride out, he’ll take half his group and leave the rest to keep our people here. He’ll know he can travel faster. To make up for lack of manpower, he’ll take his hardasses, thinking that outnumbering us 5-to-1 will be enough. What he’ll really be doing is handing us victory when we wipe out his camp right after him.” Adrian left the mess, not looking at any of them. Battle mode had just hit, and it hurt.

Neil and Jeremy left the tent together, but not speaking. They headed for the camp, easily picking Samantha from the crowd of scared people. She was

the only one in the herd worried about Eagle safety too, not just her own.

The two men sat on either side of her, not saying anything that would be overheard, but letting her know she would be in their thoughts.

It was clear she would have to make a choice when they came back...*if they come back*. Samantha stifled a sob at the thought and clutched both their hands in a tight grip.

3

By late morning, the team was loading Adrian's truck with stacks of boxes, bags, and crates; each person's tent already stacked neatly on top of the semi. In all the organized chaos, Adrian found their secret well protected.

The camp probably would have found out about Kyle if not for Neil and Marc getting them involved, playing the tape for a few, having serious, private talks with some. It worked out in their favor that the slavers had made contact. Adrian wasn't sure why they had. It wasn't their usual MO, but he thought maybe Cesar had assumed Angela told them an attack was eminent. *Or maybe's he's scared of us*.

Adrian did another sweep. Fuel and water trucks were being lined up here, while semis were being circled around Safe Haven. The guards had been tripled; machine guns were being set up. Snipers were taking up strategic places, men and women rushed children and elderly to large tents in the

center of the camp that had caved in, shrinking the area by almost half. Vests were in the windows, some people wearing them openly. Adrian was satisfied they'd done what they could.

He noticed all their vehicles and tents were sporting shiny new American flags. Adrian narrowed in and saw they were also on shirts, hats, jackets, buttons, and jewelry. His heart was warmed at the show of spirit. Marc and Neil had gotten the plan to enough of the troublemakers that nearly everyone knew the team was about to go kill the slavers. *Perfect.*

Adrian turned to John, who appeared tired. "Eventually Kenn and Marc will come to you about quarantining the women and children who will be coming if things go well. I'd like you to tell them it's already taken care of. You have to wait until the last minute to set it up though or disguise it and have it ready so the slavers don't know we're planning to return."

John nodded. He hadn't gone to the meeting, but he knew what was happening and he approved.

"These refugees will each need a volunteer to stay with them from the moment they get here, until they're settled in. Try to get women who've lost young children and maybe fate will do the rest. Figure on twenty of each, but I doubt we'll do that well."

"I'll cover it." John was glad to play an active role for a change.

Adrian waved Kevin over. “John has some things he’s going to need help with. I’d like you to take care of whatever he needs.”

The level three Eagle stepped to the older man’s side. “You’re the boss.”

Adrian frowned as he walked toward the loaded semi, letting his worry show to make it more convincing. He had a strong feeling Cesar himself was watching Safe Haven right now. Most camp members were around the parking area, but everyone’s view was blocked by semis and U-Haul trucks. People wanted to talk, but Adrian purposely ignored them.

Adrian climbed into the driver’s seat, taking the picnic basket from Angela.

She scrambled up into the passenger seat like she couldn’t wait to go.

Everything gave the impression that he and his closest allies were fleeing while the weaker people prepared to defend their lives. *Perfect.*

Adrian started the engine.

Chapter Thirty-Five
All Hells' Night
The Slaver Camp

1

Jennifer froze as the tent flap opened.

Cesar had been out observing Safe Haven since the call came from their spies that something was happening. The younger Mexican moving her way wasn't supposed to be in here.

José grinned eagerly at her pale face, but he surprised her by going to a dim, filthy corner. He burrowed into the pile of garbage. After a minute, all the terrified girl could see was the tip of his gun.

José growled softly. "Go to sleep."

Curled protectively around her large stomach, Jennifer pretended to do that, not sure that she wanted him to kill Cesar. As bad as the leader was, his cousin might be even worse. Cesar wanted babies. José wanted blood.

It was a long hour for Jennifer, where she faced choices that no 14-year-old should have to make. Her life with Cesar was indescribable, but if José took over, he wouldn't want any of the leader's bastards around, would he?

Determined to keep her unborn child alive, Jennifer made the hard choice. She would save Cesar from José's attempts to take control of these men, and maybe the evil man would reward her.

"Get half the men ready, rápido. We're going after them."

Jennifer tensed at Cesar's voice outside the flap, eyes flying to his would-be assassin. She trembled. *Maybe they'll kill me by accident. Anything can happen here.*

"Tell them to keep watch. We leave in fifteen minutes." Cesar threw the flap open.

Jennifer jerked, giving herself away as awake.

"Get up!"

Jennifer scrambled to her swollen feet, noting how his possessive glare scanned her round stomach to confirm it was safe.

Cesar delivered a slap that sent her back to the floor of the tent. "The flap was open. Who has been in here?"

Jennifer opened her mouth, not sure if she would be alive a minute from now. "Your cousin."

Cesar slid his knife out of his belt.

"He didn't touch me!" Jennifer scrambled away. "Nothing happened!"

Cesar already knew that. If José had taken what was his, he would have killed her afterward. "What did he want?"

Her gaze slid pointedly to the corner. "You."

Cesar felt the warning, instinct kicking in. He flung the blade as he turned.

“Whore!” José rose from the corner.

Jennifer threw herself out of the way as José stumbled to his feet, bloody knife hilt protruding from his chest. The slaver fired as he fell. The bullet slammed through the tent wall and hit someone outside.

Cesar delivered a nasty kick that sent the blade the rest of the way into José’s chest.

José let out an awful gasp. His hands clutched desperately at the knife as he fell against the side of the tent, leaving a bloody smear.

Cesar stared at the girl, realizing she had saved his life. His fist clenched at the sight of the bullet hole in the tent near her head. *José shot at her, instead of me!*

Jennifer slid to her knees, shaking. She’d made a hard choice, and now someone was dead because of it. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Cesar waved to the men who had come running. “Get that out of here.”

“What about her?” Gravari leered at Jennifer.

Cesar hadn’t looked away from the crying teenager. He grunted, gold tooth glinting in the dimness. “She will be put into the trailers tonight and protected.”

Cesar studied the smooth skinned man who’d come in first. Prechosen to be his next right hand, Gravari was a tough, loyal recruiter who had been fighting for the power that José had scorned. “If someone touches her while I am gone, *you* will pay for it.”

The man lifted his gun in answer.

Satisfied, Cesar waited for them to drag out José's body before gesturing at his pregnant slave. "You are okay?"

Jennifer nodded, wiping away her tears. The slaver liked them pouring from her. She dried up as best she could, so as not to encourage him to take her before he took Safe Haven.

"You will clean this up."

She immediately began to do as she had been told.

Cesar stared at her. He'd been expecting his impatient cousin to try soon. Finding Maria's body had been hard on José, especially since she had been his wife.

Cesar grinned cruelly. It had been his duty to support her when the Americans captured José. He'd done that and a bit more.

And what of this shivering Americana carrying his next born? She'd saved his life. He owed her and the evil man knew exactly how to repay her kindness. When the baby came, he would let her keep it for a while, to get attached. And then he would give it to someone else to love.

Cesar emerged into the gritty light and motioned Gravari to have the chosen men load up.

They obeyed with none of the usual fighting. His men had seen José going in; they had allowed it. His eyes glittered dangerously as he read them and the mood. *Is that disappointment?!*

“No se puede matar al diablo! You cannot kill the Devil! I dare you to try!”

They shrunk from him, believing the rumors now that he was invincible. When he stormed toward his golden car, they followed.

2

Swallowing the awful feeling of abandoning his flock, Adrian moved his small convoy fast and hard.

In the rear of his truck, the Eagles were surrounded by guns, grenades and launchers, and razor wire so thin it could hardly be seen and so sharp it could take off a hand or slit a throat. The team prepared as much of it as they could while traveling.

Kenn’s voice came through the radio. “By 8, Eagle.”

Eight times eight. Adrian pushed the button on the mike without speaking, then flipped to channel 64.

Kenn’s voice came through again.

“A large group of armed men just left, rolling toward Safe Haven, with *The Man* in the lead. Roughly thirty vehicles and a hundred men. By 6 and 2.”

Alarmed, everyone listening wondered what Adrian would do.

Adrian switched to channel 38 and pushed the button on the mike. “Check in every half hour.”

“Copy Eagle, out. 9 miss 4 by 3.”

Adrian hung up the mike and switched to channel 15.

“How do you keep that straight?” Angela needed to distract herself.

Adrian lit a smoke, leaning on the gas a little. “Practice, and then it’s like military time. Once you learn the secret, you have it, and your mind automatically does the work. Just remember *by* is times and *miss* is minus.”

She didn’t answer, trying to ignore the voice that was demanding to know why Adrian wasn’t going back to help defend their people. She noticed the increase in speed. “You’re sure he wants us enough to pass up the camp?”

Adrian nodded. “Yes, because it’s only temporary. Once he has us, he’ll come back for them. He’s sure our people will negotiate if I’m a hostage.”

Angela thought of Kenn. “They would.”

“It’s another reason we have to be successful.”

“And if you’re wrong?” she challenged suddenly, unable to help it. “If he attacks them?”

“Then, I’ll have made a terrible error in judgment and if I’m not executed for it, I’ll probably put my gun in my mouth and pull the trigger.”

Angela was shocked into silence by his answer. Her eyes shut as images of the White House and Milton’s suicide flashed. His father had paid that way. Would Adrian? She shivered, waiting in tense silence for Kenn to radio again and tell them Safe Haven was under attack.

Five long minutes later, the radio crackled and then popped loudly as lightning flashed in the distance.

“The enemy is going by. Repeat, they are going by. Watch your ass. They’re moving fast.”

“Roger that. 7 by 1.” Adrian switched to channel 7.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. Respect for Adrian doubled, vanquishing the few doubts she’d had left. Adrian would take care of things and it would all turn out the way it was supposed to.

3

They traveled steadily for the next three hours and made it about fifteen miles from Safe Haven before the weather broke. The dim sky darkened as sheets of rain covered everything and the humidity rose instead of going down.

Angela shivered as Adrian increased the AC, cool air rushing over her sweaty skin. They had been forced to drop to 30 mph, but it was clear Adrian wasn’t stopping unless he had to. He was careful though, to not go anywhere those behind him would have trouble traversing.

The radio crackled with the thunder, making them jump; they waited for someone to speak.

“Grid 12, E-8. Enemy is now approaching E-8, still moving fast, 45 steady,” their lookout called.

Adrian pushed the button on the mike, let go and switched to the very first channel they had used.

Angela scanned the road map from the glovebox. "That's only about five miles behind us."

"By 9 and 5." Adrian switched to channel 86 and hit the truck's intercom button. "You men settled in?"

Kyle answered, sounding annoyed. "As ready as we can be, considering we're bouncing."

"Good. The weather's getting worse. We may have to take shelter and that'll mean setting up wherever we land." Adrian was already looking for places that would work.

"Copy that. How far behind?"

"Five miles and going faster."

"Roger that. We'll hang on. Let's keep that distance."

Adrian controlled his need to panic, knowing it was likely to get them all killed if he didn't stick to the plan. He pushed the rig up to 50 mph. "Maybe I can buy us a little time." He pushed the button on the mike. "Channel eighty-three."

Angela frowned as he switched. That was the slaver channel.

"...on Interstate 70. I'm having trouble keeping up," a slaver called to his boss.

"Ir más rápido!" Go faster!

The transmission was full of static and odd drumming noises. Adrian gave Angela quick

instructions. “Have Neil call me on this channel, tell me he thinks he spotted someone following us and we should take shelter in Glendale and get ready to fight. It wouldn’t hurt for Doug to tell him that he’s imagining things.”

Angela realized Cesar would tell his men to withdraw if he knew they were about to make camp—to surround them. She shut her eyes and made contact with their secret Eagles sneaking through the surrounding landscape to track the slavers by sight.

The slavers were still talking, figuring out how to attack.

A very American voice cut through the accents. “Eagle? Come in, Eagle?”

Adrian waited a second, then pushed the button on the mike. “What the hell are you doing on their channel? Get off!”

“I’ve had a fire and fell behind, Boss. This is the only channel I can broadcast on.”

“Do you need a ride?” Adrian asked.

“No, but maybe we should stay and get ready when we hit Glendale,” Neil sent back. “I’m going to blackout after this. I think I saw someone following us.”

“You did not. You’re jumping at storm shadows!” Doug interrupted in the background.

The static clicked. Adrian pushed the button on the mike. “We’ll wait for you in Glendale. The

rain's getting worse. We'll have a minute to pick you up then find a place."

"Copy. Out until 10."

Adrian switched to channel 10. "Perfect. 7 by 4."

They went through four channel changes that Angela couldn't keep track of; she smoked one stale cigarette after the other, listening, hoping.

The rain fell harder, slowing them down. The wind rocked them along the sunken lanes of Interstate 70. The road was amazingly clear of traffic, but it was slowly becoming a pond as the torrents continued. Hail pinged off roofs and hoods, and the lightning cracked, striking a structure in the distance. Flames burst outward and began to fight the driving rain for survival. Thunder rolled above the small convoy, loud and echoing as if in warning.

All of them wondered how things were going in Safe Haven.

4

The news of Rick's escape had everyone worried, except for a single sullen teenager, but now that the slavers were coming, the traitor had been forgotten.

Becky had been sneaking out to their usual meeting places, hoping he would be there, but he hadn't shown. Until this morning, Rick's name had been on everyone's lips and Becky hated them for it. They didn't know him like she did. They all

called him evil and a killer, but she didn't feel that way. He'd told them who he was, told her—

“Psst...”

Becky spun to find the object of her thoughts in the shadows behind the barn. Only his shaking head kept her from throwing herself into his arms.

The teenager took a subtle glance around, but as usual, everyone was ignoring her while they hurried to defend the camp. It was almost as if she didn't exist.

Rick stayed still as Becky moved toward the showers and darted into the underbrush instead. He scanned the area. Any observers?

No.

“Come on.”

Becky followed him away from the chaos, loving the nervous chills in her stomach. *He came back for me!*

As soon as he thought it was safe, Rick opened his arms. Like he'd hoped, she didn't hesitate and neither did he.

Instead of the intense hug she wanted, Becky found her lips against his, her chest crushed tightly to him. She thought to resist, but he eased his grip then and she responded to the feel of him against her female body. *He's hard in all the places I'm soft.*

Rick was now debating changing his plans. He could take her along. No one knew where she was and with everything going on, she wouldn't be missed for hours. “I have to know why you didn't tell them.”

Shy under his gaze, Becky blushed, tone low. “I like you, more than I like them.”

Rick swept her up and this time, gave her the gentle welcome she’d been longing for. He held her until she began to let her fingers play in his hair; Rick kept himself still even when she shifted against him restlessly. He hadn’t meant to encourage her, only get some information, but the sight of her welcoming young face had been too much to resist.

“Will you...kiss me again?”

His wolf like leer was quickly hidden. “Anytime you want!”

She laughed, a fresh, innocent peal of delight that had him dropping his mouth to hers. He couldn’t take her away from Safe Haven just yet, but he could steal her virginity right out from under Neil’s nose. *Then I’ll kill her.*

5

By dusk, the mission team was still more than ten miles from Glendale. Adrian thought it was ironic they weren’t even going to make it to the place the slavers thought they would be. He waited for the check in to decide what to do, but when the call came, it didn’t ease his mind. The slavers were now eight miles behind.

Adrian hit the button as the violent lightning flashed. “We need a sturdy, easy to defend shelter.”

“We did a map check a few minutes ago,” Kyle responded. “We spotted a YMCA and a rest stop.”

“Rest stops are usually brick and small. No fires and no sneaking in,” Zack offered from the truck behind them.

Adrian hit the button. “The rest stop. Secure it and get set up right away. We won’t have much time.”

“Copy, out.”

There was no question, no hesitation. Angela felt a little better about the plan changing so rapidly. “How long will we have?”

“An hour, maybe.” Adrian followed the signs for the rest area through the driving rain. “More like forty-five minutes.”

“To set it all up in this weather?”

Adrian slowed as the building came up on their right. “This weather is what will make it work. They won’t be able to see anything until they’re trapped.”

He pulled the semi over and found his one prayer answered. Cicada covered trees lined the entire area on both sides of the weedy road.

The wind gusted as Adrian unlocked the rear doors using the button Kenn had installed weeks ago for this very moment.

The rear men got out with kits and bags, disappearing into the landscape.

Adrian turned to Angela. “Ready?”

Angela pulled on her dark hood, kit already over her arm. “You know it.”

They both rushed from the cool truck and into the freezing rain, taking shelter under the small awning over the brick building’s double glass doors.

Doug and Neil, and a few others were already there. They entered with lights on and guns drawn.

The men secured the one large room in seconds, then began carrying things into the Ellsworth County rest stop.

Adrian waved the closest man over for guard duty on the females. He spoke to Angela. "You stay down and out of the way. When it starts, I'd like you to pass out ammo and anything else we need."

"That's it?" Cynthia was disappointed; the tape recorder in her pocket was already running. She'd brought a week's worth of tape.

Adrian thought of last night's violent dream where not even two perfect shots had been enough to kill Cesar. He stepped back out into the rain to help his men. "For now, Ms. Quest."

6

The fifteen men in the rear of the rig had jumped out the minute the lock clicked. They took their share of the boxes and disappeared into the landscape. They were careful to show each other the traps they set as the storm picked up and the sky started looking like the ten minutes before full dark.

Adrian and a few of the men labored right outside, hiding their vehicles after making sure the tracks continued out of sight. The others were inside. The sound of drilling echoed out the open doors, rolled past Adrian, across the street and up

into the heavily wooded area. It almost drowned out the hordes of cicadas roosting in the trees.

The noise lasted three minutes and then there were three new holes, all filled in with red handkerchiefs. Even from only a few feet away, it was hard to tell they were there. Two of the three holes viewed into the tall stalls that made the long entrance to the bathrooms, one on each side of the rest stop. Anyone taking shelter there would be in for a nasty surprise.

The Eagles nailed thick wooden boards over the two front windows, leaving a three-inch gap at the bottom to shoot from. Vests were nailed loosely over the windows so the men inside would have some cover.

Adrian stared at the roof, where two men now waited, hidden behind the decorative chimney and a camouflaged shield of vests. He was satisfied when he couldn't pick them out.

The leader went to his semi, pulling himself nimbly up without noticing how soaked he was, but he did think the annoying, high pitched song of the bugs was louder. He pushed the button on the mike. "Location for Eagle by 6."

Adrian switched to 36 and waited, worried when there was no answer. He didn't call again, sure they were lying low and too close to the slavers to answer.

He climbed down and was about to shut the door when the lightning flashed.

The radio sparked. “They’re in Black Wolf now.”

Adrian scrambled for the mike. “Roger, by 5, 3 and 9.” He flipped to the right channel and pushed the button on the mike. “We’re in the Ellsworth Rest Stop. Break off and get ahead. Join Kyle.”

“Roger, out.”

Relief was in Jeremy’s voice, but there was excitement too. Adrian was glad to hear it. The scouting team wanted to be here for the battle, but they would be careful not to be spotted and ruin the plan.

Adrian hit the button on his chest, using the new coded shortwave setup the slavers wouldn’t be able to pick up until they were less than half a mile away. “We have five minutes.”

“Copy.”

Adrian stepped under the awning, frowning at the sudden feeling of doom that flew over him. Had he forgotten something?

He turned toward Angela, finding her through the glass. She hadn’t taken up a place under the windows like he’d expected, but her eyes were glowing red and her gun was in hand. *Good*. “Get under cover. They’re three minutes out.”

He saw his secret terror mirrored in Angela’s eyes before she took up a prime spot at one of the windows.

Outside, the cicadas fell silent.

7

The building was pitch-black as the faint sound of engines echoed through the storm.

Adrian took his place near the door, rifle in one hand, radio in the other.

“They’re here.”

The first broken lights flashed off the trees and across the wet pavement as Angela’s words faded.

“They’ll be going slow when they pass us, but it’s only because of the weather; it’s dark. They won’t notice anything wrong unless we move.”

Adrian’s words were a comfort and an instruction. Everyone froze as streams of light lit up the parking area and the sidewalk...and then the room. Wet vehicles rolled by.

“He just saw your truck...” Angela let out a cold sigh as the weight of murder settled onto her sore shoulders. “Go now.”

Adrian pushed the button on his mike, sure fate was standing still to watch this moment. “It’s a go!”

8

Eagles waited in the mud and rain as the enemy rolled toward them in the windy darkness, peering from behind the trees, picnic tables and grills.

Kyle was cool and calm. He’d been working toward this moment for months; he was lifting his arm even as the walkie talkie crackled.

“It’s a go!”

Kyle aimed for the gold Corvette and tossed the grenade that would trigger a slaughter.

Outside the rest stop, for one last instant, there was only the storm around them.... Then hell split open and swallowed the peace as the Eagles unleashed fire and brimstone.

Kyle's aim was perfect, but the wind gusted; wet branches flew into his path, deflecting the grenade. It fell to the wet grass and rolled onto the pavement.

The gold Corvette drove over it.

The grenade exploded, sending death through the cab of a red truck. It rose off the ground and fell hard, metal splintering.

The Ford behind it crashed into the fiery wreckage.

The slavers began slamming on their brakes and plowing into each other to avoid the flaming mess; the dull thud of steel hitting steel echoed. Burning metal trapped survivors. Their screams went unheeded as more grenades bounced onto the road.

Rear trucks and cars exploded in sprays of burning debris, cutting off that route of escape. More fire flared in front of them, still aimed at the gold convertible.

The slavers panicked, realizing they'd been led into a trap. They rear-ended each other, swerving, causing pileups. Most of the two lanes were completely blocked less than a minute into the battle.

Time slowed for the Eagles; this moment would determine the winners.

The gang abandoned their blocked cars, hurrying for the cover of the trees as gunfire echoed.

“Get back in the cars!” Cesar screamed orders into the mike, but groups of his men still fled to either side of the road.

More grenades shot through the wet air as a volley of gunshots rang out. Four cars with men still inside were hit. Some of them were killed, but most were trapped with flames coming their way.

Kyle flashed his light, signaling his men to fall back.

The Eagles retreated behind the ambush site as the first group of the fleeing slavers reached the trees.

Men streamed into the cover of nature... The songs of the cicadas suddenly exploded through the storm as the men hit the first traps.

Blood flew in thick splatters as men lost hands, had their throats slit, their stomachs sliced open. Bloody rain began soaking into the ground as screams of horror filled the battlefield. These sounds grew when the hungry bugs above them began coming down for a drink.

Not realizing that was where the noises of agony were coming from, more Mexicans ran toward death; grenades continued to explode on the street, herding them.

Adrian and Marc had estimated their trap would kill or critically wound half the slavers. They were almost right. Thirty-five men were killed in the mad rush, with another eight hurt so bad they would quickly bleed to death. The fiery mess on the road took more than twenty.

Roughly sixty men had run into the trees. The remaining killers now scattered toward the rest area where Adrian and his men were waiting. The rest were eaten alive. The cicadas were hungry.

A dozen guerrillas made it by the guns on the roof and in the windows, fleeing into the brick bathroom stalls. Another ten men ran behind those tall walls, all scanning vainly for help as the Eagles picked off their fellow men.

At Adrian's nod, the Eagles in the rest stop shoved guns through the holes and let loose.

Caught off guard again, only one Mexican made it out of the stalls alive. He staggered toward the six injured gang members who were hiding under the only trees on that side. They stared longingly at the cars in the street. Many of the engines were still running, the doors open wide. Two of them suddenly darted for these magic carpets and were picked off like ducks at a carnival, triggering a rush of cicadas that swarmed over their exposed flesh like acid.

Cesar was alone. Forced into the parking lot by grenades, he swept Adrian's rig and then the rear of the brick building they were taking shelter in. The

Americans may have surprised him, but that didn't mean he was beaten!

Ignoring the screams of his men, Cesar grabbed a recklessly fleeing form in a sombrero.

The man struggled until Cesar slid his knife to the guerrilla's throat. "I am your leader. You will do as I tell you!"

Gravari gave a shaky nod, recognizing him.

Cesar shoved him toward Adrian's semi. "Get it going! Run them down!"

"But the other—"

"Do it now! Run them down!" the slaver screamed, knife rising. He started to say something else but stopped in shock at an explosion that rippled into the thunder. *What is that?*

Gunshots, explosions, and screams were still coming from the picnic area. Land mines cut men in half and then eighteen Eagles advanced, guns belching justice. This was the most dangerous part, the line moving in to clear out the survivors, and not all of these brave men were with Kyle when he finally reached the pavement.

Inside the rest stop, alarm bells sounded in Angela's mind. "He's coming!"

Adrian heard his rig roar to life and flung open the bullet-splintered doors of the rest stop.

"Neil, get the long crate!" He ran toward the parking area to find his semi reaching the end of the concrete lot.

Neil and Adrian dragged the crate to the middle of the road in front of the abandoned Corvette and pried it open.

Adrian gave fast instructions. "Slide that in there and turn it." Adrian grunted as he struggled to set up the tripod in the wind gusts. "Set it down over here. Good. Now, make a hole!"

Adrian hit the trigger and held on as the Gatling gun roared to life. Trees and mud blew apart as he struggled to aim, sending up swarms of bugs.

Neil rushed to help Adrian hold the powerful gun steady.

The semi hurried toward them, grinding gears as it picked up speed. Huge bullets traced a path of destruction up the road and finally began to plunge into the rig.

The windshield shattered as Adrian tilted the gun up. The driver swerved too late. Blood sprayed across the cracked glass.

Now out of control, the truck continued its run.

Eagles dove out of the way as it smashed into the big gun, hit Cesar's Corvette, and jackknifed. Squealing and scraping, the truck crashed into the piles of burning wreckage and then burst into a huge fireball that raced over the scene in a heat wave.

Adrian's Eagles screamed in triumph...and then in warning.

"Look out!"

Standing just outside the rest stop doors, Angela felt someone behind her and realized she wasn't picking up anything from their thoughts. *Not ours!*

Fear shoved into her brain. She followed her training, drawing as she spun.

“If I cannot have you, bruja, neither will they!”

“Kill him!” Adrian was unable to get a clear shot with Angela in the line of fire.

Bang! Cesar pulled the trigger with an elated sneer of happiness.

“No!”

The bullet slammed into Angela’s chest, knocking her backward as she fired. She saw her slug plunge into his stomach as she hit the mud and realized he would get a second shot.

Bang!

Bang!

Cesar’s face twisted. The pistol fell from his grip. Around them, the cicadas fell silent.

Cynthia lowered her new gun as the evil man sank to his knees, blood streaming from his wounds. She had still been inside, forgotten in the chaos. Her bullet had gotten him from the rear, while Adrian hit him from the front.

The reporter didn’t stop the surprised tears as Cesar’s body fell forward and smacked onto the concrete. *I’m one of them now.*

Chapter Thirty-Six

One Of Them

1

I've gotten her killed.

Adrian's thought flew through the Eagles as well. The sound of running feet echoed like the ominous hoot of an owl.

Angela fought for breath as blood ran down her shirt. She slumped backward, hitting the wet ground. Hands and feet surrounded her; voices raised in panic.

She gasped as the vest was roughly ripped away, and then shouted hoarsely as strong hands touched her shoulder. She clenched her teeth against the next cry as the agony increased.

"It went through!"

"Put pressure on it!"

Angela wanted to help, but the pain was overwhelming. It lashed brutally across her torso in breathtaking waves.

"Other side's pourin', Boss!"

"At least it went through." Adrian grunted at the sight of the ugly injury. "I need heat...lighters! Get the car lighters!"

Angela knew what the heat was for. She groped out blindly for a hand and found one.

“It’s okay, baby. You’re okay.” Jeremy tried to comfort her, horrified.

“Harder! Make it seal against your palm!”

Angela managed to open her mouth without screaming. “Don’t...let them...leave.”

“Now.”

Adrian’s order stopped her from saying more, but they all understood. If she died, her final wish was for Charlie and Marc to be kept in the light of Safe Haven.

Kyle rolled her onto his knee, wrapping her up tight. “Hang on, Eagle.”

Adrian grabbed the first glowing lighter and shoved it against her bloody skin.

Angela’s chilling shriek hurt the Eagles. Knowing how strong she was, how proud, told them she was in agony to allow them to hear it. One of their own was making that awful sound, and there was nothing they could do except listen.

Her gasping screams also drew the next threat.

Before the war, cicadas feasted on the liquid in plants. The males sang, the females clicked their wings, and their weeks of life were spent in a mating frenzy. Harmless for the most part, they were ignored. When the bombs fell, it changed the weather patterns for the entire planet, and the cicadas’ food sources began drying up. The lack of rain in the plains forced millions of these emerging insects to consume what was readily available after the war—blood. In an amazingly short amount of time, the bugs had learned that screams meant food.

Neil saw them first. "Oh, shit. Get down!"

Standing in a tight circle around their injured member, the first horde of cicadas hit the distracted Eagles on the farthest edges and enveloped them in a thick cloud. The insects attacked relentlessly, sharp wings and prickly feet slicing into exposed skin as men batted at them and spun out of line. Above them, another wave circled hungrily.

"Get inside!" Adrian didn't take his eyes from Angela's rigid body as he burnt her.

"Help the others!" Jeremy didn't leave her side either as he directed his team.

Neil remembered the birds in Utah; he hit the air horn on his belt.

The closest bugs immediately recoiled.

"Use the horns!" Neil used his to keep the cicadas away from Adrian. That man didn't look up or stop what he was doing.

When other Eagles blew their air horns, it began to overpower the chaos. The cicadas reluctantly retreated under the noise, but only as far as the treetops and low sky above them.

"We need to go!" Seth dragged a dazed teammate toward the door.

"Not done yet!" Kyle's hand was starting to go numb from holding pressure on the pulsing wound. Closing the hole required shoving the glowing metal over a small part of her skin at a time, until it burnt it closed. The reek of flesh cooking grew stronger.

Angela's teeth sank into Kyle's arm and broke

the skin.

“How long, Boss?” Kyle barely felt the pain of her clamped jaw.

“Three more on this side.”

Angela shuddered under Adrian’s merciless hands.

“I’m out!” Neil tossed the empty air horn away.

“Same here!” Zack called.

Without enough noise to repel them, the insects swarmed back down.

Angela’s fingers dug into Jeremy’s wrist. “The...Caller. Ahh!”

Her body went rigid. Fresh blood pulsed from under Kyle’s hand. He tightened his hold and began to pray, something he hadn’t done since he was a child.

Jeremy cut the Caller from Angela’s belt and thrust it into Neil’s grip.

“Get her bag!” Adrian applied the next lighter.

Neil handled the caller like he’d seen her do during the wolf mission. It lunged to life, trembling eagerly. He swung it hard and high.

“*Buu-buu-buu-buu...*”

Absorbing Angela’s pain, the Caller sent out a low bass of thundering vibrations instead of the high-pitched howl they were expecting.

“*Duu-duu-duu...duu!*”

The deeper noise rolled upward and slammed into the oncoming cicadas like a tornado. It blew the neat formation apart.

The cicadas began to fall, pelting the Eagles.

When they hit the ground, they didn't fly back up, but laid there stunned.

"Pressure!" Adrian reached for the next lighter. He didn't care about the bugs, only the woman dying in Kyle's arms.

The Caller went dark as Neil stopped swinging. He looked down in time to see Adrian shove the glowing lighter against Angela's back.

Her teeth snapped together, body arching. Tears spilled over her cheeks in small rivulets; the knuckles on Jeremy's wrist turned white from her grip. Her breath hissed out in a low groan that wanted to be a scream as Adrian finally pulled back. Neil knew he would never forget this moment. Her pain was his.

Angela's body sagged.

Adrian threw the gory lighter away in fury. He tore another patch from his shirt and helped lean her against his knee this time. He nodded at Kyle, cloth ready. "Lift."

Kyle raised his hand and blanched as fresh blood poured over her chest in crimson ripples.

Adrian shoved the material into the hole and put Kyle's palm over it. "I need more heat!"

Billy dropped Angela's black bag at Adrian's feet and opened it. "Boss."

Adrian saw carefully packaged pouches of blood and allowed himself a small measure of hope. Each small stack was labeled with compatible names of the team.

"Neil has Point!" Adrian passed the duty

without considering it—he needed his mind on Angela. If she slipped, he would break the rules and offer his life for hers. He was already lending his strength, but there was little else he could do right now. His gifts weren't like hers.

Jeremy motioned half a dozen men to guard duty, then went to help Neil, who was grimly gathering more lighters from the cars.

Adrian slapped a blood bag into Kyle's free hand. "Hold it up." He grabbed the needle that was already attached to the line.

The liquid began rushing into Angela seconds later. Kyle squeezed the middle of the bag to move it faster. His harsh breathing mirrored hers as they waited in frustration for the lighters, batting away dying cicadas still dropping from the drizzling sky.

Seth said the obvious, gun still in hand. "We need John."

"Can we roll?" Neil hurried over with the glowing, sizzling lighters in a charred hubcap.

"No." Adrian grabbed one. "Check in."

Angela's whimper faded to unconsciousness.

"All clear."

"Daniel's dead. Frank too," Billy reported in a carefully controlled timbre. Both men had been near him when they started moving in, but not when they reached the street.

Sure that he had been heard, Billy went to cover a gap in their perimeter.

"Bag's almost empty, Boss." Kyle felt her start shivering. "Someone give us cover!"

Zack and a few others hurried to help, stripping their jackets.

Glad that she wasn't feeling anything now, Adrian dumped half of a pack of white powder into the small corner of the chest wound that he'd left unburnt. He quickly shoved the gauze back in and placed Kyle's hand over the wound. "Five minutes for the clotting agent to work."

Kyle shifted against the brick wall. "Slide her over."

They carefully placed her in his arms. The closest Eagles covered them with their jackets.

Adrian dug through the doctor bag and found more labeled bottles. He gave Angela a generous dose of antibiotics and switched to the last pouch of blood with her name on it.

"Boss..." Kyle's fear was heavy.

"Stand your ground," Adrian replied, but it was more to himself than the mobster. She wasn't dead. He wouldn't give up.

Neil and Jeremy finished moving through the wreckage, using suppressors on survivors to keep from triggering the remaining cicadas clicking unhappily above them. When they finished, the two men joined Adrian.

Adrian made a curt motion. *How many?*

It was returned with the same worried expression. *Not enough. Short by fifty.*

Adrian's gut twisted. Along the way, some of the slavers had split off from the main group. Maybe they'd been deserting, but more likely, they had

been sent back to attack Safe Haven.

As Adrian had the thought, headlights glared off the trees, engines swelling.

Catching up, Adrian realized.

Overhead, the storm rumbled once in low warning before drenching them again.

“Get inside!” Adrian helped Kyle stand. “Everyone inside!”

There was a fast run to the door, but it was Kyle, with Angela’s bloody body in his arms, who went through first.

Jeremy grabbed Cynthia’s arm and shoved her inside when she didn’t move.

Adrian lined his top shooters up at the shattered windows again, set to hand out more of what they’d already dealt. “On my mark...”

Headlights flashed dimly against the glare of fires.

Those inside the rest stop held still as the remaining Mexicans came in on foot to examine the scene.

“I want to hear them scream!” Adrian’s order was a low snarl of fury.

The Eagles understood what that would cause; they waited eagerly for his call.

The gang found their dead leader.

“Por aquí!”

“It’s Cesar!”

“Está muerto?”

“Si.”

“Check inside.”

Adrian made the call. “Now!”

The Eagles opened fire. Bullets went through hands, knees, and nuts in a blaring volley.

“Ahh! Ahh!”

Cicadas exploded from the thickets of trees in a hungry frenzy, swarming. Without a way to repel the insects, the wounded slavers were helpless against the sheer numbers.

Listening to it was rough for Adrian’s army...until they looked to the back corner, where Kyle was holding Angela. The complete dejection of their highest Eagle was far worse than the sounds of evil being conquered. They kept firing.

The remaining slavers fled as they realized Adrian was still inside the rest stop. In their panic, most of them overlooked the razor wire and met the same fate as their comrades.

Inside the rest stop, the Eagles were ready for the carnage to end, but there was no denying that they had enjoyed some of it. The first battle had moved so fast that few of them had a clear memory. Survival was often that way, but this second fight was slower and clearer for the Eagles. To them, it was justice for everyone who’d been hurt or killed during the slavers’ rampage through the United States.

“We gotta call Marc.” Seth stayed by the window as the noises outside fell to an occasional cry. The odor of blood, of death, hung heavily in the room.

“I’m sure he’s already rollin’.” Adrian had felt the moment her life became a part of fate’s swinging scales. He was positive Marc had too. The sulfur scents of the witch and the smoky vanilla that was Angie had been replaced with a dry heat so thin it was like a fog in his mind.

Adrian went to her, snapping on his light. “Let’s see.”

Kyle slowly lifted his hand.

No fresh blood appeared.

Both men were eased a bit. They carefully added another layer of gauze, then only taped it over three corners of the wound. The open part would allow her body pressure to adjust and keep her breathing even. John could finish it later when she was stable.

“Let’s make a bed. The cushions from benches, changing stations in the bathroom and anything else soft but stiff.”

Eagles rushed to help, relieved to have something to do other than watch Angela die. The downside was how fast it happened. Five minutes of peaceful working saw Angela moved into the bed; the waiting resumed.

Kyle joined his team, covered in Angela’s blood. None of them spoke.

Adrian swept what remained of his confident army. They were battered and bleeding, with curt gestures and unsatisfied demeanors that demanded he fix it. Adrian did the best he could with short words. “She’s doing her duty, even now. Do yours.”

Adrian’s confidence never faltered. It flipped them back into his soldiers. They got to work and tried not to stare at the woman lying deathly still behind them.

Outside, the bugs fed unopposed.

3

“We can’t stay here. It’ll draw predators.” Neil was eager to be gone.

“We’re not movin’ her.” Kyle wasn’t willing to take the risk.

Neil shrugged. “We’ll be fighting Nature next.”

Kyle scanned the men. “Ammo count?”

Jeremy had those numbers. He’d been waiting for someone to want them. “We only went through about half of what we brought.”

“We’re staying.” Kyle pointed at Zack. “Collect and load our fallen men. Take a crew.”

Kyle gestured four Eagles to sentry duty and sent two more for sniper watch.

While they were outside, the Eagles swept the newest battle scene for wounded or hiding slavers and found none. The cicadas had done an excellent job.

Zack took a moment to look around, a bit

stunned by the devastation. Cars, trees, and the ground were splattered in dark red—even the puddles appeared to be filled with blood instead of rain. Moving with the wind, smoke rolled along the battlefield like thick fog, covering and then uncovering the bodies to reveal gruesome details. It was amazing—in both good and bad ways—that they had become so lethal under Adrian’s guidance.

Zack was full of confusion and anger as he helped put their fallen men in body bags and then load them into the rear of one of their trucks. *I could be the one about to go six feet under.* How had it come to this? Why were these men dead?

Inside the rest stop, more than a few Eagles were silently asking the same thing. It was hard to think about all the hell the slavers had caused in comparison to the total devastation Adrian’s army had wreaked in only a few hours.

“It’ll be days before our camp gets word. Will they hold?” Kyle tried to wipe another layer of blood from his hands.

Chain smoking by the open, bullet-ridden door, Adrian shrugged. “They’ll have to. We’re not finished.”

“How long will it take the remaining slavers in his camp to figure out that he isn’t coming back?” Jeremy was worried about Samantha. “How long before they attack Safe Haven without him?”

“Three, four days at the most.” Adrian ground out his smoke under his boot. “Marc and Kenn have plans to delay it and buy us time.”

Neil had been studying the map. He spoke up as the tension grew. “There’s a warehouse, a country club, and a manufacturing plant—all within a mile of here.”

“The country club.” Adrian looked to the back of the room. He hated to leave her alone, though she was unconscious. He knew what that darkness was like. “Dope it out. And someone cover those windows. It’ll get cold in here without the glass.”

Streaked in blood that wasn’t his, Allan stared at Angela. *She became my friend...* “Will she still want to be an Eagle?”

The muttered question got immediate attention.

“It’s not up to her!” Jeremy gestured harshly. “One gunshot is enough!”

With nothing to do but wait and watch Angela’s shallow breathing, most of the Eagles wore expressions that said it had been wrong of Adrian to let her join.

“She won’t quit.” Adrian answered the disapproval directly this time. “We will have female Eagles, and sometimes, they’ll get hurt... Or die. It’s how things work in this new world.”

Leaning against a wall nearby, Cynthia said what all the Eagles were thinking. “You’re a cold, hard son of a bitch, Adrian Mitchel.”

The reporter was covered in shock and fallout. She now looked like one of them as well.

“You have no idea.” Adrian opened the door wider and did a fast sweep. Dusty but undamaged when they’d arrived, the rest stop was now the scene

of a high budget action film. Death and absolution coated the smoking set. "I brought her in because she belongs here."

"And if she dies?"

Allan's curt question made all the Eagles wince.

Adrian sighed, voice rough. "Then we'll honor her by remembering she gave her life for freedom."

"Mine...to give," Angela muttered weakly, drawing their attention. Adrian's need had brought her around. *Where is Marc?* "Tell them...Cyn." Angela choked it out, torso burning. She let the darkness reclaim her, the pain too much to fight. If Marc wasn't here, she didn't want to be either.

All eyes, except Adrian's, went to the reporter. He was busy listening for the witch, hoping to hear those empty minefields tell him that Angela would live. He wasn't worried about Cynthia's coming words, despite this being a real chance for her to bring it all down. He cared only for the witch's comfort; the continued silence was deafening.

Cynthia raised her head, splattered in red drops that were tacky on her skin and clothes. "Did you think he was *bluffing* when he said your life for his sheep?"

Her contemptuous words raked them. None of the men were prepared for the depth of her scorn.

"Are you all that blind?" Cynthia looked toward Angela's bloody body, and then down at the filthy gun she would never part with now. "It's too late to go back now...for all of us."

There was a stunned silence after those words,

one where every Eagle there realized the days of fighting with Cynthia were over.

Cynthia glanced up at the man she would have destroyed if given enough time. Would Adrian reward her awful sacrifice?

Still in the doorway, tempting fate, Adrian's blue eyes glowed only for her, for what she'd done. "You have one request."

Cynthia looked back down at the murder weapon she had grabbed without a thought as they ran for cover from the rain and bugs. Cesar's blood was flecked across the muddy barrel. "I want to do this again. I want to be her XO."

Adrian ignored the disbelieving glares and snorts from his men. "You'll have to work for it. Samantha also wants that place."

Neil opened his mouth but didn't follow through with the protest. He'd known, but he hadn't really faced what it meant. Now, he had to. Samantha could be the next female bleeding out in some shitty little town for Adrian's dream.

Cynthia's face filled with determination. "I'll earn it."

"Yes, you will. Welcome to my army, Cynthia." Adrian glanced at Jeremy, who was staring in distress. "Take care of her until we get back? I'll assign someone else then."

Jeremy forced himself to give a nod. "Whatever you think is best." Jeremy was stunned. He hadn't ever thought Cynthia would become a convert, let alone that she would be the hero of the day on this

run.

“She’s shivering.” Kyle drew attention back to the other female. “Do we have a heat source?”

Neil shook his head regretfully. “Didn’t think we’d need it.”

Adrian grunted. “We’ll use body heat.”

“You’re beat, Boss.” Neil knew Adrian hadn’t slept at all the night before they’d left camp. “Take the first shift. Kyle can relieve you.”

Adrian’s mind flashed to the waiting nightmares, and then to the man speeding through the apocalyptic darkness to get here. “I’m good. Kyle first, you next.”

Kyle stored the change. He and Neil had both seen and heard enough over the last month to know that Adrian wanted to be the one holding Angela, no matter the reason. The fact that he hadn’t taken the opportunity said Marc wouldn’t be okay with it.

With the excessive speed and reckless driving that they assumed he would use, Marc should arrive in about five hours. Adrian had timed it so his best friend would be the one doing heat duty when he arrived. That meant Marc had also discovered Adrian’s other secret.

It was something they hadn’t discussed, but Kyle and Neil knew it was coming. Somewhere down the road, Adrian might become unworthy. They could only be loyal to him if he remained honorable. The instant Adrian crossed that line, he would lose it all. If Angela lived, his margin for error in the future, especially where she was

concerned, would be slim. If she died, that would put their hardass leader into the red now.

Kyle ignored everyone watching him lie down between Angela and the wall. He tucked her against his chest, unable to stop a grim smile as he saw her left hand tighten around her secondary gun.

Kyle adjusted them until she was fully covered and breathing evenly, then laid his head by hers. "Easy, rookie. I've got you."

As if she heard, Angela's hand slid from the gun.

Kyle took her cold fingers into his warm grip and closed his eyes. When shit hit the fan, he was the one to call, but he also had a soft side most of Safe Haven would have been surprised to discover. Holding Angela so Adrian could burn her was a torment, a bond. Kyle didn't think he would ever be free of it.

Jeremy slid down next to Cynthia, seeing she still had the gun in her hand. He gently wrapped his jacket around her shoulders, but he didn't tell her to put the weapon away. Though only a rookie, she was now an Eagle, with her own choices to make.

"Thanks." The smell of his jacket was thick with the battle, but the heat was welcome. Cynthia wasn't sure she would ever be warm again.

"Sure." Jeremy waited, wondering if she wanted to talk, but she leaned her head against the brick wall.

After a minute, Jeremy did the same, glad he didn't have to deal with it yet. He wasn't sure how

he felt about her joining or even what she'd done, beyond being grateful. Cynthia was an Eagle now...one of them. That dangerous fact would require some adjustment.

Still a bit dazed and not totally convinced that he or any of them had actually survived, Jeremy let darkness take him away.

Sleep, however, came cruelly. It snatched rest and provided moments of heart wrenching terror that snapped men awake with fearful, desperate gasps.

It was the only noise heard for hours.

4

The sound of a snarling engine being pushed to the limit jerked Eagles into a tense, groggy alertness. They exchanged worried glances as they waited in the rest stop, but no one drew a weapon. That was a Safe Haven setup roaring through the cleared road behind them. Marc had made the five-hour trip in a little over three.

Adrian himself went to open the door.

Walking through the smoldering wreckage in front of the rest stop, Marc's mind spun furiously. The plan had worked. Perfectly, it appeared. The carnage was indescribable, but Angela had been hurt. *What didn't I account for?*

Marc's tortured gaze landed on the tacky pool

of blood congealing near the main door. He knew who it belonged to. Fear shoved against his wall of control.

Marc bent down and retrieved Angela's Python, mind screaming for him to brace. There was only one way you took a gun from Angie's fingers...

Please let her live. Please. I'll give anything. I'll get on board with the dream or assassinate him. Whatever you want, just please, let her live!

There was no answer.

Marc didn't look at Adrian as he approached the door, not sure his control was strong enough to hold. He was glad when the leader got out of his way. There was no one on the planet he wanted dead more than Adrian. "John's in the truck, armed."

Swallowing the icy chill of being treated as if he was a rookie, Adrian obeyed Marc's order and went outside to get the doctor.

Kyle motioned Seth after the humbled leader, glad there hadn't been a fight. None of them were sure how Marc would react, though Neil had said there wouldn't be a problem until word came on Angela. If she lived, Neil thought the two men would sort it out. If she died, so would one of them, though it wasn't a lock on who that would be.

Marc wasn't aware of the concerned mutters, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway. The sight of Angela lying there, still and bloody, had him shoring up the sudden cracks in his mental defenses.

When he could speak, Marc asked the only thing that mattered right now. "How bad?"

Neil didn't lie. "Too soon to tell."

Marc staggered, reaching out for the wall to keep from falling. *Angie!*

Silence.

He'd called for her mentally all the way here and received the same. It had been terrifying then, but here and now, looking at her still form, it was enough to flip him into the Marine. A single provocation would result in death.

Footsteps echoed.

Marc locked down on all of it and moved back, arms crossing over his chest.

"I need more light!" John rushed to Angela.

The Eagles hurried to help.

John lifted the bandage. "Did it go through?"

"Yes." Neil's voice held horror. "We cauterized."

John frowned at the ugly wound, feeling it in places to determine other issues. "She woke at all?"

Kyle's grim expression darkened. "Not for hours now."

Marc's profile became menacing when John peeled the bandage off all the way and dropped it on the dusty floor.

"There wasn't time for more."

Marc gave Kyle a curt grunt. He'd assumed that as soon as he saw the awful lengths that they'd gone to in order to stop the bleeding. It had been life or death... Still was.

A thick silence hung while John worked.

Everyone was glad Angela didn't come to when

he had Neil and Kyle roll her onto her side.

Marc didn't glance away once, wall rattling. The back had more burns than the front.

"I don't feel any fragments... If her fingers work, we'll know about nerve damage..." John carefully probed the wound. He didn't tell them he was noticing pockets under her charred skin, implying she was still losing blood at a slow rate. The bullet had probably nicked an artery, but she wasn't stable enough to undergo surgery. It would have to wait.

Cynthia asked the question that the rest of them were afraid to. "Will she live?"

"Ask me again in 24-hours."

Even Adrian recoiled this time.

Marc sensed the self-loathing as Adrian observed what he'd failed to prevent, but it didn't temper his hatred. Nothing ever would.

"How long before we can move her?" Neil didn't want to, but they needed to get rolling before scavengers traced the smoke.

"Another day would be best. Half that if it's not safe here, but slow travel."

"You'll stay with her?" Adrian looked at John, avoiding Marc's stiff form.

"Of course." John replaced her bandage and covered her back up. Until she was stronger, there was little he could do but exactly what these tortured men had already been doing—wait and hope. Anne had wanted to come too, but John had refused and left her standing with a scowl. Safe Haven was well

protected. The doctor wasn't letting her leave that light. These men may have to accept their heart being torn up, shot at...*killed*, but not him. Because of her age, Anne couldn't be in Adrian's army.

"Don't you think...she would be safer...as an Eagle?"

Angela's tightly controlled voice said she'd been awake for his doctoring.

"I'll never allow that!" John's timbre, in contrast, was a furious denial.

Marc went to Angela's side, not caring about the conversation—only that she was part of it.

Angela only had the concentration for one second at a time. She felt someone take her hand, but she didn't know who it was. "Already...happening."

"What!" John's face was a mask of thunder. He glared at Adrian. "You sneaky bastard!"

"It was her idea." Cynthia was full of the new, unarguable need to protect and defend. "Anne came to his tent while I was...spying."

Cynthia's admission earned instant forgiveness with the Eagles, even those who hadn't known of her vendetta. Honesty was everything.

John turned toward Adrian, empty hand clenching into a fist. "What did my wife say?"

"She told me you're dying of cancer and she'll leave unless Angela tries to help you." Adrian brutally spilled the secret John had tried to keep from everyone. "She said she'd just as soon rot alone somewhere than keep serving the people who

let you die.”

John was speechless.

Adrian tiredly finished the ugly intervention. “She also said she understood it wasn’t likely to save you; she wants to be an Eagle so she can watch your six as you fade. So long as we try, she’ll take your place.” Adrian held a hand up. “Her words, *not* mine.”

“She had...to hide it from you.”

The doctor stifled a wounded sob at Angela’s faint croak.

The weakness in Angela’s voice brought Marc to his knees at her bedside. He’d been on battlefields too much to ever mistake this feeling. Death was lurking.

“Because I lied when we came, she couldn’t ask.” John was trapped inside his own hell for this moment. “You would have told Adrian.”

“She has a...job to do.” Angela’s nails dug furrows into someone’s wrist as surges of agony twisted through her shoulder. “Let her.”

Angela’s body tensed as the pain grew deeper. Marc snapped his head around to glare at John, telling him that was enough.

John’s gaze went over the crusted, bloody outlines of Kyle’s fingerprints on Angela’s chest. He closed his mouth.

Angela was barely aware of a sharp prick as John set up a fresh IV tap and give her a light dose of relief. Angela had read the part in *Twilight* and thought she’d understood, thought she’d *felt* it, but

this fire was a level of hell that she'd never been to. Even childbirth, with its dull aches and ripping pains, couldn't compete with the fire.

Where I come from, where I go, it's always flaming like this. The witch stayed in the back of her mind, afraid to make things worse by coming forward.

Still by the door, Adrian's heart thumped as he picked up her presence.

I thought you had gone—fled to a new host, Angela answered tiredly. In her mind, it took less effort to communicate, but it still drained her to think around the pain.

We share power. If I had stayed, I would have come forward and healed you. These men would not have been able to hold a secret so large.

Even in her agony, Angela was astounded. Adrian had converted the witch! Sexually, she'd been prepared for—spirits were lusty creatures because they could no longer feel through their own flesh—but to have the witch inside willing to sacrifice her for the dream was almost too much to accept. *Why come now? Am I in the clear?*

Silence.

I hate it when you do that, Angela grumbled, close to crying again as the pain increased.

She heard a man close to her moan in distress, but she couldn't even open her eyes. She'd never felt pain like this.

I needed to check the healer's mind...

You aren't sure, Angela realized in fear.

I dread ever having to face the choice, the witch confessed miserably, but is that not how you would have it?

Angela barely heard that, tears now oozing from under closed lids. *This pain!*

“Do something for her!”

John refused Marc’s glare. “She’s not strong enough for anything more.”

Marc turned to glower at Adrian. “Help her.”

Adrian also shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Marc knew Adrian was gifted in more ways than he’d let his men see.

He knows all my secrets now. Adrian didn’t betray that surprise. “It’s limited by gender.”

Thick blackness swam around the edges, muting the conversation while waiting for Angela to surrender, but she held on grimly. These might be her last moments. She wanted every second of them. *I heard Marc. He’s here. I want to be here too.*

“So, there’s nothing we can do?”

It was a realization that the other men there had already come to accept and loathe.

Adrian didn’t answer Marc’s demand.

The witch reached out to Adrian. *Will you give them up? Trade the herd for her?*

Can’t I have both?

Never. Not without a small measure of pity, the witch withdrew to her fiery den instead of making him feel worse. There were always prices to be paid. Having descendants together was wonderful in the uses, but it was also heavy in the weight. Adrian

would carry as much of her discomfort as he was able to ease, but in time, he would need the same favor. Heartbreak was not to be lightly dismissed. It was one of the most dangerous things that humans gave to each other.

Sure she wouldn't be awake much longer, Angela took advantage of the respite to fulfill a promise that she'd made to herself while Adrian burned her.

Thank you for choosing us to stop the slavers. It was our honor to serve as YOUR hand of justice.

Still connected, Adrian flinched as if stung. He had turned her into a killer, and she was thanking God for it. *Is there a more perfect woman anywhere? I don't think so.*

At her side, Marc covered her tenderly with his jacket.

“Mmm...”

Time stuttered, then snapped in again, thrusting Adrian back into the role he feared he was growing weary of. Feeling things start to come together gave him little comfort this time. Carrying so much guilt was staggering.

Marc was glad to see Angela breathing easier than when he'd arrived and allowed himself to hope for the first time since being swarmed by a blast of dry heat. Most people would have ignored the moment, but Marc knew that sensation well. He'd left camp ten minutes later.

Now, his inner Marine began estimating her chances of survival. John's words had been far from

reassuring but learning of the doctor's illness almost was. John would do anything he could to save Angela, so that he could save himself. There was no higher motivation.

Turning to face the room, Marc slid down and leaned his head against Angela's arm. Exhausted, he fell into a light doze broken by fifteen-minute checks of her and the room.

Chapter Thirty-Seven
Rockin' Rough
Ellsworth Country Club
May 13th

1

Adrian motioned Neil to switch shifts. It had been two hours since Marc arrived.

Marc realized he wasn't as furious now. Adrian had saved her life. There was no way any of his Eagles had been around enough to think of car lighters.

Adrian felt the mood shift; he immediately took advantage of it. "I'm sorry."

Marc found he actually held a bit of sympathy. Hadn't he made his own grave error in Versailles? He'd been the one to get this all rolling by leaving her alone, forcing her to kill.

Marc let civil words out. "Hearing her screams will give a man nightmares for the rest of his life."

"Yes."

Adrian's expression said sleeping was something he wouldn't do until forced to. Allowing females into his army might have been the smartest thing their leader had ever done...or the worst choice he'd ever made. From here, it was impossible to know.

As Marc slid carefully into Neil's warm spot, Adrian revealed his inner turmoil. "What would she do now...if I pulled it all?"

Other than people turning their way, there was complete silence at Adrian's show of doubt. It was unexpected, especially after his words to them before Marc had arrived.

Marc didn't want to answer.

Again, it was Cynthia who blurted the truth. "She'd die." Her voice lowered to a mutter as the males in the room glared. "Along with Safe Haven...and our future."

There it was; Cynthia had declared her loyalty to the dream.

Marc closed his eyes in distressed resignation. "You shouldn't do that. She gets cranky when you take away something she needs."

Heart crying behind his wall, Marc tucked Angela against his warm body and tried to rest until it was time to leave.

2

Twelve hours after Marc arrived, the convoy rolled out of the rest stop with Angela's ragged breathing filling the truck. Cushioned by jackets and blankets, she clutched Marc's shirt with her good hand and soaked them both with her tears.

It didn't take long for John to do what the other men had wanted all along. He sedated her, slipping the needle into her arm before she could protest

again.

The wreckage around the site wasn't smoking anymore, only stinking and smoldering resentfully. It was a relief to leave it in the mirrors.

The pristine grounds of the country club were a welcome change of scenery but despite their careful movements, Angela's wound was bleeding by the time they got her settled into a front room of the furnished club.

John added a few quick stitches while she was unconscious. When he was satisfied, he took the chair on her left.

Marc settled into the one on her right.

Adrian and his Eagles gathered on the long, white porch to make plans.

"Midnight tomorrow, the main mission team rolls out. Myself, Seth and Jeff will take John back to Safe Haven. Everyone else stays with Angela. When the gunfire with the slaver camp starts, we'll lead the herd here. Get us set up to stay a week but make a plan in case we can't."

Realizing Safe Haven would come to her, the men fell into the details with lighter hearts. Angela had looked rougher when Marc carried her inside. Another road trip might kill her.

As the others moved off to take care of things, Kyle stayed on Adrian's right, waiting for the details their leader usually wouldn't give to anyone else.

Instead, Adrian asked a question that both men

had already answered for themselves.

“Would you change anything?”

Kyle wanted to say yes but couldn't. “No. They're dead, she's not.”

“She feels the same.”

“I know.”

“But?”

Kyle had been thinking about his purpose in this new world, and he revealed his sins in a low mutter of confusion. “Before the war, I had killed five men...and one talkative prostitute.”

Adrian waited, finally getting the reason for almost not welcoming Kyle into his Safe Haven. His first instinct had said that Kyle was indeed the killer-for-hire he appeared to be, but a second voice had promised the Italian would only kill for him now. That had been enough to sway Adrian. It was a role that he'd desperately needed to fill.

“I've racked up near a hundred kills as an Eagle, and that's only the ones I've done, not those I've ordered. It also doesn't include tonight.” Kyle was flooding with something he knew they didn't need right now but couldn't help. “I'm damned.”

“We all are.” Adrian was sympathetic, but his expression said Kyle had known what he'd signed up for after the very first mercy run.

Kyle wanted absolution, something Adrian couldn't give. He stopped himself from saying anything else. Usually, talking to their leader was a comfort. This time, it had drawn anger.

Flashes of holding Angela while Adrian burned

her slapped at Kyle. He reluctantly went to her room.

Marc and John snapped up when he opened the door.

“What?”

“Is there a problem?”

“We’re 5-by.” Kyle’s gaze went to Angela, who was crying again from under closed lashes. “What about her?”

“The same.” John’s tense body language revealed his worry.

“Not...dead yet,” Angela denied weakly.

You sound like it could happen any minute, honey.

As if to reinforce Kyle’s thought, Angela turned her head and threw up.

Kyle eased out of the room as John and Marc rushed to help, closing the door with a shaking hand. This time, he went to the mission team and prepared to do his duty. Damned or not, someone had to pay for this awful weight. A few of the Eagles and probably most of the camp would blame Adrian, but not Kyle. He was clear on who was responsible, and he was glad to have another target. Maybe after this next run, the sense of doom might lift from his shoulders.

3

“Marc?”

Marc came to her side with a bottle of water, not

acknowledging Zack as the tightlipped man took a shift keeping her warm. The trucker had insisted on pulling his weight and after her not moving for seven hours, Marc had been ready for a break.

“Hi, honey!” Marc’s cheerful greeting didn’t match his worried blue eyes. “How ya doin’?”

Under the heavy daze of pain, Angela found him slowly. “Better now...stronger.”

The men around the door exchanged silent concern as Marc knelt down by the makeshift bed to help her get a drink.

“What...” Angela tried to form sentences through the thick fog in her head. “How long...?”

“It’s dusk, a day after.” Marc wiped away some of the blood on her chin by using the small drops of water she spilled.

Her profile flooded with despair, physical and mental, as memories and pain returned.

Now was the only time she might change the path she’d chosen, but Marc already knew. “Say it.”

“I don’t regret...anything.”

Marc leaned down to press a light kiss to her hot forehead. “Then hurry up and get better, so you can do it all again.”

Angela’s lashes closed. “Love you, Marc.”

Marc drew air into shrunken lungs. “Love you too, Baby-cakes.”

She chortled in surprise and then cramped up in agony.

“Let her rest!” Behind her, Zack’s glare was unexpected. “And give her something for the pain!”

“She’s got a bit to go.” John had been puffing restlessly on his empty pipe for hours, worrying and stewing. “She needs to eat.”

Zack noted the beads of sweat popping out on Angela’s pale skin. “No way. She’s rockin’ rough.”

John got up to give her a fresh dose of the calmative.

Angela looked at Zack in gratitude as her stomach eased. It should have felt odd, or maybe even dangerous, to be lying in the trucker’s warm arms, but there was an intense sense of being protected. Kenn had another surprise coming.

“Can you eat now?” Zack couldn’t handle her gratitude.

“Maybe.” Angela closed her heavy lids.

Surprising those listening, Zack kept the conversation going. “We have a wide variety for the patient to pick from—all canned, though.”

“Applesauce.” John wished he had her back in camp with all his equipment.

“Some...variety.”

Her muttered joke eased the tension a bit.

Angela huddled against Zack’s warmth, feeling Marc’s stare, his thoughts.

“One of them...will tell you,” she forced out, blurry vision resting on her gun in his backup holster. *I can’t use it now.* That hurt as much as the gaping hole in her shoulder.

“I’ll wait.” Marc wondered exactly what was upsetting her. It wasn’t the battle they’d left behind. He wasn’t sensing remorse.

“Tell him what?” Zack was confused.

“He wants to see what went down, what went *wrong*.” Standing in the doorway, Adrian gestured bitterly toward the rest stop. “With that aftermath, wouldn’t you?”

“You wanna examine it? Ask one of us!” Zack was angry for reasons he refused to name. He grabbed Marc’s wrist with his free hand. “Don’t make *her* relive it!”

Marc froze at the ugly flashes. He understood Zack could only do it because he was touching Angela, but it was a shock to realize the trucker also *knew* that he could.

“Go easy...” Angela moaned.

The angry man didn’t spare Marc at all as he went through every scream, every gush of blood he’d seen. It went on for a long time.

Marc’s expression darkened steadily.

When Zack finally let go, tension crackled.

Angela shuddered.

Zack realized she had relived it anyway, through him. He snapped his mouth shut.

“I’m sorry...it was so awful for you.” Angela gasped, shoulder and back alive with torment as the painkillers dissipated.

Zack snorted violently in protest, jarring her.

She groaned.

“Damn.” Now guilty of what he had punished Marc for, Zack let his head drop to his arm—gently. “Someone get the damn applesauce already.”

Over their heads, Adrian met John’s eye.

“Soon?”

The doctor nodded. “In a few hours. I’ll call you.”

Adrian moved away, not looking forward to the wait. Angela’s pain and suffering wasn’t over yet.

4

Angela shivered despite the baking heat of the two men holding her. The fever had come shortly after she’d thrown up and it was resisting John’s attempts to get it under control. By midnight, it had been soaring and he’d chosen to operate. He’d been waiting for her to get stronger but that wasn’t going to happen.

“Hold her still.”

Grips tightened.

Angela groaned, biting down to stifle the scream.

Kyle barely noticed, meeting Marc’s terrified eyes. The look said it wouldn’t be much longer.

Marc tightened his mental grip.

“Almost there...” John grunted, tensing his wrist against the pressure; the needle slid through. One firm tug and the ravaged artery was closed. “Squeeze the bag!” John snapped at Neil.

The doctor quickly removed the packing sponges he’d inserted while repairing the nick. He worked steadily, taking the ready sutures from Adrian’s hand.

John slid the last of the gauze out and gave a

harsh grunt. “Bingo.”

“Good, right?” Angela croaked out, needing the distraction.

Billy smiled down at her. “Yes, you are 5-by.”
Blood sprayed them and the wall.

“Um... Shit!” Neil froze.

“Pack it off!” John grabbed the hemostats again.

“What’s wrong?!” Marc was holding her still.

“Blew a stitch, that’s all.” John quickly replaced it. He added an extra layer of thread, feeling the silent fear under every labored breath Angela took.

“Okay. Get ready.”

Neil grabbed another wad of gauze and squeezed the bag faster. Zack, who John had known was the same blood type, was hooked up to her.

The stitch held this time. John sprinkled on another layer of the battlefield clotting agent Adrian had used. “Roll now, slowly, toward the wall...there. Hold it.” John nodded at Marc, who delivered a shot of calmatev, and a gentle swipe of the sweat from her brow.

“Halfway there...” John sliced into the infected scabs on her back.

Angela screamed, long and hard.

Adrian helped Marc hold her still, not meeting the eyes of any of the furious males helping with her surgery.

Adrian wiped Angela's blood from his hands, sweeping the early morning fog. There were no obvious signs, but Kyle wasn't wrong. There was a clear sense of eyes on them.

"Should we sneak out and take care of it?"

Adrian shook his head, thoughts still on the surgery. *Will it be enough?* "They'll come to us. Revenge is best served cold, but few have the patience to wait for it."

Kyle scowled. "More slavers?"

"Probably. We look like an easy target, I'd guess, to any of them who survived. Keep the men calm. Our enemy likes to strike when the lights go out. We've got time to kill."

Kyle waved Neil over as Adrian moved toward the small room he'd chosen. He was aware of Cynthia trailing him, but he didn't stop to talk. Adrian was hoping for a few hours of quiet contemplation before all hell broke loose again.

Adrian left the door open and began removing his shirt. He hadn't had a clean one on in days. The reek coming from this garment said it would burn instead of being washed like he did with most of his clothing.

"I want...*need* something else from you." Cynthia stood stiffly in the doorway, dark eyes wide. "Can I come in?"

He nodded, considering the answer before she asked the question. He noted that she only stepped a foot inside the room—still respecting the old boundaries—but closed the door.

Cynthia didn't speak. Staring at his bare chest, she wasn't sure that she could.

Adrian didn't need to hear the words. Her cheeks were flushed, swollen body begging for a man's knowing touch and after what she'd done, one of his Eagles wouldn't satisfy that itch.

"I'm not sure that I can." Adrian gave a regretful sigh, body already responding. Another layer of guilt sank onto his shoulders—that he would enjoy this moment while Angela fought for her life nearby was unconscionable.

Sensing the opposite of his answer, Cynthia inched into the dimly lit room. She knew how it worked after a bloody battle, how the Eagles sought out their relief sources upon returning to camp. "You'll try?"

"Of course, Ms. Quest." Adrian watched her carefully search for exits, still shocked that she had been the one to save Angela. "I *aim* to please."

Instead of a flinch at the reminder of her role in Cesar's death, Cynthia smiled in a soft, understanding way that Adrian hadn't thought her capable of.

"Just do the best you can. I know I'm not her."

Telling him that she knew of his growing obsession with Angela. She was a willing substitute.

Positive that's exactly who she would become in his mind, Adrian motioned her toward his bedroll. "You'll be satisfied when I'm finished."

Cynthia moaned eagerly, lust riding her. "Yes, that's what I *need*."

Adrian waited for the reporter to kneel on his bedroll, dimming the other emotions as need—raw and thick—coursed through his hard flesh. When she started removing her shirt, revealing sun-kissed skin flecked in blood, Adrian let the grateful man inside free. At this moment, he needed a release and an escape. Cynthia needed to be rewarded, brought into the light. It would be a few hours well spent.

Kyle and Neil exchanged knowing glances when Cynthia didn't come back out, but neither of them begrudged the personal moment. Cynthia had ended things publicly with Jeremy before he started his sniper shift, and it definitely hadn't been Adrian's idea. He barely tolerated the reporter.

As they moved outside to fill the perimeter gaps, the two senior men also understood there wasn't anything Adrian would deny Cynthia now—even the truth of who he'd been if she asked for it. Adrian's slug to the temple had brought Cesar down, but it had been the last shot fired. Without Cynthia's brutal bullet to the back to throw off his aim, Cesar's second shot would have hit Angela in the forehead. It had gone high by an inch and trimmed Adrian's shoulder. Cesar might have gotten lucky there and killed them both. Cynthia was about to be a camp favorite.

The landscape around the country club was alive with swirling movement as a fog bank rolled in. Neil scanned it. "We're good?"

"Plan's solid." Kyle shrugged. "We just keep waiting."

Neil frowned. "I want a better vantage point."

Kyle watched Neil pull his jacket closer against the chill and pick a tree. The trooper scaled it as if he'd been doing that sort of thing all his life. They'd changed a number of times in the last six months. First, as a result of the war, and then again from joining Adrian's army, but also when Angela had come. Now, they would adapt once more.

6

"She'll live."

Noise filled the chilly lounge at John's call from the door, pulling Angela from a sedative induced sleep. She opened her eyes to find Marc staring back. Few things had ever looked as good to her.

"They just learned the news." Marc smiled.

Angela heard the happy sounds from a distance, heavily medicated. "Shoulda asked me."

Hard to talk to the dead. Marc swallowed the thought, closing the dusty, faded blinds against a late afternoon glare. "We'll remember that."

Ready to face another fear, Angela bit her lip and slowly reached over to grasp her other hand.

Afraid of what she'd find, Marc realized in horror. *She thought it was gone!*

"The infection started...and I still can't feel it." She was trying unsuccessfully to prevent relieved tears. "I didn't know what I'd do."

Marc dropped his forehead to hers, unable to speak. How many times had he heard that during his

years as a government killing machine? It never got easier, but to hear it from the woman he loved! Marc plugged his wounds as best he could.

Angela rubbed at her cold fingers restlessly. There wasn't even pressure when she squeezed. Without her gun, she wasn't an Eagle.

Maybe that's why Adrian didn't say a single word to me during the surgery, and why he hasn't been in or taken a shift as heater. He doesn't want to tell me that I've destroyed part of his dream by being too hurt to continue.

"I won't quit." Angela clenched her fingers against her torn, filthy sleeve. "He'll have to take my jacket. I won't offer it."

Her strength drew respect from Marc. Her next words allowed him to see how far ahead she had already planned her future as an Eagle.

"I made level one with the left two weeks ago. I might be okay with that... He might let me stay."

Marc smoothed her hair down, refusing to ask if she had known she would be injured. "I think so, too."

He'd had hours to think about Adrian's words "*It's limited by gender.*" and he'd finally caught the tone. Adrian might not be able to bring her back from the edge of death, but he could have done something for her. Marc would bet on it.

Under the full edge of the painkillers, Angela carefully lifted her good hand and guided Marc's mouth down to hers.

Ever so gently, Marc kissed her... His rage

faded another notch.

The drugs pulled. Angela dozed with the taste of Marc to guide the way.

7

Marc stepped out into the chilly hall and saw Cynthia leaving the lounge.

Behind her, Adrian lifted a gentle hand that curled into her wild hair and tugged her back for a soft kiss and lingering hug. It was done openly, reinforcing her new acceptance.

Marc gave Adrian a nod of approval as the leader left Cynthia to head outside for guard duty. Adrian knew how to reward his people, there was no doubt there, and the reporter certainly deserved whatever reward she'd asked for.

Marc studied Cynthia, wondering if she felt as satisfied as she looked. When she moved closer, he noted the tiny smile on her swollen lips, the careful tread that spoke of a deep, close sexual experience. Yes, Adrian had served her well. *Good*. Marc sent a wave of pleasure and light with his own grateful smile. "I'm in your debt."

Cynthia flushed under his approval, body waking right back up. She was attracted to Adrian, but Marc still sent her heart into heavy thuds. Cynthia pushed it down. If she longed for the same from Marc—and *I do!*—he would try to give it, but Cynthia would never endanger her new life that way. Getting between him and Angela, in any

manner, was forbidden.

“She would have done it for me.” Cynthia was unable to help wondering if Marc’s thick arms would have held her so closely, so perfectly.

“You’ve honored her. She’ll return the favor.”

Cynthia shifted to a more comfortable position. A hard floor was something her feet rarely ever dealt with now, thanks to the war. Adrian had said the same thing to her. She would never forget the sound of his voice in her head. *Even Marc can’t match Adrian’s magic.*

Marc’s troubled gaze went to the door where Angela was being kept warm by Billy. It wasn’t hard to share these hours with the men that he couldn’t help but partially hate. Her agony was a torment they deserved to experience too.

Cynthia pulled Adrian’s shirt closer around her shoulders, flushing at the smells of their passion. “If I had to, I’d do it again, only I’d be faster.”

Her pitch lowered to an aching familiar tone of determination.

“Next time, I *will* be faster.”

Marc couldn’t swallow his bitterness. “He sure found some strong women to play these roles.”

Cynthia’s chin went up. “To fight for his dreams!” The reporter stepped around him, not letting Marc’s churning emotions rub off. She went to where she had stuffed her bedroll between two long tables. She was one of them now, and that was enough. Her need to see Adrian hanged had vanished the instant she saved Angela. Unlike the

muttering man now going outside, Cynthia already knew they were a set. No matter what had happened in their pasts, you didn't get Angela without Adrian, and when that bloody fighter recovered, she would make it clear to Marc.

Content for the first time in her life, Cynthia drifted to sleep with the magical sensation of Adrian's touch lingering on her skin and in her heart.

8

As the sun sank under a crimson sky, Marc found Adrian standing on the porch, in the open and once again tempting fate. "She's wondering why you haven't taken a shift. She's worrying over it like she's done something wrong."

Adrian didn't turn from his post in the darkness.

Marc moved to Adrian's right—the place he was more worthy of than Kenn but didn't want. "She thinks she's not an Eagle without her gun hand."

"She'll always be an Eagle."

Marc hated him for it. "Yes."

"What do you need?" Adrian wanted this moment out of the way. *Two mutts and one perfect bone.*

Marc let out the final secret Adrian had been keeping. "I know why you're avoiding her. With those weak mental walls, she'll blast right through and see what I've known for a month."

Silence.

Marc was grateful she hadn't been taken—so much that the jealousy was barely there. “What matters is, does Angie know how you feel about her?”

“No. That was never among my reasons for her special attention. It still isn't.”

“And when she does?” Marc insisted. “There's no way you'll hide it forever.”

Adrian looked at him then, expression saying everything Marc had feared and more.

“I won't do that. Unless...”

The warning rang as thickly as the promise. Both men understood the battle line. As long as Angela was happy with Marc, Adrian would stay away. If she called out for him, even once, another war would start.

Marc, who had said something similar to Neil when he'd first joined Safe Haven, understood completely. He blew out a stream of smoke, respecting the honesty and the control it would take to stand by such a vow. With almost anyone else, Marc wouldn't have believed it, but Adrian really did appear to be a man of his word. When he said something, that's what happened. “I've got your post. Go take a shift and tell her what she needs to hear.”

9

“Thank you for keeping me warm.”

The sound of Angela's slightly energized voice

calmed Adrian as he entered her room. John hadn't lied just to give them all hope.

"I enjoyed it." Billy didn't censor his words as he rose, understanding Adrian was his relief. "Even covered in two-day dried blood, you still smell like vanilla."

Her careful chuckle was a wonderful sound.

Billy slowly untangled himself. "She's all yours, Boss."

Adrian locked down on the moment with Marc, but too late.

Angela's startled gaze flew to his. In her mind, Adrian read the truth that *she'd* been hiding. She was aware of the spark between them. She felt it as much as he did, but unlike him, she hadn't ever considered that future.

Before either of them could break the spell, Billy's joking quip drove it in.

"All yours until she calls for Marc in her sleep, anyway."

Angela dropped her eyes. She knew it all with that one glance, but her choice had been made decades ago. "It'll always be like that."

Adrian took Billy's place as her heater, good energy swaddling her in strength before they touched. "He's a lucky man."

Angela tensed, as she had with the others who'd provided this intimate service for her, but there was no urge to distract him with meaningless chatter. Adrian had saved her life. They now had a bond that would never be broken. She even hoped he let

himself enjoy being so close—something that would never happen again—but she doubted that he would. The Eagles and Marc might worry over Adrian's persuasive charm, but as he carefully covered her with his jacket, Angela was sure that Adrian would never destroy them all that way.

Unable to resist taking his only chance to feel what could have been, Adrian let his guard down, power reaching out.

Brilliant blue and gold touched...then connected in a breath stealing match of indescribable perfection.

The world we could have created together! The love she has to give! Adrian's hardened heart broke from the loss.

Angela tried to keep her walls in place, but that golden light sank into her as if it belonged there. It rattled doors to every place in her heart, including those already given Marc's name. She didn't allow any of them to open.

Adrian refused to acknowledge the anguish of her choice. He'd known it would be this way from the minute he realized he wanted her. Her love for Marc was too strong to allow any other man to slide into his place.

Billy paused on his way out. One vivid blond, the other deep ebony, the sight of Adrian and Angela so close was striking. *They look like lovers who've been kept apart for a tormenting amount of time.* Billy softly closed the door. *What a pair they would have made.*

“I’m sorry you were injured.” Adrian tugged the blanket up.

Angela didn’t answer. She didn’t need Adrian’s apology, only his words of her future.

Adrian hid a grin. She still wanted to be treated like an Eagle. “You’ll use the recovery time to pick a team from the recruits that will come out of the woodwork now.”

“Don’t want my own team.” She pouted. “I like being with Kyle. He’s good.”

“He’s lethal. So are you, Angie, or you will be when you let go of society’s rules and start really following mine.”

“I don’t like violence.” Angela hated herself for that lie. She adored violence if it had a righteous purpose.

Adrian didn’t snort. “You’re good at it for someone who doesn’t like it.”

“I could be good at murder, but should I?”

“Yes. For this time and place, we need it.” Adrian waited for another protest. When it didn’t come, he wasn’t sure about trusting it as acceptance. Women didn’t usually work that way. “You’ll always be a part of Kyle’s team, but these recruits will be yours, the way Kyle is mine—all of them willing to do anything for you. Imagine the possibilities.”

Angela was. How could she not? Once again, he was offering her everything. “Why not have Neil do it? The trooper’s heart is pure enough to make good calls, despite his confusion over Samantha.”

Adrian smiled, showing beautiful white teeth. “Would you like to pass this honor to someone else?”

Trapped, Angela chuckled through the twinges. “No. I wanted it weeks ago, when the senior men started talking about how to blend females into the teams.”

Adrian gently shifted so he could look down at her. “I told you that we would do great and terrible things together. You’ve survived the terrible. Now, it’s time you got some of the great.”

Angela teared up, so beholden to him that she couldn’t find the words.

Adrian wiped them from the corners of her eyes with a loving touch. “You’ve done your duty. Take this time off to enjoy what was accomplished. You’ve earned it.” He locked down on the jealousy. “So has Marc. He’s coming around to the dream, though he may never admit it to me. And there’s no longer an abusive Marine standing between you. This is your time.”

Angela frowned, feeling extremely sleepy. “Always hated that saying. Doesn’t make sense.”

Adrian recognized the defensive response. “That means your happiness comes first for a while. Think you can do that?”

“Unlikely. Someone will have to show me how.”

Adrian slammed the door between their minds before she caught his thought—*I’d give almost anything to have that honor*. “Marc has it covered.

Trust him.”

“I do.” Angela drowsed in Adrian’s warm embrace, drugged, and starting to heal. For the first time since being shot, she wasn’t in agony, puking, or crying. It was wonderful.

Adrian didn’t say more, instead watching as she drifted. Her strength was amazing. *She would have been the perfect woman to help me lead Safe Haven.*

That thought followed Adrian as he rested his head on his arm and tried to sleep. Fate hadn’t gifted Angela to them to be claimed. She’d been sent to protect his people. He would keep that in mind when the longing grew. Angela wasn’t meant to be his or Marc’s. She belonged to Safe Haven.

10

“Gunfire in the perimeter! Shots fired!”

“Shit!”

“Look out!”

Angela jerked awake, groaning. She found Adrian sitting up with his gun drawn.

She turned her head to find Marc in a set position between them and the door and groaned again—this time in groggy frustration. “We didn’t get them all?”

Neither man bothered to answer since it was obvious that they hadn’t.

“I need a gun!”

Adrian nudged her left hand.

Her fingers curled awkwardly around the butt of

her backup weapon.

Bang! Bang!

“Fall back!”

“Get her outta there!”

Crash...

“Fire!”

The noises outside the room weren't comforting. Marc motioned to Adrian. “Let's roll.”

Adrian swung Angela up into his arms as quickly and carefully as he could.

She gasped, painfully molding herself into his grip.

“Here!” Marc shoved a vest over her head as Adrian carried her toward the window.

Angela shuddered, fear trying to overwhelm her at the smell, the sights. The front of the country club was in flames. Eerie shadows ran through the foggy smoke, firing at each other.

Adrian caught it and stored her feeling of panic.
I can help her there too.

Angela tried to help as they lowered her out the window between vested Eagles. Her single lefthanded shot, aimed at a Mexican sombrero, went wild and plunged into the hood of their vehicle.

Angela was quickly shoved inside the truck. Eagles surrounded it. When the door slammed, but her driver didn't leave, Angela realized Adrian was making a stand here, with her in the center. Angela stayed low and rode the waves of pain. *There's no*

safer place I can be.

A fresh volley of gunfire lit up the night, sharp and loud. Men screamed. More shadows flew through the darkness, forcing their attackers into the light of the burning country club. It was another of Marc's plans, this one done to make the enemy think there were less men. Those Eagles had been hidden around the perimeter. Now, they moved in to trap the enemy.

Another truck pulled up. Jeremy guided Cynthia into the vehicle, then joined his team at the rear. It had only been one full day since they had been in this situation. Jeremy was suddenly slapped by a reminder of the carnage at the rest stop. *All those screams!*

He flashed back in despair and guilty excitement.

"Kill them all!"

Kyle's roar swung his hands into action. Jeremy strode forward with his finger squeezing in short, flat pops that took lives.

Next to him, Frank laughed, giddy with that dangerous edge of chaos they were leading. "Some fun, huh, Jerem..."

Frank slid to his knees in shock, freezing in a grimace of disbelieving panic. Fresh blood dripped to the muddy ground as he drew in a last shuddering breath, spoke a final order. "Kill them all..."

Frank fell forward into the mud.

Self-preservation kept Jeremy's feet moving and

his hands delivering more of what his friend had felt. As he went, there wasn't anything in his mind except blind anger and a furious determination to do as he'd been bidden.

Jeremy tried to shake it off and was only partially successful. It was still hard to believe it was over, they'd won...that he'd survived. None of his years as an MIT Grad and computer genius had prepared him for this.

His mind went to their other fallen Eagle, to Daniel. That man had once told Jeremy he was now living the life he had been afraid of before the war. Now, ducked behind a truck and firing those short little pops that were so effective, Jeremy understood completely.

Content the Eagles had Angela covered, Marc spun into the shadows, firing a hot laser.

Two Mexicans—dead—on the right. An old enemy, then. One that I'm sick of.

Marc went left.

Three more bodies there...and one up high, still alive. That's where their new leader will be.

Marc knelt down and pulled his rifle from the sling.

“Move in!”

Adrian's radio command had the rest of the outer guards freeing their trigger fingers. More gunfire filled the night.

Training mode settled over Marc's mind.

Inhale... Exhale and hold... Let go. He pulled the trigger.

The guerrilla jerked at the impact, breath gone in a powerful blast. He hit the ground with a heavy thump a few seconds later.

Marc lowered the rifle and stepped forward. *Now, one to the head.*

Around him, the slavers were trying to flee but the advancing perimeter guards were ready for them. Again, Adrian's men were more than a match. Marc was sure the remaining slavers in the camp would be the same. He had thought to go over the plan again with Kyle before that mission team left, but there wasn't any need.

Radios crackled again.

"Rollin' out, Boss."

"No mercy."

Kyle's responding tone was just as hard as Adrian's. "You know it."

"Meet up with us at the new place when it's done."

"Copy."

Vaguely listening to the radio conversation, Marc stayed in the shadows as he moved closer to the body. He saw the blood, the open, glazing pupils set deep into weathered skin.

"Marc!"

Instantly distracted, Marc keyed the mike before she could become upset. "5-by and close."

"Now, please?"

"Yes, ma'am." *Bang!*

A minute later, Marc joined Angela inside the cool vehicle. He noted how she instantly warmed when he took her hand.

Marc lowered his lids, not wanting her to read his determination. He remembered many of the things she needed, liked, and he intended to use them. Angie would want to be with him as much as she wanted to be an Eagle, and it would always be him, no one else, that she craved. There were ways.

“Should we pick a new place?” Zack was worried by the newest attack.

“No. Too much traveling.” Marc got set to cushion Angela from the bumps.

Settling into his strong arms, Angela met Adrian’s gaze through the lowered window. “The camp calls for you...for us.”

“I know.” Adrian’s face was expressionless.

“Something’s about to happen.”

Adrian gritted his teeth against the twinge in his chest. “I’m going.”

Angela closed her eyes in relief and huddled against Marc’s strength. “Drive now, Zackary. He won’t leave until he knows you guys have me tucked away.”

The former trucker immediately obeyed.

Adrian watched until they were out of sight, hating it that they were split up, but he was confident in Kyle and Marc. They would get their jobs done.

“We have a survivor!” Seth shouted from the room where they had kept Angela. He had stopped Zack from executing the bleeding man. The threat should have been over, but all the bodies around them were slavers. Seth was sure Adrian wanted answers.

Adrian came quickly, glad to see the man’s injury was grave. He didn’t think the guerrilla would know he only had minutes left. He gestured toward John. “Our doctor will help you, but I have questions first.”

The man nodded painfully. “Si.”

“What were you trying to do here?”

“Kill your leader,” the man gasped out. “Please, it hurts!”

Adrian frowned, numb to the enemy’s panic after what he’d been forced to put Angela through. “Cesar is dead. Who gave you that order?”

The Mexican stared at John’s scowling face and white coat in longing, starting to understand that no help would be given. “*Richard*, before he left.”

Rick.

Adrian grabbed the man’s tacky shirt, jerking him up as the Eagles shouted and cursed. “Where did he go?!”

The Mexican laughed and groaned through bloody teeth, feeling the shadow of death turn his way. The cold chill was terrifying. He lashed out in hateful defiance. “Safe Haven, to get his woman back!”

A single shot silenced the pain laced laughter,

but it didn't erase the mocking grin from the slaver's face. It said Adrian had made a grave mistake. He hadn't accounted for Rick.

Adrian waved. "Get us home, right now!"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Ghosts

Just after Midnight

May 16th

1

***H**elp!*

The scream was muffled by a thick gag. Samantha bounced against her kidnapper's shoulder, kicking, and slamming her hands against his legs. He didn't stop or slow.

She'd been grabbed from behind as she stepped from the camper, and hit with hard, quick blows. There hadn't been time to yell.

Sam screamed against the gag again, wriggling furiously, but got no response—not even a tightening of the grip he had around her waist. Left with nothing else, Sam curled her nails into the man's skin and tried to slice him open.

She hit the ground a second later with a muffled thud that took her breath and left no time to avoid the dirty fist he swung.

Dazed, Samantha sprawled awkwardly at the man's filthy boots, looking up into a face she'd hoped to never see again.

"Miss me?"

Sam shook her buzzing head, filled with fear.

“That’s okay.” Rick chuckled, drawing back.
“Cause I did you!”

The second hit was harder than the first.

Samantha slumped to the dirt.

Deep in the cover of trees around the crowded parking area, Rick dragged her by the arm and hair, grinning in cold satisfaction. Once again dressed as an Eagle, it had been no trouble getting to her.

Rick pulled the mask back over his face and hefted Samantha into the passenger side of the truck, adjusting her to look like she was sleeping. He casually closed her door and moved to the driver’s side, taking stock of the chaos around them. Word had come from the lookouts that the remaining Mexicans were gearing up to attack. It looked to be a dawn ambush; Kenn had ordered a bugout half an hour ago. The herd was panicking.

Rick pulled into the shortest line of vehicles being sent out. They were gassing them, but not checking passenger lists. Rick felt it was the best place to be. A single truck leaving in the opposite direction would be noticed but blending into a migrating herd was genius.

Rick spotted Becky lingering near the parking area. Staying out of the way, the teenager looked lost, abandoned.

You won’t be alone long, little girl. Neil still wants you...

Rick changed directions. He couldn’t leave Neil anything except his life, and in the end, even that might be too much.

“Kenn to the QZ.”

“Copy.”

Kenn changed directions, ignoring the steady drizzle. A QZ call usually meant someone had come in, but now was an inconvenient time for new arrivals. Both of Safe Haven’s doctors were *out*. The waiting camp were still sequestered in the mess, surrounded by circles of both stationary and roaming Eagles, but it was clear that they were about to stampede. He had to move them now or lose them.

Kenn ducked under the swaying caution tape to see John and Adrian climbing from a mud-splattered van with Jeff, Seth, and Cynthia. Kenn was surprised to see her still with them. He’d thought this might be the time the reporter was accidentally caught in the crossfire.

“Look out!”

Kenn jumped back as a wagon of women sped by, just missing clipping him with the mirror. He was sending people out in groups of five, hoping they’d stay together, but the odds were low.

John stalked by, looking like he hadn’t slept the entire time he’d been gone.

Kenn frowned. “How is she?”

“She’ll live.”

The doctor’s curt words were thrown in anger as he headed for the other side of the QZ parking

area.

Kenn filed them away as proof that things had been as rough as he'd imagined. Kenn was surprised again when the haggard man climbed into the passenger seat of the ambulance and shut the door. Wasn't he going to find Anne or check on his patients? John did a lot of behind-the-scenes work. The doctor even had a weekly meeting with Adrian. About what, Kenn *didn't* know, and that told him John was part of the chain of command, though no one else appeared to know it yet. So why was he—

Bang! Bang!

Wind muffled gunshots came from the slaver camp. The lack of word from Cesar wasn't causing them any concern.

Seth gave Kenn a cool nod, then searched for the nearest ranking guard. He was aware of his slight limp, legs like lead. The long ride had stiffened his muscles.

The radio crackled with Mitch's sober, tense voice. "The Boss is back, folks. Just hit the QZ. You'll see him shortly."

That call eased a few people, but it didn't stop the exodus.

When Jeff came to his side, Kenn's first thought was to ask how bad Angela was hurt, what had happened, and who was taking the heat for it. He swallowed the questions after surveying Jeff's exhausted walk and hostile expression.

"Boss says to keep them moving." Jeff's tone also said he was angry, to take care.

Kenn wondered vaguely who his ally was aiming at. "Good. We sent over a truck of drugged food, but that was yesterday afternoon. Scouts say they're arming up for a fight."

"Tired of waiting for Cesar to return." Adrian joined them.

"Will he?" Kenn wanted to know what had happened.

"No."

Crashh!

In the near distance, the sound of a building collapsing echoed louder than the slavers. It was another sign of postwar decline that was happening all across the country, maybe even the world. No one knew if other countries were in the same shape, but Kenn thought some of them might be at least a little better off. While the West had been living lives of convenience, other nations had been suffering. By necessity, they would have been better able to handle such a crisis.

Jeff concealed the hell he'd just been through, as well as what was yet to come. He raised his voice against the howling wind. "How can I help?"

The three men fell into a quick conversation as the rain began to fall harder.

Cynthia stayed on Adrian's heels, hand near her gun. She was guarding him.

It was noticed, but there was no time to waste on mysteries right now.

“Where’s Samantha?”

“There, in the next line to go.” Kevin pointed.

Seth headed that way, eager to have her safety confirmed and off his list of things to do. Around him, the camp was openly fleeing, no longer worried about alerting the slavers. Kyle and his team were between the two camps, getting set.

“She’s been out for about ten minutes.” Kevin was still upset with Tucker for leaving Samantha alone while she showered. Kevin had been glad to find her here after chewing on the man. “She hasn’t slept much since you guys took off.”

Seth stopped, not wanting to wake her if she was really able to sleep through this din. People shouted, doors slammed, and cars spun out the second they were gassed. They vanished into the night to hopefully catch up with the lead semi that was being driven by Doug.

“I heard there are men down?”

Seth didn’t answer Kevin’s question, instead waving toward the truck Samantha was in. “Where did that one come from? I thought we didn’t find any more red on the last vehicle recon.”

Kevin shrugged. “Not sure. I saw an Eagle park it there though, so it must run.”

Seth moved toward Adrian, and his next item to do. “Stay with Samantha during the bugout. Neil’s orders. Let her know they’re *both* okay.”

Kevin headed toward the truck as a blue large van fled into the night. “You know it.”

Eagles were all over the area, most of them toting things or helping people into their assigned rides. One of these carried a heavy looking duffle bag that he slung into the back of the truck Samantha was in.

Kevin's eyes narrowed when her head lolled roughly against the window, but she didn't react or readjust herself. *How can she sleep so deeply?*

Kevin started to knock on the window.

"Hey!" The Eagle who had put the bag into the rear pointed. "He wants you."

Kevin turned to see Kenn motioning him over. He gestured for the man to take his place. "Stay close to her. She's special."

The Eagle nodded, grinning under his mask. "I know it."

Kevin jogged to Kenn, shaking his head. He didn't like some of these newer people that had signed up. Hell, he even didn't know who that one...

Kevin stopped, turning in time to see the man slide into the driver's seat. The masked Eagle gave Samantha a friendly nod she didn't react to and began chatting as he started the engine.

Kevin strained to see. *Who is that?*

Eager to be gone, Kenn thrust a paper over Kevin's shoulder. "Boss wants you to drive Samantha and then switch with Lee when we make camp."

Kevin shook his head, watching the truck roll by. "She has a driver, but I'm not sure who it is."

Kenn's bad feeling grew. "Where are they?"

Kevin pointed.

Standing next to them, Seth froze. He recognized the man disappearing into the darkness with Samantha. The bandana gave it away. "Rick!"

Adrian spun at the name, drawing his gun.

Seth took off running after the truck, already knowing it was too late. If he opened fire, he would hit any number of fleeing camp members.

"Stop that truck!"

Adrian's shout was lost in the din.

Aware of their panic and enjoying it, Rick patted Samantha's arm and took her away from Safe Haven.

The truck vanished.

Seth ran to the next car about to leave. He ripped Roger from the driver's seat of the jeep and sped off into the darkness after them.

Adrian pointed out a team, sending them after Seth. Tracking Rick without backup was a bad idea. He was obviously more dangerous than any of them had given him credit for.

Torn, Adrian chose to stay with his camp. They would do rolling searches by the member list and he would take his place at the head of the convoy once they were all accounted for. He had to get the camp back together. Seth and the others now bore the duty of rescuing Samantha and bringing Rick back to stand trial.

Adrian checked his watch and then glanced toward the brightly lit slaver camp. That was another issue he wouldn't be overseeing, but Kyle

was lethal. There wasn't anyone in that camp he couldn't handle.

4

Kyle and his men regretted taking the newest mission until they got close enough to the slaver camp to view it. With Cesar gone, the camp was in chaos. Gang rapes took place by the fire, fists and knives flashing. The women were barely conscious, bloody, and broken as one man finished and another took his place.

Kyle's group was sickened, but if he had said to keep low and wait until it was over and everyone was asleep, they would have.

Kyle was going to tell them exactly that. The remaining slavers numbers were still bigger. Then two young boys were pulled out of a truck, kicking, pissing, and screaming for their parents.

Line up in the V. We go on two. Kyle sent the instruction using their hand code. He couldn't stand to watch that.

The teams around him got set. They were the only thing standing between the slavers and Safe Haven. Kyle and Neil had hoped to wait for a better time to launch their assault, but they were no longer concerned with slaves being caught in the crossfire. A quick bullet would be better than the slow death they were suffering. Eagle rules of engagement wouldn't apply here. In the chaos that was coming, there was no way to guarantee anyone's safety.

Vaguely glad the fog had thinned, Kyle saw the glaze over Neil's eyes and understood. "This will give you what you want. Women like heroes."

Neil didn't bother with a lie, even though their men were all listening. "It will also seal my place. Yours, too."

"There's nothing he'll deny us after this." Kyle swept the drunken men. Other than the small group of guerrillas getting ready to roll, this wouldn't be a battle—it would be a barrel shoot with sitting ducks. Even the armed men wouldn't stand a chance. "And nothing will ever erase the stain."

Neil shared Kyle's revulsion, but in this moment, he needed Samantha and his place more than he wanted a clean conscience. "For Adrian, and for my new life, I'll bear it."

Kyle's shoulders straightened proudly. "As will we all." He raised an arm. "One...and go!"

The two teams burst into Cesar's muddy camp.

The slavers didn't see the threat coming. For six months, these men had lounged in safety on foreign soil. That changed as Kyle shot the first arm rising to fire, then the head it was attached to.

He spun, checking the right. *Clear!* Left? *Fire!*
Bang!

The guerrilla fell at Neil's feet, causing the trooper to spin around. He stayed his hand, realizing Kyle had saved him.

Neil nodded his gratitude and spun right. *Clear!*
Left?

It was a pattern of behavior that protected each of the men in their line of sight, one that always began and ended with a shout of *remember to look!* during the training.

“Down!”

The Eagles dropped at Kyle’s roar.

Bbrrrrr...

The machine gun rattled across the filthy camp, hitting fleeing shadows, but none of the Eagles it was aimed for. They knew to stay low.

Billy found the gunman and delivered a spray that sent him behind a tent for cover.

The Eagles moved in, bullets ripping through the canvas without mercy.

Three captive women were caught and killed by stray rounds. One had her throat slit by a man trying to use her as a shield. His arm jerked when the bullet hit him in the head. The rest of the women and kids got out of the way.

Shouldn’t they be screaming or something? Kyle wondered in a distant, store-it-for-later way as he fired again.

The armed group gearing up to attack Safe Haven finally joined the gunfight, peppering them with slugs.

Cris fired the grenade launcher. “Hell’s waiting, boys!”

“And this is how you get there!” Shawn fired his own launcher from Cris’s right side.

The grenades exploded together, catching most of the scattering fighters.

The two Eagles reloaded each other. It was Marc's addition to their training, allowing them to fire four shots in half as much time.

Dirt and blood rained over the campsite.

The slavers were helpless under the fury of Adrian's Eagles. They'd come prepared, but more than that, the feeling of helplessness the Eagles had been smothered with over the last three days was finally being released. When it was over, the team would be expected to rejoin Safe Haven and act civilized, but right now, they were savage, killing any male that moved. They cleared the camp and didn't pause, even when one of their own cried out.

Billy grabbed Cris's limp arm and hefted him over one shoulder as he advanced, gun still barking.

Kyle grunted as a slug hit his vest and went through, spinning him around. It was caught and held by the next layers of protection. He spun back, shooting and killing the man who had hit him. *There's nowhere else I'd rather be!*

"Eagles Fly!" he screamed, grateful for the second chance at life that Adrian had given him.

The V expanded, each man marching forward to form a single line of side-by-side walking death. Extremely effective, it allowed a better range of fire and gave the Eagles the final advantage.

The slaver's six-month rampage was over.

5

Kyle didn't holster his weapon until they had

walked every inch of the garbage filled camp. His Glock barked sporadically, changing bleeding, begging slavers into mud-shrouded corpses.

It was hard to look at, but little compared to the slaughter they'd left at the picnic area. His guilt was eased by each new horror they uncovered. There were tents full of feces, dead dogs, bodies of women and kids piled in the brush behind the camp. Kyle waved at Neil. "Get a bigger fire going. We're not leaving this."

Neil didn't like the chore, but he couldn't argue the duty. The corpses had been American survivors, members of Safe Haven who hadn't reached its borders in time. They deserved more than to be left behind this camp for animals to drag away.

"Movement in the rear row of trucks." Neil passed the message from one of their men. "How do you want to handle it?"

"Those are our damsels in distress." Kyle motioned Jeremy to cover their men. "Tell the boys to settle down."

The Eagles were celebrating their victory, but their loud shouts and curses were scaring the slaves. They were used to being abused by rough, uncaring males. Kyle wasn't looking forward to seeing their fear on the ride home.

"Tell them quiet is best. We don't want to spook these women." Neil relayed orders to his XO. "None of them have a clue what's going on, so make sure you talk to them. Try to pick out the strongest one; we'll have her take charge as much as we can."

Jeremy snapped a salute and hurried off; he would have his hands full just quieting their teams.

Kyle helped Neil at the trailers. He cut the padlock off the first trailer and shoved the door up.

The dozen children inside screamed, pushing toward the rear. The group cowered there, moaning.

Kyle slowly held his hands up; the lethal Glock was back in his holster. "They're all dead. Every one of them!" He gentled his words as their noises of terror quieted. "We're here to help you."

Behind him, Neil and the others slowly recovered from their disgust. They really hadn't expected to see kids here while they were on the way. They also hadn't planned for it. Adrian would be delighted to have more kids, and as revolted as they were right now to see the bruises, shrunken faces, and other signs of abuse.

Kyle held out a hand, aiding the fearful kids. They pulled away from his light touch the second their small feet reached the ground. He hoped they wouldn't go fleeing into the night.

"Get the supplies out, Neil." Kyle tried to smile at the terrified survivors. "Get them fed and talking."

Neil and the others also plastered on smiles and calmed their movements, savage men now shoved back inside their facades, but the children knew and shied away. Monsters were easier to spot in this new world, even the ones who didn't recognize it in themselves.

“Here they come.”

Jennifer didn’t respond to Lilly’s excited, fearful comment. She belonged to Cesar—all the slaves locked in this semi to keep them unspoiled were his. They listened as the truck next to them was opened.

“They’re all dead. Come on out.”

Jennifer and Lilly exchanged glances, but not of relief. These were glares of eternal hatred.

“Don’t do it this time.” Lilly’s words came out in a low rush of terror inspired courage. “Don’t make deals with them. If you promise, we won’t tell them about you.”

Jennifer felt both the hostility of the other women in their truck and the terror of the children crammed in behind her. The kids were afraid she would agree.

Jennifer clenched her fists, getting set to do whatever it took. “Let the new owners hurt the kids, so you don’t have to serve. Is that what you’re asking me to do?”

“No.” Lilly leaned forward, eyeing Jennifer’s big stomach. “I’m *telling* you!”

Jennifer immediately punched Lilly in the jaw, making sure it split her lip. Those stung for days.

Lilly hit the side of the truck, rattling their hanging belongings as she fell.

“You don’t tell me.” Jennifer stared down at her coldly. “I tell you!”

Lilly picked herself up off the filthy floor, wiping blood from her mouth as the other women scrambled to get away from them.

Jennifer's stomach was grotesquely big in the light of their flickering candle. Lilly stared at it, keeping her distance this time. "I mean it, bruja. No more deals for us or *your* baby won't live."

Jennifer stared at Lilly without blinking, able to taste the hatred. It never should have come to this. After a raid on a big city, the women here had sometimes outnumbered their captors. "Are you challenging me...*coward*?"

A cold chill invaded the semi—an ill wind the watching women were scared of. They'd felt it before. None of them were willing to step forward while crammed into this semi. Jennifer's aim was too good.

Lilly backed down, but only as much as she had to. "Only your right to make us trade our bodies for someone else's kids. We don't owe them anything."

Jennifer lunged forward, ignoring twinges from her gut. "Those kids are worth your life!"

Lilly cringed back.

Jennifer followed, positive this would be going very differently if they were outside. The other women might be scared of her, but they were also angry.

"If you don't take their place, you will be disobeying a direct order. I won't tolerate that!" Jennifer pulled the fire back in, hearing male voices coming closer. "You'll be the first one I fry in the

fight.” She shoved Lilly into the group of women.
“I loathe you.”

Lilly clamped down on an equally hateful retort as the door was shoved up, but her glare didn’t fade.

“Come on out. They’re all dead,” the man at the door called.

Lilly shoved to her feet and stomped to the door.

The other women followed, giving Jennifer glares.

Jennifer gathered the children who didn’t shy from her gentle touch. They knew they had nothing to fear from her.

“Come on out. They can’t hurt you anymore.” The man helping them out tried soothing words.
“They’re dead.”

Jennifer took her time getting to the door, trying to decide what to do. She watched the strangers help the kids, seeing they were talking to them in low, comforting tones. Behind them, bodies lay strewn about the camp. Would these killers be better owners? Did it matter? *We’ll still be slaves.*

Until my baby comes. Jennifer lifted her chin.
Then I’ll take them away and we’ll start our own world where men aren’t allowed to be monsters.

You’ll need help with that, the voice inside told her eagerly. *Start with the leader of these strangers and work your way up, like you did here.*

Jennifer was sick of being hurt. *What if these men are just as bad?*

You have to keep those kids alive. Do what you can to that end.

But...they'll want me.

Yes. How else do you expect to pay for freedom?

Jennifer guided the final child toward the man waiting at the tailgate, hating the decisions she was always forced to make. Lilly wasn't the only one who hated this life.

With no other choice, Jennifer let herself reach out in more ways than just physically when it was her turn to get out of the truck. "I'm the only one left."

Kyle did a quick visual check of the perimeter as the other semis were opened and emptied, then he extended a hand. "Good. Be careful, the step's..."

Kyle's words trailed off as he looked up, attention snared by the girl standing there. All he could see was her dirty face and a pair of the most amazing golden eyes. He couldn't judge her age by them, not without more light, but he was instantly curious. His hand slowly lowered. *Who is she?*

Jennifer stared back. *He's pretty.* She had only seen Mexican males for so long that this one was beautiful to her, just for an instant, because he didn't look like one of them.

"I'm Kyle." He squinted, eager for her to step into the light.

"Jennifer. Jenny, I guess, if you like that better."

This time, the sound of her voice hit Kyle like bricks going into water—thick and hard. He stared stupidly. *Do I know her?*

Jennifer was almost immune to that reaction; it was what she had intended this time, but she wasn't

prepared for the way her heart picked up or how her skin felt grimmer than usual. *Who is he?*

Kyle was aware of Eagles and slaves watching them, but the strength radiating from those eyes was enough to hold him in place. *She feels so familiar!*

“I need to talk to whoever is in charge.” Jennifer sent another wave. “I have a problem.”

Kyle’s chest puffed out. “That would be me, right now. What’s the trouble, Jen?”

His tone vibrated through Jennifer’s mind. *He sounds strong.* She needed that. The slave took a breath and stepped closer, letting him see her stomach. “I’m in danger and so is my baby. We need protection.”

“You can go anywhere you want, but we have doctors and we follow the old rules. No one in our camp will hurt you.” Neil’s words floated over the huddling slaves as Jennifer slowly climbed from the semi.

Kyle would have helped her, but shock held him paralyzed. Not because of her youth or the pregnancy—he’d seen both before and after the war. It was the attraction smothering him in shards of need, making it hard to think, to breathe, that held him. He *wanted* her. Desperately.

Kyle drew in air instead of reaching out.

“Will you help me?”

Kyle’s brain was riddled with fog and guilt. He struggled to think around the confusion. “You’ll be safe with us. We won’t let anything happen to you.”

“In our camp, you’ll have the freedom that was stolen. We’re Americans and so are you. We take care of our own.” Neil was aware of something happening with Kyle, but he was eager to be back in Safe Haven, to see Samantha. He had an awful feeling and no reason for it. She was well protected right now. *Isn’t she?* “If you’re heading out on your own, we’ll give you what supplies we can spare. If you’re coming with us, be in one of the black trucks parked behind those rocks.” Neil pointed. “We leave in five minutes.”

Jennifer felt the hateful glares of the other females. She knew what they were planning. It was hard not to with Lilly rolling up the sleeves on her torn dress, but the man now staring at her with an open glaze of need was in the chain of command. *That’s handy information to have.* Jennifer was seconds away from being forced to prove that she was just as much a killer as any of these men. “Please. You have to keep me away from them.”

Kyle missed the order of her words as he turned to study the small group of muttering females standing across the fire. “They’re the threat?”

“Yes. I won’t make it to your camp.” Jennifer pulled his attention back with her note of panic.

“Why do you need protection from them?”

“I’d rather not say.” Jennifer looked away as she finished digging through his mind for a weakness to use. When she found it, her heart thumped. They

had a matching torment. “Those cowards will be happy to give it to you in full detail.”

Kyle saw one of the filthy females start whispering to a nearby Eagle. He would know soon enough but hearing it from her first was important. “If you want me to guard you, I have to know.”

Kyle was unprepared for the cold calculation that fell over her young face at his insistence.

“I kill on command.” Jennifer let her own awful bitterness show. “It’s what I did for Cesar in this new world.”

Kyle’s tormented soul fell at her feet, instantly bonded. “Do you, really?”

Jennifer hadn’t expected to find anyone with a conscience. It allowed her to be honest. “As top slave, I played God with all our lives.”

She looked at him with eyes that said she would do almost anything to get her way. Kyle felt another bond snap into place, another weight on his soul.

“Let’s go, everyone.” Jeremy walked between the groups, smiling and pointing. “Just squeeze into the trucks.”

The kids all looked to Jennifer.

So did the scared, angry women.

The adults would wait for her to make the choice and resent her for it, even while benefiting from it. Jennifer’s hatred increased. *After my baby comes, the death count might go up for me.*

“I’m going with them.” Jennifer looked at the kids she’d come to love. “I want you to come too. I’ll care for you, the same as I always have.”

The kids moved toward the trucks without needing to hear anything else.

Jennifer didn't follow yet.

"Is it okay to leave the fire burning?"

Morgan's query distracted Kyle. The mobster joined him, trying to decide. There was enough wind to let it spread, but the ground was damp.

The adult females headed toward Jennifer as soon as she was alone, faces set, determined.

If only you'd come together like this sooner! Jennifer understood their need to punish her. She hadn't looked out for *their* best interests. In fact, she'd sacrificed these cowards whenever she could.

Jennifer braced her swollen ankles as Lilly and the others stepped over silently shrieking corpses to get to her. Jennifer looked at Kyle.

Kyle rotated, drawn by Jennifer's tension.

Morgan frowned at the unexpected behavior.

Jennifer locked eyes with him. She didn't push or pull, just stared.

Kyle broke into a light sweat, thrown into confusion once again. Her fear was hitting him in waves, demanding that he help, but Kyle didn't understand how one little group of women could be dangerous to her. *It's not like they're going to attack her.*

Jennifer switched her gaze back to the approaching females, hoping the fast bond with Kyle would be enough. If not, she and her unborn child might die here.

"Hey!" Lilly led the confrontation. "You're not

going!”

“Make it official, then.” Jennifer got ready, gathering what energy she had to protect her stomach. “I have no problem killing you.”

Lilly hesitated at the tone, but the others didn’t pause in their march forward. She had no choice. “I challenge you for top slave.”

“Alone?” Jennifer sneered. It would be a group fight, but she wasn’t going to use her gifts or the gun. She wouldn’t take the chance on shooting one of the kids by mistake. She shoved it deeper into her pocket. It wouldn’t help her here.

“We’ve decided to share power.” Grace, another former rival for top slave, stepped forward. “Get her!”

The slaps, kicks, and fists came from too many directions to defend against. Jennifer hit the ground and curled into a ball around her stomach.

“Son of a...”

Kyle and the Eagles rushed into the mob, shoving swinging women aside to reach Jennifer.

Kyle bumped Lilly into the side of a smoldering tent, dropping down to cover Jennifer as the rest of the Eagles got the women under control with harsh shouts.

Being yelled at cowed the females into a submissive group. They were scared of Jennifer, but they were terrified of men.

“Get them loaded!” Kyle scanned the girl still curled into a ball. There was too much blood splatter on her dress and the ground to determine how

injured she might be.

He picked her up, arms tense. Touching her was like standing at threshold of the greatest dream. Kyle cradled her close as he stood, picking out injuries—new and old.

The other women glowered resentfully.

“Thank you.”

Jennifer’s weak whisper gave him relief and reminded him of the nightmare with Angela. Ignoring the audience, Kyle took her to his truck, haunted. *Not this one.*

“Hey, wait!” Lilly followed him. “There are things you need to know about *that* slave.”

Neil grabbed Lilly’s arm. “Why did you do that to her?!”

“You shouldn’t let the bruja into your camp!” Lilly growled, spinning free of his hold. “She’s trouble.”

“What?” Neil stared, mind also going to Angie. *Bruja means witch, right?*

Lilly didn’t lower her voice. “She had them fighting over her from day one and she’ll do the same to you. She killed people to get the top slave slot here.”

“Sounds like survival.” Neil watched the girl in question peer up at Kyle with a bleeding lip and a dazed expression the trooper thought would be hard to resist. It was, apparently, because Kyle stiffened and stopped.

“She’s done that and then some.” Lilly eased closer. This man was also in the chain of command.

“She made them believe she was a witch. Cesar put her in charge of us.”

“A witch? What made him think that?” Neil didn’t like how Kyle was staring down at the girl now. He’d started walking again, but his expression was too protective.

“Bad things used to happen to his men, to the ones who hurt her. None of them would cross her again after what she did to Kern.”

“They’re nice to her!” another woman threw in, arms streaked in blood and bruises.

“She makes deals with the men. She always gets what she wants.” Grace stood next to Lilly.

Like it’s an honor. Neil was reading the jealousy loud and clear. “Deals?”

“She protects those kids like they’re hers.” Grace’s bruised face turned uglier. “She makes us take their place.”

“She steals men’s minds.” Lilly leaned in to whisper. “She’s a threat.”

“If she’s a witch, then why is she a slave?” Neil stared at Lilly now. “And why aren’t you dead for what just happened?”

Fear flashed over Lilly’s face. “Cesar won’t let her use it. He threatened those damn kids.”

“It doesn’t stop his men from trying, though. They think if she comes to them willingly, they’ll be able to kill Cesar.”

“He keeps her weak with just enough food and energy to keep her and the baby alive.”

“She can’t kill them all, though she’s tried to get

us to help her enough times. We knew better than to fight back.”

Neil let the women spew, pulling the details he needed. Jennifer was special. That was dangerous because she might not be good, like Angela. It sounded like this one might use her power at will, but that wasn't the big problem here—the other slaves were. These envious, power hungry women not only knew of magic, they had accepted its existence and developed a fierce hatred of it. When they got to Safe Haven, it would cause trouble.

“Do you want me to handle things?” Daryl joined Neil, but his eyes were on his team leader.

“Yes, let's get...” Neil paused. Kyle was attending the pregnant teenager himself, without doing his check in or even verifying he'd lost one of his team. *We won. Why does it all still feel hinky?*

7

Kyle slid Jennifer into the seat and backed away. His control was weak compared to the flames shooting through his skin at the contact.

Jennifer looked up to find Kyle staring at her with a dangerously observant expression. Did he understand she was hated by her own kind? That she was alone and easily taken advantage of?

Jennifer winced as her stomach muscles seemed to clamp down. *Yes.* There was heat growing in his eyes as he studied her. It was a fire Jennifer recognized, one she would use. Those kids wouldn't

be slaves forever and neither would she.

“Are you okay?” Kyle heard how winded he sounded.

“Yes. Just have to rest for a minute.” The cramps were subsiding. Her back and head had taken most of the blows.

Kyle wanted to be alone with her; he found himself using Adrian for his own gain for the first time, though it was only a small manipulation. Pregnant women were to be protected at all costs. Kyle hit his radio. “Take ‘em on, Neil. I’ll catch up.”

Jennifer closed her eyes and put her head back, heart thumping. If he hurt her now, she was certain to lose the baby, but a car ride with the other women would do the same. Tears of frustration began to ooze from beneath her lashes.

Neil came to Kyle as he knelt at the open passenger door. He understood when he saw Jennifer’s face. “She can’t travel.”

“Get the others to Adrian. We’ll catch up.”

Neil shook his head at the curt order. “Better to stay together.”

Kyle looked toward the satisfied females cramming into the second truck. “Really?”

Neil couldn’t argue. It wasn’t the first time they’d done this, though both of those trips had seen deliveries with dead mothers and infants that Adrian hadn’t been informed about. “At least pick a couple men to stay with you.”

“They’ve all been on this run from hell for four

days. Get them, and yourself, home.”

Neil didn’t pull rank. Safe Haven was exactly where he wanted to be. “All right.” He didn’t look at Kyle as he walked away.

Neil slid into the driver’s seat.

Lilly delivered another warning. “It’s a bad idea to leave him alone with her. You might not see him again.”

Neil shifted and hit the gas. “This witch story looks like envy on your part, ladies, and my boss won’t like it. He might not let you in. We don’t admit bad people.”

Lilly snorted from the passenger seat. “Then be ready to deny Jenny. She’s as bad as women come.”

Neil didn’t answer. That was an awfully heavy reputation for one pregnant teenager to be carrying. Kyle would be able to handle her. Neil keyed the mike. “Base, mission team is headed in. ETA after dawn. One man down, 29 survivors.”

“Copy,” Mitch responded right away. “Boss says to hurry in.”

Neil started to give the usual response and listened to his worried heart instead. “It feels like there might be a cat in my barn. Blonde and blue, with hunting claws.” Neil used the code with a tremor in his voice.

The former slave in the seat next to him tensed as she noticed.

“Yeah, I’m afraid there is, but the boss says enough dogs are chasing it,” Mitch replied uneasily.

Neil didn’t answer the subtle order to stay

focused on his mission. He drove faster and started preparing himself the way he assumed Marc had while flying to the rest stop. That meant running through anything that could be wrong enough for Adrian to have given that prepared message to their radioman. Adrian had known he might figure something out, so there had to be an answer ready.

Rick beat them back to Safe Haven. That was the only answer that fit, and it was the worst of the lot. Had he hurt Samantha? Killed her?

Neil went through the worst possibilities first, no longer worried over the slaves' words or Kyle's actions. Samantha was in trouble and he couldn't help her. It was so close of a mirror to Marc's pain that acid churned in Neil's gut. Marc had been allowed to keep his world. Angie would live. *What about Samantha?*

Behind Neil's truck, Jeremy was busy singing songs and trying to distract the full load of kids from missing the girl with Kyle. They'd been crying for her, so he had switched off the truck's radio in favor of a soothing voice.

In the driver's seat, Billy was keeping up with the team vehicle ahead of them and also singing along. Their ride, though a bit stressful at this level of exhaustion, wasn't nearly as long as Neil's.

Kyle was silent as the teams left, but he gave Neil a nod as he rolled by. Inside... Kyle looked down at the crying girl, torn. He wanted her and he didn't. She would be his downfall, maybe, or his

salvation. The choice would be up to her.

Jennifer began her count, using the only defense she had against the fear. Numbers began flying across her mental chalkboards. On them, were unknown formulas and unthought equations. Chemistry, biology, physics—all of them and yet none. It was a complex web of connections and explanations to some of the puzzles and mysteries that mankind would have given anything for only six months ago. Now, it was locked inside this teenager's brain as a constantly repeating pattern she used to keep herself from crying or begging.

Jennifer felt the weight of his stare. She'd hit him too hard with the spell, but she didn't remove it now. She relied on what she'd found in his mind. "I won't fight you. Please don't hurt me."

Kyle growled in denial and spun away from the door. He was an Eagle. He didn't take by force.

Then make her willing, his heart whispered ruthlessly. *Willing is better.*

Yes. Kyle moved for the driver door, picking out a small farmhouse nearby. *To have her wrap her arms around me, to pull me close...* He grunted in longing. *That would be worth my place. Maybe even my life.*

8

Samantha yanked harder, hurting her arm, but the cuffs securing her to the steering wheel didn't budge.

Sam had come awake as he pulled inside this garage and took something from the back of the truck. She'd started trying to get free as soon as she heard his heavy steps in the house above her.

Samantha strained to see the interior of the truck, hoping for the knife he'd taken from her belt, but found only trash.

Her eyes went to the horn, but she hesitated. If he heard her, he might come back and he would be angry. *He'll hurt me.*

He's going to anyway, the voice inside remarked almost eagerly. *You have to kill him.*

"Nooooo!"

The scream echoed through the darkness, full of fear and pain.

Samantha's head snapped upward. "Becky?"

"Please, no! Stop!"

Rick had Becky up there.

Samantha twisted again, this time using her palm to lean on the horn.

Honk! Honk! Honk!

In the house above her, Rick didn't react to the noise. Sporadic gunfire was still echoing from the slaver camp, Samantha wasn't going anywhere as long as the cuffs held, and the Eagles were gone. He could spare an hour to enjoy what Becky had been teasing him with. Her battered body would torture Neil and Adrian, if it was ever found.

Rick thrust again, fingers squeezing, scratching, pinching.

Becky only whimpered; he began slapping her between strokes.

Rick shuddered in ecstasy when she shrieked, leaning down to taste her tears.

Outside, the horn continued to blare those three distinctive blasts.

Honk! Honk! Honk!

Seth headed for the faint sound, hoping it didn't alert Rick. The emergency code sounded like any other alarm on an abandoned car, adopted by Adrian for just this reason.

Honk! Honk! Honk!

The light in the window was only a thin beam in the darkness that Seth would have missed if not for the horn leading him to the right house in the row.

Seth saw Kevin come from the dark roadside and head toward the garage. He was glad to know he had backup out here.

Above the garage, shadows struggled violently.

Seth headed that way. He noted vaguely the horn had stopped, but now that he thought he knew where Rick was, it didn't matter.

Determined to help Samantha, Seth let himself in through an already broken window and found the stairs.

9

Kevin cut the gag from Samantha's mouth as they headed inside the house. He did her hands next,

following her lead. She had jumped from the truck the instant the cuffs were off, motioning him to be quiet.

“That’s perfect!”

Kevin heard the familiar, hated voice and the awful sounds under it as they found the stairs; he took the lead. Murder filled his thoughts.

“You feel good, Becky baby, real good!” Rick groaned. Bedsprings creaked rhythmically as he wallowed between her bloody legs.

Slap!

“Uggg!” Becky cringed, turning her head to avoid the next blow, and saw someone in black coming up behind Rick.

Creak.

Becky grabbed Rick’s hair before he could look and pulled his slimy mouth down to hers—then bit into his lip. Blood flew into her mouth, gagging her.

“You bitch!” Rick drew back to punch and saw a cold eagerness in her eyes that screamed *duck!*

Rick did, but it was too late.

“Uh-uh!” Seth knocked Rick off Samantha with a nasty temple shot and found a different naked body curling into a bloody ball.

It’s not Samantha. “Becky?”

Coming out of the daze of lust to feel pain, Rick scrambled backward for his gun and fell off the bed.

Seth saw the weapon. *Becky wasn’t supposed to come out of here alive.* He moved toward Rick with a harsh smile. “Where ya goin? This party’s just

started!”

Rick gained his feet and darted for the stairs.

Kevin appeared in the doorway, blocking his exit in angry satisfaction. “He ain’t done yet. Get back in there and take it like you were giving it!”

Samantha appeared behind Kevin, sneering. “Miss me?”

“That’s mine!” Rick lunged forward.

“No!” Kevin punched him hard enough to send the traitor reeling back into Seth’s reach. “She’s Adrian’s!”

Rick spun for the other door in the room.

Seth kicked out, bringing the evil man back to the floor by his knees.

“Ahhh!”

Seth kicked again, aiming for ribs this time, and was rewarded with a harsh snap and another loud shout.

“Again!” Becky screamed, now standing shakily by the bed. She was awful to look at. “Do it again!”

Seth was caught off guard by her hatred, pausing in surprise. That wasn’t the Becky they all knew.

Rick took advantage, slamming his fist into Seth’s ankle. It brought the cop down. They struggled for the gun, grunting and cursing each other.

Becky limped to the table Rick had tossed his things onto after shoving her down on the bed. What she needed was there.

Seth elbowed Rick in the ribs and lunged backward in a vicious headbutt. He spun in the suddenly limp hold and swung. Quicker than Rick could defend, blood splattered at the blow.

Seth repeated the motion, using more force. *He took them both! He raped Becky!*

Seth swung again.

Rick's head smacked into the wall. He slumped there, barely conscious.

"You are under arrest for...a lot of shit!" Seth slung blood from his hands so he could grasp the cuffs on his belt. "You'll stand trial...and hang! in the camp you've tried so hard to destroy!"

"No." Becky's voice was icy cold. "I won't allow that." She lifted the gun.

"Don't!" Rick cowered.

Becky stepped around Seth and fired.

Hands up in defense, the bullet plunged through Rick's wrist and then his throat. Blood gushed from the holes.

That's a shot any Eagle would be proud of, Seth thought vaguely, turning to stare at Becky. "What have you done?"

"She gave us justice!" Samantha answered harshly. Her face was also a swollen mass of bruises.

Still standing in front of Samantha, Kevin was gaping in shock. He didn't think he was capable of speech.

Seth looked at the beautiful kill shot pouring blood, dead man slowly slumping to the floor. It's

what Adrian would have had Kyle do after the trial. “Okay.” Seth sighed, feeling cheated out of his vengeance. “Samantha, get her to the truck. Kevin and I will provide an escort straight to John.”

“No!” Becky was naked, bloody, and bruised, with Rick’s gun in her hand. “I want to see him burn.”

They had all heard the story of Angela killing the man in Versailles, but did little Becky realize that burning was a curse to keep the man from gaining any peace in the afterlife? Did it matter?

Samantha shrugged at Seth’s questioning look. “I have no problem with it.” She stepped toward Becky, meaning to cover the girl up.

Becky recoiled violently, almost tripping over the corner of the soiled bed. “Don’t touch me!”

Samantha stopped, throwing Seth a worried glance. “Okay.”

Becky slowly lowered her head and the gun, standing there with no idea what came next. Maybe... *Maybe there is no next.*

Picking up on the vibe, Seth held his hand out for the weapon.

Becky flinched again.

Seth didn’t relent. “You don’t need it. I’ve got your six.”

Becky stared back, mind scattered. “Yeah, like before?”

No one moved for a minute at the accusation.

Becky let the gun fall to the carpet. “Stay away from me. You’ve all done enough.”

The girl slowly turned toward Rick, furious and empty at the same time. "He meant to leave my body here to destroy Safe Haven." Becky spat at the evil man, suddenly sure she would never be free of him.

Leaving Seth to deal with it, Kevin gently steered Samantha back down the steps, not liking the way she was staring at Rick's body. "Come on."

Seth heard them leave, but he didn't take his attention away from Becky. She had that on-the-edge look wild animals sometimes got when they were cornered. That was the time they were the most likely to bite, but Seth didn't fancy any more wounds over Rick. The traitor wasn't worth it.

Becky was only vaguely aware of the warm fluids running down her legs, her face, her neck. What she was feeling most clearly, was lost. She wasn't happy little Becky anymore, and that injury was terrifying. Now, she would only be the girl who got herself raped by the traitor. "They'll say I deserved it."

Seth took his jacket off and carefully placed it around her shoulders. She didn't react. He nudged the gun out of her reach with his boot.

She let the Eagle help her. "I do, don't I?"

"No." Seth hoped Kevin would think to call in to base. "But he deserved what he got."

Becky felt the misery waiting for her, the hell Rick had sentenced her to, and shuddered. *I'll never be the same.*

Seth, who had often thought the girl would grow

up to be another Tonya, felt something shift in his mind. No one deserved what she'd been through. Being flirty and stupid didn't justify it. "This was Rick's doing, Becky, not yours."

"Don't call me that!" Becky shouted, paling under the bruises. "She's dead now!"

Seth's heart lurched. "I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner."

Becky looked up at him, blood slowly running down her jaw. "I didn't think anyone would help me. I expect...expected to die here."

Seth imagined a camp without her and was surprised to find the thought bothered him. "In one minute, I'm going to wrap a sheet around you, and then pick you up. Just close your eyes and let me get you to John."

Seth was expecting the same reaction that Samantha had gotten. He didn't understand Becky couldn't stand the sound of Samantha's voice, let alone the feel of her trying to be helpful.

Becky trembled. "I may have to stop on the way, to puke."

Seth blinked. Where was the emotional flood? The tears? "Okay. Here we go."

He actually saw her body tense, as if she was terrified that he might do what Rick had. "I won't hurt you, Rebecca. Neither will the other Eagles."

"I know that." But she didn't, really. They were men and men couldn't be trusted.

Becky went rigid as Seth slid his arms under her, breath coming in short gasps. Unable to do

anything more than exactly what he'd asked of her, she closed her eyes and didn't struggle.

Seth lifted her tiny body as gently as he could and sensed her clamp down on a scream. His heart lurched. "Easy, baby. Just hang on."

Seth took her outside with careful steps that still caused her pain.

The sentries starting to show up from Kevin's call saw enough to understand. They turned away in respect and cold fury.

Kevin was waiting with gas cans. "Now?"

Seth nodded, moving for his car and not the one that Samantha was already in. "Do it, then find out exactly where John is. Tell him to pull over and wait."

Inside the burning house, Rick's charring skeleton glowered bitterly. Denied peace, over time his ghost might collect the energy of those who passed. If it grew strong enough to commit a murder, he would become solid, regaining a cursed life. That had been the way of things before the war and it continued unchanged afterward. Restless ghosts remain so because they know death isn't final.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Close

1

Angela's eyes shot open. "It's done."

Marc hurried to the bed. "You okay?"

"It's over now." She wanted him to confirm it.

"Yes. The slavers are no longer a threat to anyone."

"Are *you* all right?"

Marc forced his gaze away from the ugly wound. "Yes." He resumed his seat next to her bed and delivered a charming smile. "What about you? Feeling better?"

"Yeah." Angela grunted. "Let's go with that."

Marc chuckled at the joke because it was expected. He would be extremely glad when Safe Haven arrived. Hopefully, he only had another hour to get through.

"Marc."

Marc looked over to see the fingers on her injured hand moving. It was a great sign. He leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Happy for you, honey."

Angela opened her palm, smiling.

Marc was clear on what she wanted. He gave her the Python he had carefully tended in her stead.

Angela slowly transferred the gun to the blood

crusted holster on her right hip that she had insisted John leave on. Knowing it was there might help keep the nightmares at bay. Angela drifted off while hoping Becky was able to find something to use in the same manner.

Marc saw that she had fallen asleep and eased out of the chair to go take a turn on sentry duty.

Zack's second in command came quickly when called, reporting that everything was quiet. The XO expected to be asleep on his bedroll at Angela's side in about two minutes.

The warehouse they were sheltering in had once held engine parts. Kansas was dotted with places like these that Adrian was stripping. No one was flying planes or anything else these days, not even flags. *Except us.*

Marc stared at the cicada-lined trees and waist high fog rolling through the thick trunks. *Almost surreal.* Marc picked a high post. The rest of the Eagles not with Kyle were perched in various places around the warehouse, tired enough to kill for the slightest reason. It had been an exceptionally long trip—one never to be forgotten, no matter how hard they might try.

Marc used his thermal scope to search for heat signatures that would show something alive. He saw only dark, still forms. A sense of being unprotected coated the area. In the hours since parting from Adrian, the unease had only increased. Marc found himself longing for the camp's noisy arrival again. It had become home without him realizing it.

Marc heard the soft murmur of voices and knew Allan and Angie were talking. She was a lot stronger now, thanks to whatever Adrian had done. Marc had figured out that staying away was the best thing her witch could do to help. Even now, that fiery spirit was still only coming in short visits. Marc hadn't known about the energy-share. He wondered suddenly if Adrian had.

Faced with too much time to think, Marc let his mind ponder Adrian a bit deeper than usual. It was hard not to after everything that had happened. The blond man was in charge of an ever-growing camp of armed survivors who would banish him when they found out who he had been and what he'd done. Rather than finding a way to get them to accept it, Adrian was busy trying to fix the flaws of the old world instead.

Marc flashed to his first nights in camp, when he'd learned about the double standard for some parts of their population. Ray was where Angie had been, starting over, but without his blinders anymore. Even the reporter would be a convert now. Why would so clever a leader not find a way for his people to accept the truth?

No answer came.

Marc wondered which way he would fall when it all came out. Would he and Angie be side-by-side in defense or would they end up on opposite teams? It was hard to guess. He was sure the truth would come out eventually, but he no longer had the driving urge to help it happen.

Clearly, neither did Cynthia. She had insisted on being a part of Adrian's guard when he left, but she'd spent a hard minute picking. Adrian had only taken three men—Seth, Jeff and John—had that made the choice for her. Marc hadn't realized Angie had support from the camp women, but it was clear from hearing about Anne, and from watching Cynthia, that she had been subtly manipulating her own choices into place. Angela was so much like Adrian it was horrifying. How bad would it get over time? Would she end up scarred and missing limbs, using her gifts openly for the camp upon their asking? A real life Merlin for Safe Haven's King. *Is that the master plan?*

Marc refused to let himself answer, staring down at the shadowy main road the camp would come over. *Why does life always seem to get harder?*

2

John studied his wife from the passenger seat of the ambulance. He had been waiting here for her when she got in. His accusing expression had been enough to stop even a word of welcome between them. Not sure what all he needed to say, John had kept quiet, allowing them to hear the faint gunshots under the storm. Almost an hour had passed now.

Anne followed the blurry lights of the rig in front of them, aware of her husband's disapproval. She knew why, though he hadn't said anything. She

finally let out a harsh sigh. “You don’t make the patients wait this long. Why me, Mr. Harmon?”

John blinked, not used to hearing so sharp a tone from her. “You lied to me, *Mrs. Harmon*. That’s why.”

“By omission, yes.” Anne didn’t remind him that he’d done the same thing to her in the beginning of this new life. She didn’t need to. “I’m sorry for it.”

“But you’d do it again!” He accused, ignoring the rocking ambulance; the wind hadn’t let up much. Neither had his anger.

“Yes, and so would you. I had to find out on my own.” Anne gave him what he needed to be able to accept it—the truth. “You broke our trust.”

Hearing her say it smashed through his furious indignation. John’s shoulders slumped.

Anne hated his misery. “I hope to prove my loyalty, to earn back your love.”

“I always have love for you!”

The wife finished leading him into giving her what she had to have. “I can wait until you’re too sick, if that will make it easier on you...”

John’s anger broke under a flood of terror. “No, please don’t. I want those last moments with you!”

Anne gasped at the unforgiving anguish ripping through her chest. Her husband would die soon and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

They reached out a hand at the same time for comfort, grips tight. Neither could imagine being without the other.

The truck in front of them slowed and came to a stop, forcing them to do the same.

John motioned to the glovebox, expression daring her to protest. “Get it.”

Anne reluctantly retrieved the gun he kept there, nervous. She’d only had a couple of quiet lessons.

Lee came to the window. John quickly rolled it down. “What is it?”

“We have two injured camp members catching up.” Lee’s face was grim. “They need care. I’ll drive.”

John and Anne switched to the rear of the ambulance to wait, assuming the mission team had run into trouble.

After a long minute of exchanging hurt, needful glances, John slowly tugged his wife closer. “Together, for the rest of it?”

Anne nodded, holding onto him, to his comforting life force. “You know it.”

John winced but didn’t let go.

They stayed that way until Samantha opened the door, looking like she’d been beaten. Behind her, Seth was carrying Becky, who clearly had been.

John moved aside to let them in, pushing back the pain and worry to do his duty. There would be time to mourn later.

3

“This area is off limits! State your business!”

The sight of Marc on top the warehouse, with

alert guards in the shadows, allowed Adrian to breathe again. He hated being split up. "I own the place."

"Welcome home...Boss."

Adrian's eyelids began to sting. Even if it was only a show for the men, Marc's tone was more genuine than Adrian felt he had any right to. He grunted in weary annoyance with his emotions. *I need sleep.* "Kenn has point. Get us set up for a week."

The camp members, who had also been without Adrian longer than any of them were comfortable with, rushed from their vehicles.

"Let them through." Adrian was quickly surrounded.

While the Eagles got the camp set up, Adrian allowed his people to see and hear the battle. Cynthia had surrendered the tape recorder in her pocket as they pulled in to lead the convoy. She was one of his now.

Adrian motioned to the reporter, telling her silently that she was on her own time.

Cynthia nodded, but didn't leave.

Adrian had to decide if she knew the codes or if she was only acting like she had understood.

Okay to stay? Cynthia sent by hand code. She didn't want to leave his guard until Kenn had camp set up. Less distractions would keep their guards watching what they were supposed to. If she and Rick could sneak through the shadows and get to the chain of command, then so could others.

Adrian grinned at the reporter. “You’re my shadow until camp is up.”

Cynthia smiled back, blushing a bit at his open reversal of her outcast status. “Thank you.”

Adrian pushed out a wave of pleasure. “My honor, Cyn. My honor.”

Those around fell quiet at the interaction. Cynthia wasn’t an outcast anymore! How had that happened?

“Play it.” Adrian hung around, calming people, joking with his men, but his eyes weren’t normal. He could tell from viewing his reflection in their relieved gazes. His eyes said he’d just come back from hell and needed a break.

The tape was already at the end—the only part the camp really needed to hear. Adrian stared at Cynthia as the chaos echoed. He owed her so much. They all did.

Bang!

Bang!

“She’s hit!”

“He’s dead! Cesar’s dead!”

“Who did it? Did Adrian get him?”

“Other side’s pourin’, Boss.”

“No. It was Cynthia.”

The powerful recorder had captured the talk of the Eagles as Adrian and Kyle fought to save Angela.

“Cynthia shot him?”

“Good thing, too.”

“Yeah, his next shot would have killed Angie.”

“Pressure!”

“Damn. Look at that puddle spread. One hit might still be enough.”

Adrian switched the player off. “You have one request from the top two team leaders. Use them wisely.”

The camp understood Cynthia was to be rewarded. They surrounded her next.

Cynthia was forced to pass guard duty to someone else in favor of being accepted into the herd.

“Took a call, Boss.” Kenn shouldered his way through the crowd. When he sent a hard glare around, most of the people headed toward the familiar mess now taking shape behind them. The others fled for bathrooms and showers, all eager to discuss what they’d been through. The center fire would be busy as Safe Haven compared stories and drew conclusions.

“The mission team had a delay. One of the slaves is pregnant and having trouble. Kyle stayed behind; he’ll catch up in a few hours.”

“Fine.” Adrian approved of slow travel, always eager to welcome new children into his flock. “What about the doctor?”

“Ambulance should be here anytime.” Kenn had been glad to hear that Samantha was safe, and shocked to find out Becky wasn’t in any of the vehicles he’d sent out. It was a perfect example of

his leadership. It just wasn't good enough. Kenn knew it. "I'm sorry."

Adrian didn't make him feel worse. He'd had to leave Kenn in charge while they handled the slavers, but he had known as they left that it wouldn't go well. That rock-and-hard place was gone now. "You did the best you could. Make plans for the things that got out of control, so it's covered next time."

Kenn scowled. "Next time?"

Adrian snorted at the naivety. He was low on patience, on everything. "You don't really think the slavers were our only enemy, do you? We'll have to do this again and again. Get ready for it."

4

It took a while for Safe Haven to settle down.

The livestock was fed and watered, the dogs were put out, and four common tents surrounded them with the flapping noises they'd all gotten used to. It sounded like home, and almost felt that way. The perimeter was widened, and the mess and bathrooms were full of unwinding people who would crash hard tonight in relief. The threat was gone; their shepherd had returned.

Now doing rounds, Adrian watched the bubble swirl and fluctuate around the perimeter. The power here was growing. Each challenge they faced sent nourishment into the magic seeds that were planted in this haven. They'd come through what he

assumed would be the hardest part—surviving the first six months. Now, the future was here, full of possibilities and pain. At the moment, it was exhausting, but even under his weariness, Adrian knew what the next chore was. Magic was about to become a part of his duties—blending it in and training it to protect the camp instead of itself.

“It’s almost time to form the council.” *If I’m still leading them after Little Rock, the first Presidential Cabinet of the new world will be chosen. If I’m not...* Adrian’s head turned toward the warehouse, but he didn’t finish the thought as movement nearby caught his attention.

Just the Ants. Adrian didn’t understand why the mutations were occurring so fast. The chemicals in the ground wouldn’t cause changes this quickly. Eating infected corpses wouldn’t do it either. They had to have another contamination source, a powerful one.

That scared Adrian, and not just because of the obvious danger. The ant’s determination to survive was as strong as the human will to live. If not for the dogs and wolf running them off, the bold insects would be fighting for space in their tents. If the ants continued to grow, these methods would become ineffective. They could only do a basic routine with the dogs, unlike the wolf.

Adrian changed directions, blending into the trees as if he were a part of them. “Dog?”

The brush rustled to his right; the wolf padded to his side with matted fur and a tense demeanor.

Realizing Dog had been close, Adrian frowned.
“Where’s Charlie?”

At the mess with his playmate. They’re feeding the strays.

“Serving the trays,” Adrian corrected. “Who has guard?”

A rookie.

“Who made that call?”

Kenn.

Before Adrian could hit the button on his mike, Dog gave a soft growl. *The pup is safe. Nature outnumbers us. That is our problem!*

To their right, a single file line of ants was slowly crawling up a moldy tree just outside the perimeter tape. The line stretched into the distance, where cone hills rose from the ground like pimples on skin. Soldier ants surrounded the line, larger and more aggressive than the rest of the colony. Their hard, black eyes returned to Safe Haven’s protection repeatedly—the dogs and the people—but it was the wolf they studied.

“Be careful out there.”

Dog understood why he was getting the warning. *Yes. I suggest only pairs for patrols.*

“I have some ideas, but I need to get the dogs following orders the way you do. Is that possible?” Adrian moved toward the warehouse while he waited for the mental answer.

Not unless I talk to them. Dog followed him.

“You can?”

Dog snorted heavily, shaking his body to clear

some of the scents of civilization. He missed the wild. *What message shall I relay?*

Adrian accepted the newest oddity with a brief mental lurch. Discovering that an animal they had always considered inferior was capable of cross species communication was beyond humbling. “They have to put down scents around the camp each time we set up.”

They’re already doing that, the wolf answered with disgust. Like the Eagles, he was also tired enough to snap at anyone who came too close. *The perimeter reeks of mutt.*

Adrian chuckled. “Chemicals and urine don’t detour the ants, but all of the mutations avoid places where you’ve rolled off dead fur.”

Yes, that’s good. And smart to have noticed. Perhaps you were a wolf in a previous life?

Adrian realized the animal was joking with him. “Perhaps you were a human.”

Dog chuffed. *I was cleaner than those here.*

“We’re rationing, cutting shower times.” Adrian missed the wording in his exhaustion. “Three hundred of us use more water each week than what we’re finding.”

Dog looked up in golden-eyed amusement. *Have you encouraged licking?*

Adrian snickered. “If I did that, our species would die out from lack of mating.”

Dog shared one of his torments. *In exchange for being able to lick myself, I’ve been given a tongue that takes layers of skin with each stroke. Why*

create such horror?

The wolf snorted in bitter amusement that almost made Adrian recoil—it was too human. “Maybe that’s why pups are so wild. It drives them crazy.”

Not pups, Dog corrected gently, sensing Adrian was ready for guidance outside the realms that he was already familiar with. *Men. Each life born into the animal kingdom now is a human spirit, paying for mistakes.*

Adrian’s mind shuddered, step pausing as that awful truth locked into place. It fit perfectly.

Nature was gentle in the garden. When it was sealed for man’s crimes, the world changed.

“Because evil was born into the animals.” Adrian’s dazed mind sorted a batch of puzzle pieces in a back corner. This was an ancient mystery that mankind was cursed by. Dog may have just given him a key piece.

They only began killing when the evil of men took control.

“And the apple?”

Dog looked up in confusion. He had forgotten most of the world he came from, the fast, vibrant life that he’d held before. He remembered his part in it, but only that much.

Adrian rephrased the question. “What was the crime that got man banished from the garden?”

You already know what they did to curse us. It is why clean spirits pass on, but evil stays, constantly repeating in both human and animal

populations.

“They lay down with the beasts.” It was a theory he’d held for some time now. “*HE* stepped away for a breather, and they went crazy with their discoveries.”

And cursed an entire world.

“The first births?”

Dog wasn’t sure how much the man was ready for now. Adrian’s eyes were slightly feverish in the coming light. *Was animal-like. Its sibling was human. When the mistake was understood, the first son was banished to the wilderness, where he watched his brother with envy that became hatred. How could he do anything else but kill to reclaim what he had lost?*

“So earth...”

Is Hell. There is no better place to punish, than where the crime was committed.

Adrian was aghast. “How do we fix a curse like that?”

You cannot change what has been, only what may be.

“Meaning?”

The war gave one chance for mankind to repent, to get it right. You are leading that grueling charge. You have to convert them, rip away the evil; make them believers.

“That’s what Safe Haven already does.” Adrian felt odd arguing with a wolf. “One ugly step at a time.”

The head start is too big. You could convert

every survivor on the entire planet. It would not be enough.

“How then?”

STOP! There were rules. Dog heard the mental warning clearly. He wasn’t allowed to share the answer.

Adrian wasn’t above begging. “I only want human suffering to end. I’d never use anything you tell me to gain power.”

Dog broke the rule without caring what punishment he might receive. Adrian was the shepherd. He needed this information. *If drawn by a bright enough light, lost souls might come, ready to mend old hatreds and be reborn in peace. That might shift the balance of good and evil back to man’s favor.*

Adrian tried to estimate the number of lost souls and couldn’t. “How do I convert them once called?”

Dog looked up at him warily. *The same as you do your living herd. Very carefully.*

5

“The Ambulance and escorts are back.”

“Copy.” When Adrian got to the QZ, he found Seth waiting for him at the tape. The headache in his temple grew worse as his mind continued to sort through all that Dog had shared.

“Rick’s dead.”

Adrian didn’t congratulate Seth, sensing the damage was bad. “And?”

“Samantha has a concussion and a face that looks like she went five rounds with a heavyweight.” Seth sneered. “She got off easy.”

They both turned as the ambulance door opened, watching John and Anne help Becky into a wheelchair. Covered in sheets and the haze of drugs, it was clear what she had suffered.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you or her mom yet. She said if you make her, you’ll both be sorry.”

“What did John say?”

Seth’s hands clenched. “John wants her under 24-hour suicide watch in the medical tent.”

It was still better than what Adrian had expected upon finding out Rick had also taken Becky. “What about Samantha?”

“I’ll live.” Samantha climbed from the ambulance, grateful to John for insisting on the painkillers. She felt like shit and not the normal kind, but a pile that had been rubbed across the sidewalk by dozens of feet.

Adrian went to help her, scowling at her misshapen face and bandaged hands. “I’m sorry.”

“I brought him here.” Samantha accepted his touch stiffly. “You don’t owe me that.”

“Rebecca won’t accept our sympathy either.” Seth was shattered in a way that he had no idea how to fix. “She hates everyone.”

“Adrian didn’t do this. Neither did Neil or myself. Rick did, and in time she’ll realize that.” Sam turned toward the QZ’s small parking area, where the guards were preparing for the mission

team's triumphant arrival. Extra tents were going up, the mini mess was being erected, the smell of food was wafting over them. Very soon, she would have to face her own mistakes and then sacrifice her desires to repair the damage.

"You headed for a tent?" Adrian was sure John wanted her resting.

Samantha's eyes stayed on the parking area, where camp women were gathering—some waiting to care for the new people, some waiting to care for the Eagles. "There's something I need to do first."

Adrian recognized the tone. He waved an alert looking rookie over. "Stay with her. She gets out of your sight, you're out of my army."

Samantha and the rookie both frowned, but Seth nodded in approval. During the ride, Samantha had told them how Rick waited for the rookies to leave her alone during shift change. He'd grabbed her from the shower during the lapse. *None of the camp's special people will ever be without guards again.*

Engines swelled.

The redhead crossed his arms over his chest, face tightening. He hadn't argued with Samantha about it not being anyone's fault but Rick's. She was beaten and medicated, so why bother? However, Neil hadn't suffered. He didn't know what had happened, but Seth was about to make sure Neil was aware of the debt he now owed to the devastated girl who had chosen to stay in an Eagle's tent and hide rather than to face anyone.

“You are approaching an American M-Military Refugee Camp. Identify yourselves!”

Frowning, Neil keyed the mike. “Amber waves of grain.”

“Melcome back!” Mitch slurred cheerfully. “We swissed you.”

Neil lashed out. “Thanks, you fucking drunk! That means *so* much coming from you.”

Laughter floated over the camp.

Neil didn’t give their radioman time to respond. He released his team from the run. “Your mission is now complete, gentlemen. Well done.”

Headlights from the rest of the team flashed in his mirror as the radio lit up again.

“The doctor is waiting, the mini-mess has cold sandwiches, milk, hot coffee.”

Mitch now sounded tense, as if he was hurriedly trying to sober up while looking over his shoulder for Adrian.

Neil nodded in satisfaction as he climbed out, noticing Jeremy talking with a QZ guard. His XO was finding out what Neil already knew. Something had happened, something the team intentionally hadn’t been told.

Jeremy slowly turned, reeling in fear. He found Neil across the parking area and read no surprise, only the same grim need to know.

Jeremy joined his team leader. “She’s in the

medical tent.”

Neil started to duck under the tape, but Jeremy caught his arm. “In the *QZ* medical tent. Rick kidnapped her and Becky.”

Neil’s heart thudded against his chest. “Is she okay?”

Jeremy didn’t have to ask which female he meant. “Lee said she’s allowed visitors.”

“Is Rick dead?”

“Yes.” Seth appeared behind them, face a mask of anger. “Becky killed him—after the hit and pit.”

Both Eagles felt the weight of her abuse, but until they knew about Samantha, it wasn’t going to sink in.

“She got hurt, Neil. They both did. Are you happy now?”

Neil recoiled in surprise. “No! Why would I be?”

“You flipped when Samantha came, changed your mind. Rick was right there watching, taking advantage of it.” Seth pointed, flushed. “Some of this is your fault.” Seth wanted to fight, to find a release for this helplessness in his heart. “You owe her, Neil. If you don’t pay that debt, I’ll turn the Eagles against you.”

Seth stalked off, going back to lurk in the trees around his tent.

The trooper didn’t need to look around to know that everyone who had heard them agreed he was partly responsible for two of their females being hurt.

The rock-solid status Neil had protected so selfishly now tilted harshly under his feet.

7

“No more. I mean it!”

Thud!

Adrian marched through the damp night, searching for the source of the sounds. Disturbing the peace right now was a dangerous thing for anyone to do. Like his men, Adrian also needed a release for the guilt and horror. He tracked it mentally, angry guards on his heels.

“What the hell, Zack?” Tucker frowned. “We always razz him. You do, too!”

Zack shook his head. “No more. He’s earned his place.”

“You don’t get to make that call!” Anderson spat. He’d never liked Zack because of how he sucked up to everyone.

“Yes, I do. Until the rest of the Eagles are cleared, I’m top man here under Kenn.” Zack pointed. “You’ll do as you’re told.”

“Or what?” Tucker stood straighter. “You’ll set up a guard for this little baby, like you did with that new bitch?”

Zack’s face iced over; he used the biggest weapon any Eagle had in their arsenal. “I’ll tell the boss.”

“Tell me now!” Adrian came through the trees.

Zack was elated as Adrian joined them. “If you’d taken the order you were given, you’d be in the clear. Now, you’ll pay.” Zack had already confessed his own behavior to Kyle right after he’d been taken back into the Eagles. “He’s waiting.”

Anderson, Tucker, and Jones didn’t speak.

Adrian didn’t need it. Instead of the scolding they expected, he helped Ray to his feet. “You gonna live?”

“You know it.” Ray used his arm to shield a rib he was sure was broken.

“The fire crew needs a team leader.” Adrian’s composure cracked enough for them to hear the compassion he usually held inside with iron will. “You’re it. Have Dale help, if he wants to.”

Ray’s gratitude made his eyes damp. “Thank you.”

Adrian felt that ugly side of him lunge to the front. He needed a release and people needed a lesson. Adrian spun around.

Thud! Thud!

“Hey! Wait—”

Thud! Thud!

Zack stayed alert, no longer cocky as he worried the boss would go to work on him next. He hadn’t paid for what he’d done, only confessed and stopped.

Adrian’s hard knuckles were streaked with crimson as he stepped away from the three groaning bullies, breath ragged. He met Zack’s wary gaze over the Eagles. “Get them in line! If you can’t,

they're gone!"

"Yes, Boss." Zack was relieved when Adrian stalked by, slinging blood onto the blackening trees.

Ants hurried to taste it.

Ray moved by Zack without a word, but it was a big moment for both of them—the gay and straight man face-to-face with no animosity. For one instant, they were on the same side. It gave Ray hope and sent Zack's mind into another layer of self-exploration.

This was what Adrian wanted; it had been a part of the dream even before Ray had saved his life. Adrian wanted all his people to be accepted. The words spoken right before Anderson and Jones had held Ray so that Tucker could take rib shots with those big, beefy farmer hands, had brought that to Zack's thick mind clearly.

Ray didn't struggle. These three had been waiting for Dale to come out of the shower. Ray had drawn their attention with a quick insult. Dale had run for the man on point—Zack—as the scuffle turned ugly. "Go on. Get it over with."

"Oh, we will!"

"Hold still!"

"Why? Because you're scared and need the rush to prove that you're still alive when everyone else is dead?"

The blows had started there. It had taken Zack a minute to snap out of the instant daze those words

caused, allowing Ray to suffer two powerful punches. Every syllable had fit perfectly.

Zack hit his button. "John to the parking area. Bring your bag."

"Copy."

Zack left the nearly unconscious trio to be found by the doctor. That was all he was willing to do for them. They would have hurt Ray this time. It was enough to drive in how different he was becoming. Before his time around Adrian... *Angela*, Zack would have been the fourth man, trading off punches with Tucker. Now, he was disgusted and determined to protect both Ray and Dale.

What the hell has this place done to me? Why didn't I understand how wrong it was before? Because the old world had expected people like him to treat people like Ray badly? Because it had been an outlet for working his life away just to own a piece of property to be buried on? Because the lovers were breaking society's basic rules and were happy?

Childhood abuse had eaten Zack up inside until he was a bitter man with nothing kind to say to a woman. As Kenn's right hand man, he'd done things that could get him banished and tossed back out into the apocalyptic wastelands with his sons. It was a risk he'd been willing to take.

Until Dean snuck into Safe Haven and almost killed Angela, Zack had been content with the orders Kenn had given because he was being loyal. Zack's sense of right and wrong had been

scrambled. He had thought it was okay for him to treat his first wife, who'd died during the war, as badly as he wanted because he was suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. He also thought it was all right for Kenn to hit Angela because they were together for so long and women needed correction from time to time. Now, he might openly shoot a man for hurting a female. After being in Safe Haven and learning true men didn't hurt the innocent, Zack was realizing he'd been wrong...his entire life.

Full of chaos, Zack returned to rounds as point man, but he waved Kevin along to be positive things were covered while he explored the guilt-laden doors showing up in his mind. The war had changed everything.

7

Samantha waited outside her QZ tent in a daze. These painkillers weren't as good as morphine, but they were still strong enough to make her a bit fuzzy. Hopefully, they would help her get through this without breaking down and doing something stupid, like telling her men the truth.

What I wouldn't give for a quarter syringe to calm my nerves!

After what she'd just gone through, Samantha didn't berate herself for the thought. Her addiction had been a shock. It still was. She would keep fighting, but right now, that liquid gold was a delicious fantasy. *Reality, in comparison, sucks*

donkey dicks.

The guards on the area didn't comment on Samantha's battered face as they greeted her, but they couldn't help staring. Everyone had been waiting for this moment. No matter which man she picked, they expected it to break up Neil's team.

At the sight of both her men alive and well, Samantha let out the breath she'd been holding since first hearing the whispers. *Man down*, was a phrase she now loathed.

Samantha held up a hand when Neil and Jeremy would have rushed to hug and touch her. "Let me breathe."

Both males stopped, angrily scanning her injuries.

"What happened?"

"Are you okay?"

Sam didn't want to relive it. "Rick's dead. Becky's shot was beautiful."

The two men exchanged a worried glance at the odd tone. She almost sounded regretful.

"Sammi?"

"I'm glad you're both okay." Samantha ignored Neil's worry, seeing to her own needs first. "Welcome home."

But there wasn't much welcome in her words. Jeremy leaned against the side of the QZ supply truck, patiently waiting to be denied what he now wanted as much as his place in Safe Haven. He was positive she would choose Neil. He hadn't decided yet about staying on the team once they became a

couple.

Samantha hated what she was about to do. She hesitated.

Jeremy held up a hand. "I don't need to hear it too. Feeling it is enough."

She flushed at his open longing. "I'm sorry I can't give you what you want."

The XO shrugged as if he wasn't being ripped apart. "You and Neil together was the plan all along, the main plot. I'm glad it worked out."

Samantha stepped closer, unable to ignore Jeremy's pain. "I'm sorry."

"And you still want to be friends, right?"

"Close friends."

Jeremy shrugged, fighting his emotions. "It's harder to pretend *not* to feel something for someone. I'm not sure I'm that good of an actor."

Samantha hadn't expected it to hurt them all so much. She swallowed a withdrawal of her choice. "You'll stay away?"

Jeremy was too upset to care about witnesses. "I think that's best."

"I figured you'd say that. I understand, but I won't act differently." She smiled sadly, unable to help feeling abandoned even though he had no other defense against her choice. "You were my first real friend here. I'll miss you." A tear rolled down her bruised cheek.

Jeremy's control snapped. "Damn it!" He stepped forward. "And damn me, too."

Jeremy carefully surrounded Neil's woman

with arms that didn't shake, didn't betray him. He held her close for one moment of pretending she was his. "I'm always your friend, Samantha. More, if you ever want it."

Sam clutched at his strength, his need, surrounding herself with his light. "Promise?"

"Yes." Jeremy slowly placed a gentle kiss to her forehead, then pushed her back. "Just let me heal for a while. It hurts."

He was out of her sight an instant later, leaving Sam with a new wall of guilt. She should have stopped his play after the first act, but she'd had no will to resist after that life crushing trip to get here. This pain was her punishment for using them both to ease her loneliness.

Neil studied Samantha's stiff back for a sign that she had anything more encouraging to say to him but didn't find one. It didn't stop him from trying. "I'd like to talk."

Samantha carefully wiped her cheek. "I have to rest now. I only waited up to get this over with."

Neil did brace this time, hands going to rest on his belt, feet straightening. "Go on, then."

Samantha took instant offense at his tone. If she'd said that to Jeremy, he would have taken her arm and escorted her to a tent to lie down. They each had their own way of treating her, their own responses to her moods. She'd found herself grateful for that at various times. This wasn't one of them. "Okay, I will. I don't want an exclusive relationship with you, either. I tried to tell you. Now

he's hurt, and you—"

"Are what you really want, so stop playing games," Neil interrupted. "I'm too tired for it."

Sam's head throbbed, reminding her of what *she'd* just gone through. The anger resurfaced, blasting out. "Only some of what I want." Samantha sneered. "Jeremy's the other half."

Neil's face reddened at the direct hit. He got set to fire back, but the unhappiness in her next words diffused his anger.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but if I can't have it set up the way *I* want it, then serving the greater good will be enough." Samantha found Jeremy's shadow moving tiredly into the QZ shower camper. "I've had so much less that it won't even faze me to be lonely."

Neil studied her, resisting the urge to say she could have whatever she wanted, if she'd just let him lie down and hold her for a while. It felt like this run would never end. "How do you want it, Sam?"

She sighed. "That's not something I can explain."

Neil was confused and tired of fighting. If she needed a confession of emotions, no problem. "Samantha, I love—"

"I know that." The pain pills were making it hard to think, to be patient. "So does everyone else."

Neil gaped at her. "You know that I love you?"

She nodded, carefully. "A lasting friendship is all I can give in return."

Neil watched her hand slide over her bruised mouth as if she was as tortured by the choice as he was, but she was also determined to see it through. That was it, then. There would never be anyone else for him. “If that’s the way you want it.”

“It’s the way it has to be.” Sam absorbed his pain, and her own, to sob over later.

Neil picked up the kit he’d set by the tire and took it with him to the shower camper in the corner. He didn’t look back, determined to honor her wishes. He expected it to suck, but he would make sure that he never crossed the line again. When he bled on the inside, he would be the only one who knew.

Neil stepped into the camper and saw Jeremy already in a stall. His XO looked utterly dejected. *Jeremy will know. He’ll bleed alongside me.*

Neil being here, instead of with Samantha, was a surprise to Jeremy. He took in the wounded expression that mirrored his own. “Friends too, huh?”

“Yeah.” Neil grunted tiredly. “What’s with that shit?”

Jeremy shrugged, trying to shake off the feeling of drifting in an ocean without a boat. “Something in the female bloodline they pass to each other, maybe. Rip a man’s guts open, then want to hang out later like nothing happened. Gets them an award in the sisterhood or something.”

Neil found a small snicker and gave the required male bonding response. “Like when you get in a

good shot, something you know they can't deny, and they still manage to twist it so you were wrong."

Jeremy snorted thinly. "For even firing, usually."

"Yep." Neil dropped his gear and got the water running.

After a minute, the steam began to relax weary muscles. The light conversation they'd been having issues with for weeks continued to fall.

"John will have us cleared quick." Jeremy rinsed the bloody soap off, feeling better but not sure why.

"Yeah."

"I'm going up the hill to help dig graves when I'm out."

"Same here." Neil glanced over at his XO. "You still feel the need to kill me?"

Jeremy shook his head. "No. I was just thinking she gave us our team back with this choice."

It occurred to them both, then, why she'd really done it.

Neither of them spoke again after that.

8

"This is the way you want it?"

"Yes." Samantha tried not to let Adrian discover what a lie that was. She couldn't have what she wanted... *Can I?*

Standing by her well-guarded tent, Adrian was picking up vibes that pleased and worried him. Her

refusal of both males hadn't just been for the good of Neil's team. It was part of her own nature showing and if her two men hadn't recognized it, Adrian would eat his jacket. With her choice, she'd secured her place among the Eagles.

Adrian didn't stare at Sam's injuries like those on duty around them were. John had assured him their storm tracker would be fine. It was the teenager huddled in the next tent who needed care and concern. "For the good of the many?"

"Yes. I could never be happy with one of them if it hurt the dream. I believe in it too much for that." *And I want something else, something that was forbidden in the old world. How can I get it?*

Adrian studied her, watching the mental smoke roll. *What is she planning?* Her entire demeanor had just gone still and wary—a sign of female chaos yet-to-come. "Samantha?"

She ducked into her tent without responding.

Adrian let her go, a bit stunned by her courage as the answer occurred to him. He hadn't considered that these postwar women would want to change the double standard on physical relief. Adrian began to smile. Once the camp got over it, they would start giving more freedoms that females had been denied because of their gender. After that, the quiet, steady women who were even now generously seeing to the comfort of his returning army, would join it.

Adrian's pleasure sent peace and light over his camp in thick waves. Despite the wounds they'd suffered, the future had never looked better.

Kenn appeared at his side. “Kyle just checked in. Said he won’t make it back until evening.”

Catching the uneasy tone, Adrian waved a hand. “What is it?”

Kenn filled him in on the Jennifer situation, ending with the last thing Kyle had transmitted. “He said to tell you to tally his account. That mean anything?”

“It’s a warning.” Adrian sighed in resignation. “He’s giving me time to prepare.”

Giving you time to save him, Kenn thought. His own foray into banishment hadn’t been that long ago. Kenn found he held sympathy. “Message back?”

“Yes. Tell him it’s been a long run, and I want him home. We’ll handle all that shit when it happens.”

“The other rescued slaves are saying she’s only fourteen.”

Adrian thought of the way Seth had defended Becky’s honor, of how he was still on duty over her. “Then she’ll need a friend like Kyle. They all will.”

Kenn frowned, not understanding.

Adrian didn’t try to explain. With the slavers gone, more things would change for Safe Haven now. The future depended on it. Adrian had expected Neil to break this particular barrier for the camp, but Rick had changed the roles. Now, Seth and Kyle might have those parts in rebuilding their world.

“Kyle *needs* to be an Eagle. It’s who he is now.”

Aware of Kenn lingering, Adrian headed toward the warehouse again. They both wanted a subtle check to be sure Angela was okay. "He'll walk the lines carefully, like we all do."

"Did you help her?" Charlie stepped out of the shadows to Adrian's right, followed by Cynthia, who hung back to give them privacy.

Kenn immediately went in a different direction.

Charlie had just been in to visit his mom, and he was surprised by how much better she seemed. It didn't match what he'd been expecting after looking through Eagle minds for details. "Did you?"

Adrian flashed to holding Angela, sharing his strength. "Yes, as much as was allowed."

"But it won't last."

"No. She'll use it up quickly."

"Would you have been able to bring her back, like she did for my dad?" Charlie's tone wasn't accusing, but it was hard.

"No."

The teenager stared, working it through, dealing with his emotions.

Adrian wondered if the boy's parents knew how restless he was becoming, how apt to swing.

"The Eagles would have killed you."

Again, Adrian told the truth. "Only if they beat me to it."

"And you put her in that situation!"

"It's where she belongs. I can prove that."

"How?"

The child's tone was hopeful, but nowhere near

the subservient minion he'd been before. *Good*. "If she resigns, I was wrong to put her there. And *everyone* will understand that, not just my army."

The teenager grunted in recognition of what Adrian had risked, was still risking. It hadn't been just the lives of his men, but also the very leadership that had brought them all together. "She won't. You knew that or you wouldn't have set it up."

"Partially." Adrian enjoyed the teaching moment with the bright boy, but he wished it hadn't happened. He would never forgive himself for letting Angela get shot. "I watched to be sure, but there was a moment when your mom and I first met that told me where she belonged. With you, it was in that dusty office of Sage Lanes."

"When I came to you about the new arrivals."

"Yes. You were serving the greater good, with no idea of what my army was even about yet. I've always known you would have a place."

Darkness crossed Charlie's face. "They'll think I'm too young. They want to hold me back."

Adrian shrugged, finally reaching the warehouse door. "Age doesn't make a man or a woman, awareness of the situation does. They know that." Adrian stepped inside, but he looked back with a hard stare. "Be reasonable and take their instruction. Everyone needs guidance, but *especially* those like us. Without self-control, our gifts are dangerous to everyone. Never forget that."

Before Adrian could get inside, Neil joined him.

Adrian moved back to the sidewalk. He didn't

think he'd been this tired since right after the war.

"Camp's up and running."

"Good." Adrian was functioning on a total of fifteen hours sleep in five days. His previous whining came to mind, making him grimace. *Not anymore. Every four hours of rest I get after this will be valued.*

Neil's bloodshot eyes went to the hilltop, where a few of the men were getting things set up for the funeral now that the digging was finished. It was the first one Safe Haven would attend as a camp. For the Eagles, it was closure for this run. The men were gathering in the training tent for workouts. He was headed there next.

Kenn moved around the corner and into the warehouse without looking at either of them. A number of guards were following the Marine. Kenn's mistakes hadn't been forgotten.

"Should I head that off or let it roll?"

Adrian considered Neil's question, reading the faces of the men trailing Kenn. "If they choose to handle it now, let it roll." Adrian moved closer though, in case he was needed.

"Adrian."

The leader turned back, catching the tone. He braced for a blow.

Neil delivered two. "Use the team as you see fit, but Jeremy and I agreed we need a break. We're both off duty until further notice." Neil let his personal torment show. "And I'm no longer your third in command. I don't deserve it anymore. Give

it to Marc. I'm done."

Adrian stared in shock as Neil walked away. *I just lost my first Eagle.*

The End of Book 2

What would you like to do now?



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Note From The Author

Hello Blurry Reader!

Once again, I didn't want to cut it where I did. However, there is still 100+ pages of aftermath and there just wasn't room for them. To make the paperback, the page count has to be below 800 and I'm already over that.

I hope you liked this edition of *Life After War*. The next book takes us toward Arkansas, where Adrian's personal mystery begins to unravel.

Did you know you can leave me a comment on Facebook? I honestly read them! I love hearing from readers. You ladies and gentlemen are to me, what the Eagles are to Adrian—*Everything*.

And by the way, thanks. About halfway through this book, I was nervous. The story wasn't flowing right, the ending was in choppy segments, and the bad reviews on book one's editing were dragging me into the fiery depths of hell. By page 800, I was overwhelmed, wondering how I'd get it all in 'book' form. At the point I pasted the ending into the file, I had 195,000 words, 990 pages, and Writer's Shake.

Let me tell you a little about Writer's Shake. It's not an official illness, but it should be. It's when you stare at the words without a clue how to wrangle them into submission. You're exhausted, more drained than even after the best orgasm of your life,

and yet, there's this whole other mountain to climb. But it's a labor of love and you struggle to your feet, swaying, reaching out for support from the one source that's kept you going so far—your readers.

They respond with a kindness you never really thought would happen, shoving your dreams into vivid clarity. They love your work! They've fallen into a passionate affair with your world and they yearn for more. They email you and leave wonderful comments on your website. They tell people about you, send pictures of themselves wearing Safe Haven dog tags, and in the midst of your dreams coming true, you realize you're shaking.

Why? Because you still haven't managed to climb that other mountain and all those delightful people are now waiting...and waiting...and waiting. The longer it takes to get to the top, the harder you shake. By the summit, your gut is one big Prevacid and no one in your household will even walk by the door where you're working without fear of being decapitated. The pizza delivery boy knows your card # by heart and all you can think about is how nice it was to be asleep a lifetime ago.

The Shakes are unpleasant. Non-writers often assume authors spend a few hours a day working and the rest goofing off. It's only that cushy when your last name is infamous, and I am nowhere near that. This stress is one small downside of my new life, but I've never worked harder on anything, never been more proud. That driving force, those

shakes, pushed me into a place where I can stand in safety, knowing the final result is one I'm honored to share.

Adrian's Eagles was finished for me on All Fool's Day. When Cynthia pulled that trigger, I gently shut the door, but didn't bother with the lock. We'll be returning to Safe Haven and its magic...only next time, I'll have the memory of this feeling to lean on when I shake. I love you guys; I hope you know that. Thank you for your purchase, and for gifting me with your time.

It's been *my honor*,
Angie

On another personal note, I would also like to thank the great people who beta read for me, hosted me on their sites and blogs, and offered their services to me. It was an honor to work with those Eagles. Thank you Kim, Holly, Carol, Drew, Stacey, Jeanne M, Allison, Charles, Angie H, Crystal, Elizabeth, Kim, John M, Jeff, Wendy, Marleen, Kristi, Harry, Jim, Jacqueline, Diane, Clara, for all your hard work!

Deleted Scene

“What’s going on?”

Seth shrugged at her question. “We’re not sure. Kenn hasn’t checked in.”

Angela sent the witch out to search. When she stopped, so did Seth. “We need to—”

“It’s all right.” Adrian came through the fog.

“They’re hiding in a cornfield off a highway. Bikes, gunshots...screams. They’re coming this way.”

The witch’s voice was ominous in the thick fog. Adrian’s hand slid to his gun for comfort. “Can you send a message? Tell him there’s a distraction coming, to dig in.”

She shut her eyes as Adrian gave Seth instructions. The guard was gone an instant later.

“The slavers found their vehicles, but with all the darkness and fog they can’t find...”

Adrian frowned, waiting while she searched.

“They’re too close, too loud. Kenn’s pinned down.”

“It’s a go, Boss.”

Adrian pushed the button on the mike in response to the radio call. “Now.”

Seconds later, there was a shrieking whistle and a dull thud as a rocket launched, barreling east. It exploded over the dark landscape; a shower of purple stars lit up behind the fog like a magic show.

Adrian keyed his mike. "Another. Two more after that, thirty seconds apart."

The shriek came again, whistling though the night before filling the sky in gold and blue showers of light.

Angela shuddered. "They've changed directions. The Eagles are circling around."

Adrian was relieved. "Tell them to meet us on the road."

Fireworks exploded again, drawing more people. Rick crouched lower as he pushed the button on the mike. "It's a trick. You have a rat in the corn."

There was a double click in response.

Rick quickly put the channel to where it had been and got out of the unmanned Com truck. He faded into the fog a second later.

The traitor had heard Angela's words while roaming under the cover of the weather. When the teenager running the radio stepped away for a better view of the fireworks, Rick seized the chance to help the slavers.

He entered the shower camper, nodding to a guard using one of the stalls. He needed Cesar to hurry up before he blew his own cover with Neil's murder. A few more times of having to see him and Samantha flirting might be enough to send him into a rage that would only end in blood.

Morgan frowned. "What's going on out there?"

Rick pulled off his shirt. “Fireworks to the east. No alarm sounded yet.”

The Eagle continued his shower.

Rick started a casual conversation that would be remembered later, providing an uncontestable alibi.

Place a Review

Reviews are one of the biggest ways that readers can help their favorite authors, or warn their fellow readers! Reviews do not have to be long. Just let the world know how this book made you feel while you were reading it, and maybe who you think would enjoy that type of story. To place one on this book, [take this link to my website page](#) and pick the store of your choice. Thank you, really. Reviews mean a lot.

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Paperback Page

Book 3



Nuclear Ashes

1

Kenn stopped in the open door to Angela's room, ignoring disapproving looks from her guards.

"You'll live. That's good." Kenn scanned her wounds. *I hate seeing that on her now. I wish I'd been along to stop it.*

The thought drew a surprised stare from Angela. She could feel how much he meant it. "Yeah. Thanks."

Kenn was unable to take his gaze off the breathing wound. It was uglier than anything he'd

ever done to her.

“That doesn’t absolve you!”

“I know... I didn’t come to fight.”

Angela watched him, while he watched her. They’d been through a lot together, years of hell, but the war had ended it. They were both free now. “I’m telling the camp about Charlie’s parentage.”

Kenn stiffened. “Most of them suspect anyway. They think you had an affair.” He took the next step toward peace with the past. “I’m sorry for saying it.”

Silence lingered in the small room at his admission.

Kenn leaned against the doorframe and stared at her with an unreadable blue gaze.

Angela lifted her chin and carefully stood up.

“Ugh.” The thick twinge when she straightened ripped a groan from her lips against her will. She didn’t look at Kenn, hating it that he was seeing her weak.

“You’re on light duty in a week?”

“Providing John clears it.” Angela took her first steps while the overprotective hens were out of the room. It had been five days since her boots had even touched the ground. It felt good to be standing, to be alive.

She inched toward the window. The room they had her in was an office, now cleared of everything except the stiff couch, two chairs and a desk with photos of a smiling family. The room had one door and one window. *An escape route.* She flashed to

the country club. Fire was her biggest fear—one she wasn't sure she even wanted to try taming.

Sunlight, bright and rare, beamed in as she looked through the yellowed blinds. Safe Haven appeared, with hundreds of happy survivors. The weight in Angela's heart eased a bit. *I'm home.*

Angela watched Marc take the dog leashes from Charlie, freeing the boy to come in again. He was so good, so pure.

Being with his father might have given Charlie that type of personality too. Hopefully, there was still time for some of it to rub off.

Behind her, the room was filling with tension. She realized Kenn wanted something. "What is it?"

Kenn winced. He'd assumed there wouldn't be magic with her so weak. "Do you think... Is there some way..." Kenn clenched his hands. "Can you forgive me?"

Angela turned, gaping. That was something she'd never thought to hear from him.

It was something Kenn had never thought he would say and actually mean. Hoping for her to die on the trip to Safe Haven had been easy. When it was a real possibility, the truth had come like a shovel to the knuckles. He wanted power, but Kenn thought he'd remained immune to her charms. Then the war came, and he'd even thought to leave his obsession behind, but she'd made it here. And then earned a place at Adrian's side! It was the Angela he had first glimpsed working in the kids' unit at the hospital, settling into her new career. She'd been

vibrant, a glowing beacon of hope for his dark soul. He'd loved her. *I still do... Damn it!*

Angela was picking up his thoughts clearly now. The ugly darkness she was used to was gone, replaced by the heavy chains of guilt. Her nearly dying had sent him soul-searching. She wouldn't destroy that progress. "Yes. In time, I think."

Kenn opened his mouth, grateful.

"Well, I won't!"

Charlie was standing behind Kenn. It was hard to guess how much he'd heard, but clearly, it was enough. Weariness swarmed over Angela. She braced her wobbly legs. *Maybe it is too soon for all this.*

"You always get off!"

The open hatred in Charlie's words was a surprise to the Marine, but not to the mother.

"I'm gettin' real tired of that. He doesn't deserve forgiveness!" Charlie sneered. "Until I'm an Eagle, I guess there's not much I can do about it."

The teenager left with an angry stride that was very unlike the obedient boy the camp had gotten used to.

There was a pause after he left. Charlie's words had opened a new dilemma. Would Adrian let the teenager into his army? What was the age limit? Was there one?

Kenn started to follow the boy.

Zack stepped into his path. "Leave him alone. You've done enough damage."

“Move!” Kenn started to bump shoulders and found Zack’s gun in his chest.

Zack scanned Angela. “You should lie down.” He glared at Kenn. “And you should get the hell out.”

Adrian viewed it from the front door in satisfaction. She’d won them all over, even the stunned Marine slowly lowering his fist. Kenn was also now hers to command, though she didn’t know it yet.

Adrian watched her motion Charlie out of the line of fire, and then refuse his request to go get Marc. He had come right back upon hearing Zack challenge Kenn. *She understands Charlie needs to see this too*, Adrian thought in approval. It was amazing to find someone who could lead so instinctively. Angela was exactly what he’d begged fate to send.

Kenn’s tense body relaxed. “Go on then, shoot me. You still won’t get my place.”

“I don’t want it!” Zack spat. “I want you exposed for the lying pig that you are!”

Kenn stared. He didn’t understand why Zack had flipped on him. “Why?”

“Because our camp XO always has to do his duty first, or we die.” Zack motioned with the barrel of his gun. “Jeff overheard Adrian right after the brother snuck into camp and was killed. He said Angie could have been stabbed and shot!” Zack’s finger tightened, expression twisting. “You once told me you were the best rifleman on your base.

Why did she get hurt at all?"

Kenn hadn't seen this blow coming.

The listening men crowded closer, giving Zack a full team of pissed-off, mixed-level support.

Zack wasn't aware of it; he didn't need it. He'd found out the night before the slaver mission and vowed to handle it as soon as he could. "If you'll do that to a female, to an Eagle, you don't deserve to be his XO. You should be banished!"

"Or maybe dead." Allan came to flank Zack. "If you had your own team, it might have already happened."

"That's why he doesn't." Lee joined the impromptu moral board. "And why he resents all of us so much. Even the rookies are more worthy than he is. At least they try to get along."

Zack slowly lowered his gun. "*Angela* should have your place."

Kenn had frozen, determined to take his punishment like a man, but now, he shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned against the doorframe, no longer caring about their audience. "I have his right because I belong there. You don't have to believe it. Adrian does."

"Then maybe he's wrong!"

Outside, the camp was growing quiet, becoming aware of a problem.

"Maybe so." Kenn flashed that hard, new expression they were all starting to be cautious of, to respect. "But you wouldn't even be an Eagle right now if it weren't for me, so your opinion means

exactly shit.”

Zack’s arm rose again. “That’s not true!”

“It is.” Kenn swept the other furious men, ignoring the gun. “The same is true of most of you. I’ve added to his army, and I’ve always pulled my weight. I’ve even saved the camp, all of them, at least once. I’ve bled and sweated, and built, the same as you have.” Having the day for it, Kenn surprised all of them. “And I’ve made mistakes, ones I’m trying to fix. If it’s too late for that, or I find I’m not strong enough, I’ll resign.”

“It’s too late.” Zack gestured. “Look at the mess last night!”

Kenn shrugged. “I’d like to see how you would have done so much better with everything going on.”

“I want you gone.”

“You don’t get to make that call.”

All eyes went to Adrian, but the blond was staring at Angela. He lifted a brow.

She shook her head. “He stays where he is.”

Faces tightened at her firm answer.

Zack’s anger fled, leaving a tired hatred. He spat at Kenn’s boots. “You’re a piece of shit.”

Kenn let out a harsh grunt. “Fuck you, boot.”

Everyone waited as Zack considered attacking anyway.

“You’d better kill me.” Kenn glared. “That is the only way I’ll go.”

“Maybe he’ll have help with that.” Allan hadn’t drawn his gun, but his hand was resting on the

holster. “If you had been doing your job, Rick wouldn’t have gotten close enough to try killing Adrian. You let your personal shit endanger everyone in this camp.”

“Too busy plotting and planning to do your job.” Zack’s voice deepened. “It’s been quiet because we had more important things to handle, but now that the slavers are gone, you should be, too.”

It was a powerful moment for the Eagles, but for Kenn, it was only the rest of his lies collapsing.

“Take a vote, then.” Kenn knew the outcome.

Allan looked to Adrian, who was in the doorway. “He still has your support?”

“Yes.”

There was no hesitation.

Allan hadn’t expected any. “Until he doesn’t, we’ll follow, but the second he gets out of line, we’ll kill him.”

“I’d expect no less from the men you’ve become.” Adrian’s tenor was full of careful control. “Now, you’re truly my Eagles.”

“We are that.” Zack glared at Kenn. “As long as he walks your line, things will stay the way they are, but we’re watching now, and we won’t let even one fucking thing slide.”

Kenn had known it could get this bad when the truth finally came out. It would be open season on his place now, and the competition was only a part of it. The Eagles would help each other, make their own picks and form groups of support. It was quite

likely that a month from now, Neil or Marc might have the XO slot. Despite the words that had been said and everything that had happened, Kenn refused to believe Angela might get that place. The Eagles would never allow it, not when so many of them wanted it.

Head starting to thump, Adrian moved away from the main door and turned toward the camp. The members couldn't hear what was happening, but thanks to the glass front windows, they were viewing it. The warehouse was in the center, near the bonfire. He'd wanted Angela to feel surrounded by the golden light he was throwing out in thick waves.

Angela was reeling from the open emotions. The loss of their men wasn't helping. Daniel, Frank, and Cris had given their lives. Judging from the small work crew driving up the nearby hill, they would be buried tonight.

Angela heard Kenn leave and stayed at the window. The constant ache in her shoulder was draining her energy. She planned to sleep for a while before it got dark. When Adrian put their men to rest, she would be there to pay her respects—even if she had to ask for a wheelchair ride.

Knock-knock. “Is this a bad time?”

The curt rudeness of the past was gone, replaced with a cautious respect.

Angela carefully chuckled at the irony. Just a few days ago, the answer would have been completely different. “No, Cynthia. Come in and

close the door so we can talk.”

Samantha watched the door shut with resignation. After saving her life, Cynthia had every right to be Angela’s XO. That didn’t stop Samantha from wanting that slot.

Samantha noticed Hilda and Peggy hassling Adrian and detoured that way. Obviously, they’d expected him to do a better job of protecting Becky.

“No, I won’t.” Adrian swallowed his personal anger at the women. “I trust Seth to handle the duty he accepted.”

“I’m going in there!” Peggy started to walk around Adrian.

Finally acting like a mother, Samantha thought. *It’s too late.*

“No.” Adrian stepped in front of her.

“I’m going, and you won’t stop me!”

“I will.” Sam joined them, hand on her gun.

Hilda and Peggy gaped. They had expected Samantha to be on their side because she was female.

“Let the Eagles work.” Samantha patted her gun, bruises glaring at them. “It’s what *we* do.”

Adrian grinned at her open declaration of joining his army.

“What happened to my daughter last night?” Peggy pointed. “Was she beaten, like you?”

Sam wanted to shout the truth, but she did what any Eagle would have. She ignored the woman and walked away.

Samantha’s guard, Kevin, denied Peggy when

she would have grabbed Sam's arm. He stepped between them. "I wouldn't do that. She hasn't had any sleep yet."

Peggy glared at all of them, promising retribution.

Samantha stepped by with a casual nod to Adrian and received one in return. Behind her, she heard the chatter of angry women heading for the QZ anyway.

Samantha hit the button on her new belt, the first time she'd used it. "The QZ is under full quarantine until further notice. We're not sure what the contaminant is yet. No one allowed in or out."

"Copy." The QZ guard's voice was amused.

Adrian and Kevin shared pleased looks. If the other females who signed up were like Angie and Sam...*and Cyn*, Kevin added wistfully. If the others were as smart, Adrian's army was about to be unstoppable.

A minute later, the rookie guard on the parking area refused the two pissed women entry to the QZ.

Smirking a bit, Samantha continued on her way to the women's tents, ignoring the ache in her jaw and the stares at her bruises. *You should have cared more when it might have made a difference, Peggy. You deserve to worry.*

Samantha was shocked at the callous thought. *Don't I have any compassion for a hurting mother? A fellow woman?*

No, not in this case. Becky had been crying for help, but her mother had been too busy to notice, let

alone to react in time to save her. Becky had learned a hard lesson. Peggy deserved no less.

2

“She’ll be okay?”

“Yes.” Charlie handed the bottle back to Matt. “John said she can do light duty, as long as she keeps healing so fast.”

The two teenage boys didn’t bother with lowered voices despite the late hour.

“That’s good then, right?” Matt wanted things back the way they’d been. It was harder to steal a bottle when the Eagles were so alert.

“Yes...”

Matt belched. “Are you mad your mom got hurt?”

Charlie considered, vaguely thinking Matt didn’t always stutter. “No. At least, I don’t think so. I’m pissed at Kenn.”

“Because he hit her before the war?”

“Because he never has to pay for what he’s done! Someday, that will change.” He held out a hand. “Open the next bottle.”

Matt dropped his eyes. “Sorry. Couldn’t get it this time. My s-source...dried up.”

“You mean he kidnapped two of our women and got himself killed!”

Matt was shocked. “If you kn-knew I was helping Rick, why didn’t you tell?”

“For the same reason you didn’t tell anyone

about the things I can do.” Charlie shrugged, too upset to lie. “I didn’t want to lose my friend.”

“Yeah.”

After a minute, Charlie broke the grim silence. “Does Adrian know?”

Matt paled. “I haven’t heard anything yet, but I wasn’t given a schedule this morning...and I might be under guard. Yeah, I think so.”

“What about your dad?”

“Not yet.”

“I could show up when he’s flipping out, try to take some of the heat off you.”

“No.” The pimply teen let out a harsh sigh. “I earned it. I’ll pay for it.”

“Like Becky.”

Both boys shuddered at the images. They were old enough to imagine what men did to women. They hadn’t been good friends with Becky, but she was their age. It was frightening to think she and Samantha had been alone with a slaver.

“You wanna go with me to check in? Maybe my d-dad heard something from Kyle.”

Charlie followed Matt from the tent, aware of Eagles giving them suspicious looks. Yes, Adrian knew. Matt’s punishment would come.

The boys ducked under the canopy and saw Adrian and Mitch in conversation at the rear of the com truck.

Ray, the Eagle on duty here, waved them on. “Bad time. He’ll need to cool off.”

“He’s been doing what?! I’ll kill him!”

The boys fled toward the opposite end of camp. Mitch continued to spout threats.

Ray approved of Adrian's casual talk down that would keep the boy from being beaten. Matt's drinking problem was partly his father's fault. He had no right to hurt Matt for the methods used to achieve his needs. Mitch had done the same, only his desires had been attention and respect.

Across the way, Dale paused in his digging chore and delivered a quick smile.

Given with a slight tilt of the jaw, Ray's heart picked up. He'd met Dale right here in Safe Haven, and that was where they were staying. Dale hadn't been cut out to be an Eagle, but there was a place for him, a purpose other than being one of the camp members. Maybe Dale would be good on the fire crew. It was a respected place, more than enough to earn acceptance.

Off duty soon? Dale sent through code.

Ray shook his head, motioning. *No. See you after mess?*

Dale nodded quickly.

Ray gave him a lingering smile that sent a flush of happiness over his lover's cheeks. Ray knew it was likely to cause trouble, but it beat the hell out of ignoring Dale unless they were alone. Honesty, even if it got him thrown out, was the line Ray had chosen to walk.

“You need to lie down.”

Angela didn't protest when Marc slipped a hand under her good arm and guided her back to the couch. She'd only been up for an hour, but her body was swearing it had been longer.

Marc helped her into a comfortable position and handed her a bottle of water, not letting himself run through all of the things she and Cynthia could have been talking about. Deep down, he was sure he knew. “I should wake you, right? For the service.”

“Before that. I'll need time to get ready.”

Marc settled into the chair next to her bed. “I brought you something.” He handed her a purple gift bag. “Picked it up a couple weeks ago.”

She removed the trappings to reveal a long, thin box with blue velvet covering. Inside was a beautiful gold chain with a small silver pendant in the shape of an A.

Angela took it out of the box with a smile that filled his heart.

“It's beautiful.”

“I saw it in a display and thought of you.”

Glad to know it hadn't been taken from a previous owner, she held it out. “Put it on me?”

“Nope,” Marc denied in mock regret. “John said not even a bra strap for a few more days.”

Angela blushed and dropped her arm. She wasn't wearing one now. Her chest grew pointed under the thin shirt John had given her.

Marc kept his eyes on hers, swallowing a crude offer to hold them for her. Some days, being a man

was hard.

Angela caught the thought and flushed darker. “Can you, uh, give me a few minutes?”

Marc snickered, sending a chill through her gut. “Sure, Baby-cakes.” He moved for the door. “I’ll *hold* that thought.”

Angela gasped. “So not fair!”

Marc pulled the door closed before she could recover and fire back. As he went, he motioned a man over to stand guard. When they finished securing the perimeter and putting out the animals, Dog would also be here, ready to eat anyone who came close. The wolf wasn’t any happier about her injury than anyone else was.

Angela listened to the settling camp with one ear, and the thoughts of those moving around the warehouse with the other. The mood was half-glad, half-furious. She didn’t think it would take much to spark the fuse. She also didn’t think it would take much to put out the fire.

The camp thought she was dying. If she attended the service, they would understand it wasn’t as serious as rumor implied, like when Zack’s team had rioted or when she’d been stabbed. The Eagles would know better, of course, but they would spin the story because it served the greater good.

Pain, thick and heavy, dragged at her. Angela let sleep carry her away for a brief respite. Marc’s gift stayed clutched in her grip.

The radio crackled. “Kyle’s back, Boss.”

“Copy.” Adrian headed for the QZ, getting there in time to see Kyle pull in.

Kyle didn’t look at anyone; he didn’t check in or nod to his teammates. He didn’t even acknowledge the waiting QZ guard. He got out and went to open the passenger door of his truck.

The girl climbed down slowly.

Mutters went through the Eagles. The other slaves had said fourteen, but wearing Kyle’s sweats and Eagle jacket, Jennifer didn’t even appear to be that old. The clothing swallowed her, leaving only a child’s face and a stomach that looked ripe enough to pick.

Kyle grabbed his kit and gently put an arm around the teenager, helping. It would have been fine except for what the Eagles had been told and for the way he was ignoring everyone.

His handling also drew notice from Adrian. It was too familiar, too caring, too openly done. Adrian saw the frowning Eagles on duty, the scowling camp members who were close enough to see it, and understood Kyle wasn’t going to be talked down from his choice. He’d come prepared for a war. He was doing it this way to draw first blood.

And what about the pregnant urchin that had drawn his highest man so hard and so fast? Adrian studied her closely, searching.

He picked up nothing but energy. Some of it was dark, but enough of it was bright to tell Adrian what he needed to know. *She's one of us.*

“We may have to do something about that.” Neil came to Adrian’s side. The urge to roll back out of camp was strong for the trooper. There was nothing here for him but guilt. “After what I’ve done, caused, the camp won’t take much of it.”

Adrian didn’t offer comfort. Instead, he set up another lesson. “Do you think so?”

Neil shrugged. “The other slaves we rescued have had nothing good to say. He might be in over his head, enough to not see the consequences.”

Adrian regarded Neil coolly. “Like me, when it comes to wanting Angela?”

Neil forgot to breathe.

Adrian didn’t punish more than he had to. The trooper would be doing that to himself for a long time to come. “What did Kyle say, when you went to him about me?”

Neil forced himself to answer, suddenly afraid he’d just lost more ground than he could recover. “To trust you.”

Adrian watched Kyle help the girl into the nearest empty QZ tent and drop the flap against prying eyes. “We’ll honor him the same way. Leave them alone for now.”

“You got it...” Neil moved away, frowning.

Adrian glanced over his camp in tired contentment. Another of his needed few had come, and this one would lead the camp into the next level

of progression, the next level of survival. It was another moment of feeling like fate was on their side.

It made Adrian's determination stronger. When he was finished, this camp of survivors would all be Eagles, even down to the children. The color of their skin, their sex, or even age, meant little other than a new challenge to the camp's prewar mindset. It was the individual light inside—the personal value that had allowed each of them to be a survivor—he always appealed to, but it was the same red blood that pulsed through each of their veins. That's what he needed them to recognize. When they did, they would become a country united again, able to withstand.

5

The sound of the final mission member reaching the warehouse woke Angela. Cheers and crackling radios were loud.

She found Marc in the dim corner, hand on his gun belt, and knew he'd been standing guard over her.

"It's Kyle. Easy."

Dusk's orange glow washed through the shadows, bringing details to light. She loved that sexy jaw, those full lips. She smiled, stretching gingerly as desire rose. It was another welcome feeling. "You need sleep, too."

Marc grunted in response. He'd been thinking

about how he had watched her sleep on the trip to Safe Haven, and about how being without the sound of her breathing when they'd been separated had nearly broken him. *She's my world.*

Angela didn't push, reading his dangerous mood. His acceptance was also clear. After this, he wouldn't hold her back anymore. He would be by her side, helping to give life to Adrian's dreams.

"Yes, I will. For *you*."

"Eventually, it will be for them, as well."

Marc didn't grunt this time, quelling a sharp response to keep from upsetting her.

"So that's how it'll be? You'll close yourself off?"

Marc snorted, loving her sharp mind, and hating it at the same time. "Like I could do that unless you wanted me to."

Angela sighed. No, at the rate her gifts were growing, none of them would be able to keep her out. It was isolating.

"Are you ready?"

Angela let him help her onto her feet. It was time to pay respect.

Marc stayed on Angela's right as they reached the mess, aware of an entire camp watching their exceedingly slow progress through dusk's glow. He had thought she was hurting at first, but quickly realized that she was showing people she was okay enough to linger. Despite her good act, Marc didn't think she should even be out of bed, let alone

walking around.

He looked down to find Angela's gaze on his arm. He'd chosen a black tank top because of the coming work. She was staring. He flexed.

Angela drew in a quick breath as his muscles tightened into a thick rock. *Sexy!*

Marc swept the parking area, hiding a snicker.

Angela tried to ignore the daze, following his line of sight to find Cynthia standing her first shift with a team. Cynthia would have to work her way up, the same as anyone else. Killing Cesar hadn't guaranteed her place with the Eagles, only Adrian's approval to try. He had made that clear.

Cynthia nodded to her, face expressionless.

Angela returned the gesture, still marveling over the swift change in loyalty from not only the reporter, but also from herself. *Cynthia* had saved her life. It was shocking.

"Do you need to talk to her again?"

"No."

"You sure?" Marc was trying to give all the support he'd denied before, eager to make up for his mistakes.

"Yes. I will talk to Sam though, if she's here."

Angela allowed their hands to brush. Even when they were alone together, he stayed covered, but she needed human contact now more than ever. The black muscle shirt he had on revealed hard skin and the ability to protect her, ruthlessly, if necessary. *He's still my John Wayne.* That gunfighter's walk and those matching ivory handled Colts only added

to the impression.

Vaguely aware of Angie's gaze running over him, Marc was doing his own silent checks. He was becoming Adrian's go-to man. The Eagles now wanted him to challenge Kenn for the XO slot. Some of them were being open about it.

Picking out an unguarded corner, Marc motioned to Tucker, who reluctantly went to cover it. Marc wondered where the rookie's fresh bruises had come from.

Finally feeling more comfortable with the authority Adrian insisted on giving her, Angela keyed her mike. "Man on point to the parking area."

"Copy."

Marc understood she wanted Neil to know who had that spot, even if it was temporary. She was still worried. Why else would she personally be concerned with their security? She was only an elevated level one, though if she wasn't injured, Marc was positive she would pass her tests. As it was, she wouldn't be taking them with other Eagles this time. John had already ruled it out.

"It's part of my job now." Angela steadied her legs and ignored her shoulder. "I haven't picked up anything new; I'm just being careful."

"Okay." Marc was still bothered by it. He had hoped there might be some downtime for her, time they could spend together, but it didn't appear that fate was going to give them much of it.

The camp was eerily quiet as the couple reached the mess, full of a respectful awe that one of them

found embarrassing.

The other thought she could become addicted to it.

The entire camp had been draped with black crepe paper; every camp member was wearing black clothing to show their respect. Even the table covers in the mess were dark colored. Angela felt her heart swell with renewed love for them. The Eagles hadn't done this and neither had Adrian or his pets among the women. This was the camp telling the Eagles they were wanted, that when they gave their lives, the herd wouldn't just keep grazing. Their fighters would be remembered.

Seeing Samantha wasn't at the mess, Angela continued to the empty center table amid cheers. As she neared it, subtly grabbing the edge for support, the camp members who were there surrounded her.

Marc uneasily let himself be edged away. With a quick glance at the two snipers on the area, he hovered along the far wall and waited for her to be finished.

Marc understood that if he agreed to fight for Kenn's place, these people would love him that way too. It was heavy information to carry around and not act on, because he now knew the way to Angela's continued affections was through these people. If he did important things for them, she would want him more. But it wouldn't be right to use her emotions that way. He also knew that all was fair in love and war, and this was both.

Angela let the camp run on for a long minute,

understanding they needed it, but she didn't give them much in the way of conversation. The service was about to start.

On the hilltop behind Safe Haven, the lines of torch-bearing Eagles were supplying escorts through the darkness. Three of their men were waiting, about to become a part of this apocalyptic landscape forever.

The camp members sensed her sorrow and fell silent, moving back. They hadn't been there; they didn't know exactly how their men had died, but she did, and it was haunting. She would never view another battle scene the same way.

She glanced at Marc. *I'm ready.*

The silent words brought him to her side.

Angela allowed herself to clasp his bare arm for support as they walked.

Marc sucked in a tight breath at the contact, need surging for an instant. Even in a moment of sadness, he wanted her.

Angela slowly led them toward the hill, shoulder throbbing. With so many moving torches, the steep incline ahead of them appeared to be on fire with tiny rolling flames.

"This is such a hard new life. We'll have to do this again."

Marc knew what she needed. He could give it now. "You'll save as many of them as you can."

He felt her shoulders stiffen in determination and was sure that V was standing out in her chin.

"Yes, I will."

He bent down to place a gentle kiss to the top of her head.

Angela smiled happily. It was okay for Marc to show how much he loved her. She was ready for that now.

As they reached the bottom of the hill, Marc noticed the beads of sweat breaking out on her pale skin. He started to ask if she wanted him to push her up in the wheelchair and caught Cynthia's motion as she left her post to the next shift of Eagles. The reporter made a gesture that got Marc's heart thumping.

He raised a brow. *Really?*

Cynthia surprised him by knowing the hand code, using it to answer.

Yes. She'll love it.

Marc drew on his courage. If Angela rejected him in public, he would survive. Right now, she wanted to be at the service. This was the easiest way.

The camp was gathered at the top of the incline. The countryside below was mired in darkness and fog, but the hill was alive with light as the torch-bearing Eagles escorted people to the gravesite. Three ornate boxes with newly carved gravestones were waiting next to six-foot holes. All that remained was to put them into the ground.

The camp was a mix of relieved, angry, triumphant expressions behind lines of mourning Eagles. Losing three of their own made the threat of death more real to the men serving Safe Haven, but

it also brought a satisfying sense of awareness. The slavers had gotten further into America than any other foreign army ever had. They'd tormented people through thirteen states—more than two thousand miles of towns and cities, and the Eagles had eliminated them.

Adrian stood in front of the caskets, profile a mask of respectful sorrow. He and the other Eagles were standing together in full gear. It gave a sense of them being a private society inside Safe Haven. The camp didn't understand, but it was clear that the Eagles were different, stronger.

Unlike funerals of the past, where words took up most of the service, the ceremony now consisted of only a single sentence.

Adrian slowly raised his torch as three long, brilliantly stitched flags were draped over the coffins. "It was my honor to serve with you."

Behind him, the Eagles did the same, torches rising, lips repeating. Some of the camp members did it too, but most were aware that they didn't really belong to this other hard group. They were only glad the dark intelligence of Adrian and his Eagles was on their side.

Zack broke the respectful silence. "Escort duty, one o'clock. Teams two and three."

His own team, and Kevin's, rushed to surround Angela as Marc carefully put her on her feet.

Angela didn't thank her honor guard; she was too emotional to respond. Days ago, she had bonded with the men in those coffins, won them over and

trained with them. It was hurtful to think she would never hear Cris's jokes again or Daniel's laugh, never argue with Frank.

Angela stepped to the coffins, not caring about the drama coming through the crowd for this minute. She had too much grief in her heart. "It was my honor."

As she stood there, two more darkly dressed people joined her guard, not giving the senior men time to refuse. Cynthia and Samantha flanked Angela, ignoring the mutters. It was the first plan they'd made together, reluctantly agreed upon with hand gestures and glares.

Adrian noticed the teamwork. His men wore many expressions in response to the open declaration, but when the two females only stood guard and didn't speak, the men allowed it. Those who knew of the coming power shift expected these females to eventually be to Angela, what Kenn and Kyle were to Adrian.

As Angela left, her rookies stayed close. Walking on the right flank, Samantha was aware of how powerful the sensation was. She was also aware of the fear. Not of failing, but of losing this when the camp found out who she'd been. She and Adrian had the same secrets, though she was sure his would destroy these people. The camp had complete faith in their leader. Adrian had delivered them from every threat that had crossed Safe Haven's path. To find out that he'd been a part of the danger from the very beginning would be a blow

they wouldn't recover from. Samantha was trying to find a way to keep it all hidden.

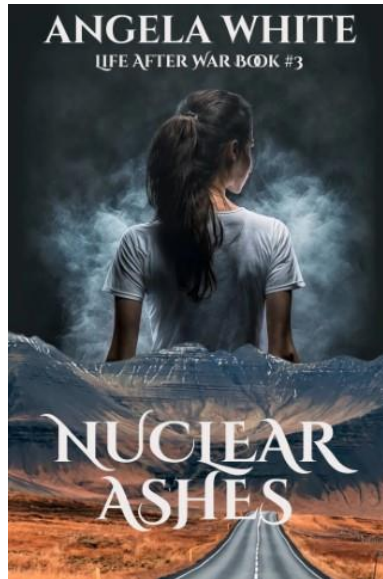
Next to her, Cynthia was just concentrating on doing this duty right. They hadn't gotten any training yet, only rookie gear and a slot in the tryouts, but the reporter wasn't worried. This wasn't like babysitting kids. This was keeping the wolves at bay while Adrian and Angela rebuilt their country. It was worth getting dirty for.

Slowing as the ache sank deeper into her shoulder, Angela pondered the differences in the thoughts of the two females openly showing their loyalty to her and to Adrian's dream. One selfish but good, the other riding both of those lines, each would be strong examples for the camp. There would be times of chaos, Angela didn't doubt it, but she was also positive there would be moments of stunning glory and she couldn't wait to start teaching them to be Eagles... *Mine!*

Marc trailed the three women, observing the guards and camp members. It should have felt wrong to be left in the rear, but he was smart enough to know that he was seeing one of the proudest moments of Angela's new life. The happiness flowed from her, reaching out to calm those she passed. No longer fighting the pull, Marc sent out his own wave of light, as he had with Cynthia when she'd come from Adrian's arms. Angie wanted the camp settled down so the mission teams could do the same. He would help.

Adrian also understood Marc was now on

board, but he couldn't help a faint twinge of jealousy as the new couple went by him. *They're the future. I'm the past.*



[Nuclear Ashes](#)
Book 3