

Nuclear Ashes



ANGELA WHITE

Adrian's Eagles



ANGELA WHITE

The Survivors



ANGELA WHITE

# The Survivors

A Novel

ANGELA  
WHITE

Copyright  
**Life After War Box Set**  
Books 1-3  
by  
Angela White

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# Book One

**ANGELA WHITE**  
A POST-APOCALPTIC SURVIVAL FANTASY



**THE  
SURVIVORS**

Copyright  
**The Survivors**  
by  
Angela White

**Title:** The Survivors  
Life After War Book 1

**Edition:** 2024

**Author:** Angela White

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# Prologue

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

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

I've gotten ahead of myself, far beyond the beginning, when our future didn't look as good as it does now. Most people surviving on this tiny island won't talk about the long, ugly journey we made together. They say those memories have faded, but I know a lie when I hear one. Some horrors, you never forget. Like our final battle with Cesar. It's been four years, but I still see the thick streams of blood running down rain-soaked trees. I still smell men burning alive in their metal coffins. I dream of it sometimes, of the cold, wet night I was the bait and I'm sure



Adrian does too. It was the moment we knew our people would survive.

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

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

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

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

Part One:  
**The Survivors**  
December

Chapter One  
**Devastation**  
The Northern US  
**Samantha**

1

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

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

Samantha paled. “It was just a question.”

“Your file indicates otherwise.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Samantha brushed a quick glance over the other well-dressed, lucky few onboard. She recognized the same dawning terror in

their expressions, but she could have been alone. She didn't have a connection to them. *I'm different.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Told ya it's a woman!"

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

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

Hands clamped around her slender ankles like iron bands.

Samantha began to scream.

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

# Kenn

## The Southern US

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

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

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

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

There were also suicides. The news was informing everyone of bomb hits in other places. Some people hadn’t been able to go on without their loved ones. Only Kenn’s rank had allowed him to

keep moving freely, but that would change once the rest of the lower ranked men were loaded onto the choppers. *When I get Charlie from the officer dorm, we'll have to evade capture.*

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

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

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

*Charlie! No!*

Orange flames and black smoke billowed upward.

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

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

# Angela

Mid US

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

# Marc

The Eastern US

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey! He’s too young!”

“They just hit an old guy!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2

“Help!”

“My God!”

“Ahhh!”

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

“Help!”

“No!”

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

Marc scanned for even one other survivor.

*Danger!*

He swiveled.

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

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

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

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

Marc blinked. “W-war... A bomb.”

“But where? North or south?”

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

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

Blood sprayed across Marc’s face.

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

# Adrian

## The Western US

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your family caused this, you bastard!”

Adrian concentrated, letting out a thick sleep charm.

Half of the men dropped; the rest kept coming.

“You traitor!”

“You spied on us at every meeting!”

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

“Who are you?!”

“Tell us the truth!”

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

One more man fell, knocked out.

*I’m rusty.* Adrian retreated.

“Make him tell us!”

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

“We’ll beat it out of you!”

“Did you know the war was coming?!”

“Did you help him do it?”

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

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

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

“Get him!”

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

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

The small, neat house crumbled, burying them alive.



# Kendle

## The Pacific Ocean

“Let me go!”

The dark-haired females were shouting, but their fight went mostly unnoticed in the mayhem that had taken control of the cruise ship.

“Keep going! We have to get below!” Kendle spotted a group of crewmen running down the crowded deck, grabbing wildly at unsuspecting women.

Ducking, she roughly spun her twin sister from their reach. Everything was OC now.

“Stop!”

Kendle shoved the girl again as she tried to go back the way they’d come, keeping one fascinated eye on the tidal wave eating up the ocean as it raced toward the boat and the other terrified eye on the younger, bloody girl in front of her.

“We gotta help dad!” Dawn screamed, skin on fire.

Kendle shook her head, noises buzzing together unpleasantly as they stumbled along the debris-covered deck. They were being jostled by other panicked holiday passengers, many of them bleeding or having to stop to vomit.

Tears blurred her vision. Kendle wiped a hand across her face, not surprised by the red smear on her fingers.

“Move, Kendle!”

“No! Fall back!”

Dawn took a swing at her famous survivalist sister for the first time in her life, missing through bloody tears.

Kendle’s thin control over her own emotions snapped. Her terror (the first she’d felt in many years) flew out uncensored as the roar of the ocean grew louder, the screams around them more frantic. “He’s dead, Dawn! You saw his eyes explode!”

Dawn screamed again, this time in horrified denial.

Kendle shoved Dawn, sending the rebellious teenager tumbling down a dark stairwell. Ready to mix it up to keep her alive, Kendle quickly followed, wishing for her camera crew. She hated to be without them.

Kendle yanked the dazed girl onto her bare feet. “Hang on to this rail. Supposed to be unsinkable, but if it flips, I hope—”

“Flips?!”

Kendle locked her arms around the suddenly gutless teenager and the banister as the already damaged planks under their feet groaned in protest. The ocean under the ship swelled, roared....

“Hang onnn!”

A wall of water slammed into the side of the Carnival Cruise Liner as if it wasn’t there, rolling it over like dead wood. The force of the impact allowed the cruise liner to surface halfway through the roll and reclaim stability. It was the only break they got.

The fifty-foot wave continued thundering across the ocean toward Hawaii.

Chapter Two  
**The Stormtracker**  
Nine days later

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ain't goin' on no boat." Henry let out a hard belch.

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

Both men laughed when she cried out.

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

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

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

The trio tensed at a loud gunshot from the west.

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

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

Samantha inhaled, concentrating... *Snow.*

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

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

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

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

*Pop-Pop-Pop!*

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

“Shit! They're back!”

“Henry, get that fire out!”

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

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

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

The males cleared spots on the dirty windows.

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

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

Sam bit her wrist to keep from screaming.

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

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

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

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

A scream echoed.

Light, freezing rain fell over the broken ground.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3

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

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



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

"What...uh? What're you doing?" Melvin elbowed Henry.

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

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

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

Her words got Melvin up. He shook Henry awake.

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

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

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

Henry struggled to pull on his pants, not arguing.

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

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

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

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

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

Melvin and Henry stepped outside and slammed the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Samantha yanked on her ruined flats.

“Get out here.” He leaned in.

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

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

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

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

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

The two painters laughed; Henry doubled over.

Samantha’s anger grew colder.

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

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

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

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

#### 4

Samantha was still searching the wagon. At least ten minutes had gone by. She darted a quick glance at the two men struggling with the truck. They weren’t paying attention to her. She took the unobserved moment to evaluate what she’d found. A fanny pack, a lighter, two Bic pens—one of which she slid behind her ear and

covered with her dirty hair. Half a pack of smokes and one unopened can of Diet Coke completed the stash. She shoved it all into the fanny pack before switching to the rear. This vehicle was crammed with bags, suitcases, boxes; it was a wonder there had been room for a driver.

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

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

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

“What are you—”

Sam hit the button.

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

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

She held the button in.

Melvin stumbled, teetering.

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

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

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

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

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

Melvin's lids shut, body stilling.

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

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

Henry looked back down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To the west, more smoke was rising, backdropped by distant purple mountains. She shivered. *Yellowstone. Terrible things are happening there.* That only left due east or south. Samantha

pushed off the wave of fear waiting to overwhelm her. *NORAD is south. I can make it that far.*

“Ugh...” Melvin began to regain consciousness.

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

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

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

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

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

“Come on!”

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

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

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

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

Sam shrugged. “I can’t say the same.”

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

His voice got louder when she stood.

“Please don’t. Please, lady!”

Fury burned in Samantha's heart. "You don't even know my name!"

"No, come on! You'll kill me. No! I'm sorry for what we did!" Melvin cringed as Sam dropped to a knee.

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

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

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

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

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

"What're you gonna do?"

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

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

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

Samantha traveled fast, glad when the snow became thicker and the wind blew harder. It muted Melvin's screams and covered her tracks. It also might kill her if she waited too long to take shelter, but Sam didn't stop yet. She went by house after warm,

empty house to keep her enemy from finding her. Sam wished she could drive one of the vehicles she was climbing around, but they had spent the first few days after the war hunting for something quieter and easier on gas than Melvin's van. She'd been forced to tell them about EMPs; they'd been lucky the van had even started. Almost anything that ran on electrical components in a damage zone was now junk.

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

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

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

## 5

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

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

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

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



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

## 6

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

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

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

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

Chapter Three  
**The Marine**  
New Mexico

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sir?”

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

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

Kenn snapped awake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Crunch.*

Baamm!

Kenn snapped awake. *Someone is out there!*

*Snap.* “Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.”

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

“Beep. Beep. Beep.”

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

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

Footsteps came.

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

*Snap!*

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

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

Charlie started the engine without being told.

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

“They still have the truck!”

“Get the boy! We need him!”

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

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

Men grunted in the wet, cold darkness.

Kenn hunkered. “Go!”

Charlie hit the gas.

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

“Get our bikes! We need his blood!”

“Shoot the Marine!”

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

“Now, boy!”

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

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

Silence fell.

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

“Are they dead?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We takin’ their stuff?”

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

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

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

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

## 2

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

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

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

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

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

Kenn wasn’t encouraged by their location. Nearly every business and home they passed had been destroyed or damaged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



“Radio time?”

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

Charlie shrugged. “Okay.”

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

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

“What are we hunting?”

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

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

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

“What about a dirt bike?”

Kenn moved his way. “Yes.”

“It was new. Still has a sticker.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But, what’s—”

“Now!”

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

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

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

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

That’s why his stomach was a ball of liquid heat. They had been in the path of these invaders. If the vehicle hadn’t run out of

fuel, they would probably be in sight right now. On this desolate stretch, against so many, they wouldn't have stood a chance. *Death missed us by a quarter tank of gas.*

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

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

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

“Get down! That's the enemy!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Four  
**The Mother**  
Ohio  
January 18th

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I hear ya.” Angela pulled on gloves.

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

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

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

“Praise the Lord!”

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

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

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

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

"You can stop it?"

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

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

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

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

Warren had frozen.

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

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

The former groundskeeper moved reluctantly.

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



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

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

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

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

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

The little girl didn't react when Angela injected her.  
Warren flinched each time.

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

Warren joined her on his knees, leaning close.

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

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

Angela tensed for a split second, considering her options.

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

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

There was silence in response.

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

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

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

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

*That’s it. That’s his weakness.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The two teachers reached for Angela again.

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

"Mine!" Breathing rapidly, the preacher turned to Angela.

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

Raised voices came from the dim lobby.

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

Footsteps crunched.

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

“Thank you. I had no idea.”

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

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

“You’ll kill them?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re sure he will come?”

Angela frowned. “Yes.”

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

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

Warren couldn’t hide his disappointment.

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What do I owe you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She jumped again as the wind slammed against her car. A barrage of black hail pinged off the hood in nerve-wracking blasts. The sky was grayish brown, thick with layers of dust and smoke.

The clouds racing toward her came through the grit easily, spewing fat drops of rain against the hood and windows.

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

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

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

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

The storm flew by, threat disappearing as quickly as it had come. Angela eased the car up Queen City's steep, narrow pavement, steering around chunks of debris sliding through the muddy ripples. Abandoned vehicles and wrecks had been pulled to the side of the winding hill, looking like lined up dominoes waiting to be pushed over. Angela saw no signs of people trying to continue like normal, but she could feel them watching her through barely cracked blinds. She was disappointed by it. Angela had hoped people would come together, but these survivors

wanted nothing to do with her. They only wished for her to be gone.

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

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

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

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

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

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



decade in it as her life flew by, unable to change the awful mistake she'd made by saying yes to Kenny.

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

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

## 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

She locked the door, then stepped over the bags and boxes littering the 8x6 storage room she'd claimed. Her legs trembled as

she lit the lantern on the floor in the rear corner. She was almost shivering despite the warmth of her blanket covered area. Her body confirmed her decision. It would be at least three more weeks before she could leave. She wasn't strong enough to make the cross-country trip. The early birth had damaged her body and her soul.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The woman huddling in the nicely warming storage room gave the idea sincere consideration this time, instead of pushing it away

in terror. Marc was also a Marine; he had been for a long time. She had no doubt he could make the trip, and he owed her a huge debt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Until the war. Being alone while her world was blown away had ripped off the locks on the witch inside. The cell door was

barely standing. The dark, shifting spirit behind that thin shield whispered almost constantly to her now.

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

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

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

She found no signs of life.

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

Chapter Five  
**The Father**  
West Virginia  
January 28th

1

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

The wolf in the passenger seat growled.

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

*Crack! Rip!*

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

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

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

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

Marc lowered the windows as they were pulled along by the strong current, surprised the engine hadn’t stalled yet. Slinging his kit over one broad shoulder, Marc ignored the water rushing onto

the floorboards as he steered toward the steep bank that he had no chance of climbing in this vehicle.

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

“Dog, out!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marc glanced around as he got his breath back, deciding where to make camp while he waited for the water to recede. The Blue

Ridge Mountains were eastern rolling peaks of foggy blue under a wide purple and yellow sunset that was marred by never-fading angry gray layers. South held dipping valleys and hills of tobacco fields and white pines. He'd just come from that direction. Those empty, snowbound towns hadn't given him hope.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Crunchhh!*



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

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

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

*Crack!*

Marc spun, .45 in hand.

The wolf bristled.

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

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

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

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

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

He'd wandered after discovering nothing at the family home, but it hadn't taken long for him to become restless and start

hunting for his own kind. He had been sworn to his country. He still wore his dog tag under his fatigue shirt and black leather coat, but the America he had served was busy dying. It was crushing that he couldn't stop it. Now that the future was so grim, he wasn't going back to his base. The entire world was FUBAR. Everything and everyone he had ever known was gone.

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

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

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

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

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

Marc had traveled northwest last, checking White Sulphur Springs, and then the National Radio Astronomy Observatory. He still hoped to find signs of normal life restarting, but he no longer expected it. The world even sounded empty. There were no noises other than the wind. There also wasn't any sign of the bastards

who had let it all happen. The government was absent, but the brass Marc had served all those years would never let survivors have control of topside, poisoned or not.

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

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

*Marcus!*

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

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

The wolf whined at his master's pain.

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

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

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

Marc exchanged fresh fatigues for his soaked, torn clothes, then retied his holsters over his thighs. The river was already several feet deep around distant maple trees and column-supported

buildings. Changed and warming, he evaluated the situation. His breathing was normal. His heart was back in his chest where it belonged. Other than a few scratches, he was unharmed. He hadn't swallowed any of the nasty liquid. He also still had his hat. The string around his neck had kept it from being washed away. Had he reacted a little slower on the bridge, he would be dead now. It was a harsh, new world where some days were harder than others.

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

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

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

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

*Marcus...*

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

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

“Angie?”

Silence.

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

*Marcus! I need you!*

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

*You owe me!*

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

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

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

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

*My life back.*

Marc jerked as if slapped, thrown into the past.

*I need you. Will you come?*

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

*Ohio. Cincinnati.*

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

A relieved blast of energy exploded from her end.

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

*You have to hurry...*

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

The line went dead.

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

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

Chapter Six  
**The Hero**  
Safe Haven Refugee Camp  
**Utah**

1

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

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

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

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

He'd found himself stewing on it constantly when he was awake. Thanks to his rebel mother, he'd already known how to set

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

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

*January 4<sup>th</sup>*

We hit Nellis today. There's nothing left.

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

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

*January 5<sup>th</sup>*

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

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



*January 7<sup>th</sup>*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*January 11<sup>th</sup>*

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

*January 12<sup>th</sup>*

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

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

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

*January 13<sup>th</sup>*

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

*January 15<sup>th</sup>*

We've spent the last two days in a mall, snowed in. The black flakes fell for almost twenty-four hours. It left over five feet of nasty slush. I kept everyone in until it melted. It felt wrong, as if contact might sicken us. I wonder if Mother Nature might be

helping our extinction along. It's a crazy notion, but in this new hell, anything is possible.

*January 20<sup>th</sup>*

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

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

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

*January 25<sup>th</sup>*

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

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

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

*January 26<sup>th</sup>*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So Adrian had devised his own line of justice.

*Scratch...scratch...*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He laughed, fishing in his pockets for a smoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Was it really rape?*

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

Adrian pushed away the slight edge of guilt and went back to studying his notebook entries. Tonya was a snake who hadn’t been punished for Joe’s murder. Now, she had. Adrian’s smile faded. His leadership hadn’t been questioned once after Joe’s death. Later, Neil had told him his brutal execution of the killer had



gotten the camp's final approval. Adrian had stopped himself from telling the trooper how morally wrong it was to earn respect by taking a life. This was a hard, new world. They were all adjusting as best they could.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He didn't baby the refugees, but he did try to distract them from some of the things that might have caused rebellion-like training his army. He gave them soccer and football games, poker

nights, and shooting contests. Eventually they would start feeling like Americans again. Once that happened, they would wake up to the unpleasant reality that it was going to be a rough trip. They had to work together.

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

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

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

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

"Where was she going?"

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

Adrian gave a small smile of satisfaction. "Isn't she always?"

Doug grinned, but he kept a tight leash on his mouth. Doug had joined the service to keep from being another Irish potato farmer in Idaho. Once in, he'd found a way of life and a moral code that had allowed him to keep his hope. The same was true of Adrian, who had enough faith to save the world. Doug had witnessed Tonya coming from Adrian's tent, but Doug wasn't about to begrudge him a piece of ass that many in camp had

already had. Adrian was sacrificing everything to save some of this country. Doug, who had given most of his life for the same thing, had a lot of respect for Safe Haven's leader. It made Doug willing to overlook anything that might interfere with the dream. Like the camp finding out Adrian was screwing the woman they all suspected was a black widow, or at least an accomplice to murder. That information was dangerous. He would guard it well.

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

*Click.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s wrong?”

“You okay?”

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

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

They were probably glad to have something to keep them awake. He had put the right man in charge of this shift, though. That was clear. The trooper, who everyone called Neil, wasn’t your average cop. Despite his young age of 29, people had begun to wonder if Neil was being looked over for second in command.

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

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

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

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

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

“Why?”

Neil frowned, settling his cover on more firmly as thick flurries rained over them. “The other campfire, the one northeast,

is big and loud. That'll push the smaller groups our way out of fear."

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

Neil shook his head, worrying. "Can't tell yet."

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

"Yeah... They're bigger than us."

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

Neil glanced at his watch. "After the check in?"

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

Neil offered him the walkie talkie.

Adrian shook his head. "I'm not here."

Neil keyed the mike. "Check in time. Let's try to remember how to count. Point is clear."

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

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

"Area three, clear." Doug, at the parking lot.

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

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

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

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

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

“No, sir! Nature call.”

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

Neil huffed. “Think he fell asleep again?”

“Probably. Call in his relief when you get the extra men. Let’s have Danny put lime dust around the johns each day before he can have a bottle. We shouldn’t get into the habit of being careless.”

Neil recapped thick brown curls under his hat. “Most of the men said okay to the mountains, if we can’t find anything better along the way and the bunker’s too small for us by then.”

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

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

Adrian stared, yanked from his thoughts.

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

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

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

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

Neil didn't know what to say.

Adrian did. "I can't ask for it; it has to be offered."

Neil filed that rule. "I'm offering."

"Excellent. I want you as my chief of security."

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

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

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

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

Neil studied him. "You mean people like you."

It wasn't a question. Adrian frowned, hoping he hadn't offended the trooper. "Like me?"

"It's hard to explain. Something draws us to you." Neil shrugged. "I'll know it when I feel it."

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

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

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



Neil's face darkened. He turned away. "Why didn't he help before we got lost?"

## 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did Mitch pass the radio test?"

“Yep. Only one who did.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Damn!”

“Pass.”

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

Kyle grinned. “Daryl thought he had you.”

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

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

“I’ll be in my tent.”

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

Chapter Seven  
**The Enemy**  
Colorado  
January 29th

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Come in, Reechard.”

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

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

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

*"You wish to live, yes?"*

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

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

*Rick moaned, scared, but on fire.*

*"If you do what I want."*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rick dropped his eyes. “I can’t.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Reechard.”

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

“I can’t. They’re my people.”

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

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

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

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

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

Rick’s mouth went dry, body twitching.

“You want her, sí?”

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

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

Rick fell.

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

Chapter Eight  
**Right Place, Right Kind**  
Utah  
February 1st

1

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

He swung around to look behind them.

A glint of silver flashed.

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

Kenn put a hand on his arm.

Charlie thrust the binoculars at him. "People!" He coughed again, pointing. "It's...lights...right? A lot of them."

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

Kenn got ready to fight.

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

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

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

"And what's wrong with that, Grunt?"

The hard tone allowed no hesitation.

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

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

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

"So, where ya headed?"

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

"Hunting for family?"

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

"He your son?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adrian picked up his mike. “Neil.”

“On the way, Boss.”

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

“Thanks. We could use some R&R.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All three men hesitated, shrugging.

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

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

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

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

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

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

His mind went to his newest additions as he drove, mind replaying the meeting. Their uniforms hadn’t mattered. He had known the pair for what they were the second he saw their shadowy outlines. He didn’t believe it was a coincidence that they were Marines. Kenn would be one of his circle. Instead of being elated to have found his first promised helper, Adrian had a sinking feeling that Kenn might also be a weak link. That was

dangerous because the first of his circle would be the one he depended on the most. The bond of bringing these refugees through the wilderness needed to be strong enough to hold them all together. It was the foundation. A crack or weak brick could cause the whole thing to fall.

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

## 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

The shadow slipped a hand between the cars...

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

"Easy." Adrian was pleased. "He's one of ours."

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

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

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

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

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

“Good. Let’s get to work.”

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

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

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

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

Chapter Nine  
**Mercy And Death**  
NORAD Road, Colorado  
**Ground Hogs' Day**

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ahead, a lump lay in the street.

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

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

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

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

*Was anyone let in?* Samantha swept row after row of destroyed cooking, sleeping, and laundry areas. She lifted her goggles to wipe away tears. *No. Not one of them.* These people



had been desperate. They would have overrun the guards the second the door was opened.

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

Samantha settled in the cover of bushes, sheltered from the sharp wind while she waited for the fires to finish burning down. It could have happened that way. Then again, they might have had bait to get the door open. That also had a ring to it. She examined the battle scene again. Blackened, smoldering piles of debris highlighted shot bodies lined up near the compound's entrance, almost all male. The females were gone. Samantha pushed away the thought of how bad their lives must be now. The main doors were charred, dented, beaten. *This compound was conquered.*

She scanned the area, then the sky. The thick layer of clouds threatened rain or worse by morning. Samantha decided to set up her shelter and go down tomorrow. She was dreading it, but she hoped there would be bits of food or the location of another government complex that had held. *Please, God. Don't let me be alone forever.*

## 2

Samantha went down at dawn to see what remained of the facility. She had a tough time forcing her feet to pass through the blackened entrance. She tried not to stare at the dead, but she couldn't help crying as she stepped over hands still outstretched for mercy that hadn't come. Another two hundred human lives, gone.

Sharp, glittering glass crunched under her boots. Thin clouds of smoke lingered; snapping flies tried to invade her long trench coat. Despite the season, snow hadn't layered the ground here yet.

The rotting corpses were creating a perfect environment for insects.

Red lights in the tunnel signaled a generator still in use. It comforted her as the dim daylight faded from view. She had a gun, a Taser that may or may not work, two knives, and a can of mace, but she didn't feel safe as she wound deeper, straining for sounds. This new world was full of death and destruction. More of it existed down here in these long concrete halls.

The disadvantage of the red lights was that she could see all the horror. Blood stains and bullet casings were hard to avoid as she walked over the uniformed dead littering the hall. She only saw soldiers. Whoever the enemy had been, they'd taken their dead with them.

She flipped her belt light to high as she stepped into the first room. It was a security area with four gory bodies and no loot.

The next three rooms held more of the same.

Samantha went by open doors marked as Utilities and Lavatories, knowing they wouldn't hold anything she needed. The tunnel dead ended into a spacious bunk area, with bodies in many of the beds. They wore an even mix of military uniforms and Capitol Hill casual. They'd been shot. Sam wasn't sure she could force herself in there for long. She went to the stairs. *I'll search there last.*

### 3

Samantha returned to the top level after three hours of searching. Tacky blood was so thick on some floors that the Presidential Seal was no longer visible. The lounge had been stripped; both cafeterias had fire damage. Laundry rooms didn't have a single sheet or blanket, and the three medical bays were completely empty. Not even a box of bandages had been spared. Whoever had done this had made sure survivors would find nothing to keep them alive.

As she headed back toward the room of bodies, she was drawn to a small painting of President Milton placed in a shadowy corner

behind a set of shattered doors. It hung askew, revealing a darker shadow.

Samantha examined it and found the covered entrance to a throw room tunnel. Set into the wall, it was a secure area where the Secret Service could literally toss a person to be safe while they guarded this only way in. Samantha avoided a bloody handprint on the rail as she hefted herself into the opening.

The tunnel dumped her out onto a thick mat in a narrow hall lined in multiple doors. Sam sighed, able to feel how empty it all was. *Back to scavenging through body-filled rooms in the dark. Lovely.*

The sixth door was a war room. Computers were destroyed, communications equipment was broken, uniformed bodies Samantha vaguely recognized were draped across desks, lying on the floor. Drying puddles were impossible to avoid as she checked stacks of papers and books, then the computers. None of the electronics responded to her fingers.

She dug through the file cabinets next, but most of the charred papers were too damaged to read. She found a single sheet intact; it had two ominous sentences.

*All descendants must be rounded up according to the new mandate made by President Heins before his death. No exceptions are to be made.*

*They were hunting descendants... My kind.* Samantha tried not to be disturbed by it. She went back to her search, dumping out drawers and swiping at dark corners of high shelves, but she came up empty.

She scanned for anything she'd missed... Samantha found writing on the wall. *Is that red marker...?*

She realized it was blood.

***We did it for our country.***

She eased out of the room, stomach in a knot.

*Scratch...*

Sam spun, fingers fumbling for her gun. She stopped when she saw a big rat. If not for the noise it would make, she would try to kill it anyway to keep it from doing what the insects were. Sam glared at the bold rodent as she went by.

The last door led to a small lavatory. When she saw no bodies, not even blood smears, Samantha allowed herself to use one of the dusty, cobwebbed stalls.

Peeing was bittersweet. Even taking paper from the almost empty roll hurt. She struggled not to cry. *It's all gone.*

A small, dark shadow dropped from the ceiling above her. It landed on her bare knee.

“Damn!” She slapped at the spider as it ran upward, missing. It was fast.

Sam gritted her teeth as the arachnid bit her, sending a rush of pain up her thigh that shot straight up into her spine.

Sam squashed the fleeing spider against her leg, grinding it into little pieces. She wiped the remains down the dusty stall wall. “Serves you right!”

She used the last of the paper on the roll to wipe the bite, a bit uneasy at how sore the wound already was. Then she put it from her mind. *I've been here too long. I'll check the lounge, then get the hell out of this mausoleum.*

#### 4

The climb out of the throw hole made Samantha anxious because it took so long. She breathed a sigh of relief when the faint, dim glow of red lights finally came into view. *One more room, then I'm out of here!*

Samantha hurried by the rows of bodies. She stepped into the smoky, vomit-smelling vending machine area, stomach growling for chips or a candy bar despite the odor in here. She ran to the three tall dispensers, but every ring was empty.

She slapped her hand against the dirty glass. “Damn it!”

“Help...”

Sam jumped, fumbling for her gun again.

“Please.”

Samantha drew in air, glad that her bladder was empty. She lifted her belt light for a better view of the man dying on the brown and white sofa.

“Do it.”

Total awareness flickered in those dead eyes. Sam wished her peripheral vision would go out. The gore was everywhere. She breathed through her mouth to keep from gagging as she stepped closer. Trying not to gape at his emaciated body, she realized it was a white sofa. The brown was his rotting body drying into the material.

“Please...help me.”

The pitiful whisper made him seem more human. She lowered the gun. “What can I do?”

“Kill me.”

Sam blanched. “I can’t do that.”

He moaned. It was a wet sound. She heard his jaw grind as he coughed. Scarlet flew from his mouth, ejecting one of his teeth. Reddish drops of agony rolled down his distorted cheeks. “Please!”

She lifted the gun as his gasps filled the room. His body was no longer responding to his commands. The sickness was destroying him from the inside.

“Where...” She pushed aside her horror to talk. “Where else can I go?”

He struggled to answer. “Only a base...in Cheyenne taking calls. All gone...faulty air valves. A lot of us got sick.”

“What about the Essex?”

“No! Ground...Zero. Evac’d after the bomb... No transportation for...radiation.”

Sam was scarred by the hell in his eyes. *I’ll never forget this moment.* “There must be some place left, some people. What about all the Joint Chiefs, and the Secretaries?”

“Breached. Burned alive... Wouldn’t touch me.”

Samantha’s mind went to the smell of gasoline and the charred room four levels below them that she hadn’t been able to enter.

She shook away the horrible images. At least their struggles were over now. “What about the people who did this?”

The dying man coughed again.

Sam retreated as bloody pus sprayed from his swollen lips.

“Guerrillas. Came during...a storm. Hit Fort Carson first. Attacked the refugees. Took females. One of them...drafted. Betrayed us. ...retaliation for the war.” He lifted a finger, skin sliding to the side. “Please...do it now. Don’t know...anything else!”

She tried to smile as she lifted the gun. “I’m Samantha Moore.”

“Pat. Mi-Michaels.”

She gasped in horrified recognition of the former press secretary. She asked the only thing that mattered to her now. “Why were you hunting descendants?”

Pat’s eyes lit up. “Evil! Caused the war!”

Sam couldn’t think of anything else to ask.

When he tried to beg again, she pulled the trigger.

His body jumped like Melvin’s had when she hit him with the Taser.

Sam ran, loud steps mocking her flight. She had no idea where she would go, only that she shouldn’t have come. *I would have been a captive here too. I can’t go to another bunker. I have to find my own kind and blend in. The government is no longer my safety net.*

Chapter Ten  
**Hard Goodbyes**  
Ohio  
February 6th

1

*I'm leaving today. This is no longer my home.*

Angela was dreading the journey she was about to make; the horror in her dreams said it would be worse than her life with Kenny. The nightmares warned she would confront dangers that made the Marine seem like an amusement park ride, but none of it mattered. She couldn't wait any longer to leave. The circled day on her calendar was over a week away, but she was going now. She just needed to know where Marc was first. Angela had to be sure he was coming this time.

She wasn't eager to tell her story. She planned to put it off as long as she could, but the odds were against her making it alone. Kenny was also a huge problem. He wouldn't just hand her son over. Between her man and the trip, she needed help. Marc was the only one left to ask for it.

*You can't!* Her fear shouted this time. *Kenny will kill you for this!*

The door in her mind stayed shut.

The power inside wasn't at her beck and call. She shared space with a gifted spirit who was still sore about the years in a mental cage. Angela didn't have more information on how it all worked or where her kind had even come from. All she knew was she needed to use it right now but the witch inside wasn't cooperating.

*I'm scared.*

*Of being locked up again?*

*Of him killing us this time.*

Angela stood in the dark hallway of her apartment building, understanding only fear was preventing the call. Anger took control. "I'll kill him if I have to!"

The rush of angry energy blew her fear away. The door in her mind swung open. Her breathing became shallow as power ran through the mud tracked mental halls. Memories washed over her, strengthening the connection.

Jet-black hair, long, feathered, soft on her fingers as their mouths touched. She called for him now, releasing a powerful vibration that rattled like an earthquake. *Marcus!*

His hands had been light, gentle as they crossed forbidden lines. *Marcus!*

He had loved her and left. She had never recovered. *Marcus!*  
*I'm here, Angie.*

He sounded older, used. She winced at the pain of having him in her mind. It reminded her of when it had just been them against the world. "Are you coming?"

*I'll be in Cincinnati by the end of the week.*

Angela let out the breath. Five days. She was worried Marc wouldn't care once he found out what she wanted. She didn't know what kind of person he had become. She was depending on an old debt.

*Will you tell me what's going on? I picked up a few things, but I can be better prepared if I know more.*

Angela listened to her heart. *You do know what kind of person he is, or you wouldn't have called him.* The old Angela, the one the war had almost freed, stared hopefully from her twisted cell door.

*Angie?*

"I'm here, Marc." She could almost feel him wince this time. It surprised her to discover she didn't enjoy it. She owed him much worse.

*Can you tell me what's going on?*

The caution in his voice allowed the old Angela to open the door between them a little wider. The words fell through silent tears. "My son is somewhere in the middle of the country. I need



you to get me there...and then help me get him back. I'm leaving now. We can meet up on the road."

There wasn't even a pause after her request.

*It's bad out here, Angie. I wish you'd wait for me.*

Pain slammed into her heart. "I tried that already!" She was suddenly sixteen again, hurt, betrayed and alone, with no one to depend on.

She slammed the door on Marc's incoming protests, but the old Angela was stronger now. She was forced to listen to the muffled explanations he labored to push at her. She heard his remorse, but no matter what he said, Angela refused to answer.

## 2

Under dawn's early light, Angela approached the shiny black Blazer in the secluded garage. Her anxious gaze swept the extra tires on the luggage rack, the rear area crammed with boxes, and of course, the tiny grave she had spent time at every day since the war. Leaving her baby behind was hard. She had to force the grief down. *I can't abandon the living child to stay and mourn the dead one.*

Angela wiped away her tears, then finished her comparison of contents to the lengthy list in her hand. *Do I have everything?*

After another minute, she put the paper in the mailbox, along with an envelope in plastic and the door keys from around her neck. It would have to be enough.

She swept the red Tempo, making sure the weather hadn't dislodged her notes. She had also written on Charlie's bedroom wall and left the keys in the ignition of the car—just in case. Her quiet, respectful son was becoming angry and impatient. If he slipped off on his own (*and survives! Please, let him survive!*), she would change course to intercept him.

She had no delusions about the world they were in now. She'd made sure her son would know the truth if he came here—the real truth, not that bullshit she had been forced to tell him for the last decade. There had been a great love, a hard choice, a lie, and a

deal of convenience, but really, none of it mattered now. What did matter was telling him how to survive if he found himself alone. The notes would keep him alive until his father came for him.

Light, ashy flurries started to fall as Angela got the last bag from the hallway. She stepped out the door, spotting a woman reflected in the glass she wasn't sure she knew anymore. She was much stronger than she appeared. *Someday, I'll look the part.* Angela slid into the driver's seat, giving a thin smile. *I'm changing again. It's good...*

"Going somewhere?" Warren's cold tenor outside the open door was unexpected.

Angela flinched, but didn't draw the gun her hand was resting on. *How hard do I have to fight? Will a good bluff set me free?* She hadn't heard them come up, hadn't felt a warning. They'd probably been here all along, letting her do the labor of loading the supplies.

Half a dozen men lined up across the bare, muddy courtyard in front of her building, cutting off her path of escape. They leered at her openly this time. They were quiet too, another bad sign. She recognized the outline of vests under their thick layers of clothing. Her heart skipped a beat. *They came prepared.*

*Or so they believe,* the witch inside comforted. *Hold your ground.*

Angela tried talking first. "My owner called me. I have to go."

"Shut up."

Warren's bruises told her the chain of command at the college had changed, making this a more dangerous confrontation. Talking her way out was improbable as she stared at the zealot.

"If you try to run, they'll open fire." Warren grabbed the door handle. "Get out here."

Angela slid to her feet, scanning the six men. All of them had a gun aimed at her. She sneered at Warren, gesturing toward the bible under his arm. "No longer under your protection, *Preacher?*"

"No one is."

It was confirmation, yet none of the others stepped up to do the speaking, to take control. They stayed well back, even Aaron.

Aaron hated her because she'd stayed independent after the war. He was the one who would shoot her. The others wanted her alive. Aaron wanted her dead for humiliating him. "Let me go. I don't want to hurt anyone."

Her would-be captors exchanged nervous looks instead of the scorn she'd been hoping for. It told her they had discussed the possibilities of getting hurt but were determined to follow through.

Her anger flared to life. She would have to fight her way out. Angela let the witch have a little more control. She had to fight—she didn't have to kill. *And I won't!*

The scruffy males advanced toward her together, faces grim, leery.

The witch whispered words; Angela muttered them. "Poison! Blindness! Disease!"

The reaction was instant.

"I can't see. I can't see!"

"Skin's on fire! Someone put me out!"

"The bugs!"

"Help me!"

Warren wasn't fooled by the vivid bluff. He put a hand out to grab her... He jerked away as lightning flew into a tree in the courtyard next to them, shaking the ground.

The oak exploded, raining wooden shrapnel.

Warren snatched Angela by her sweater, jerking her against his hard, thin body. "Surrender to me! I want that power!"

Her face became a snarl of hatred. "I belong to no man!"

Lightning crashed again, close.

She pushed him away with a strength he wasn't expecting. When he tried to grab her again, the witch whispered two words.

Angela shut her eyes as her newest gift was revealed. "Fire! Ice!"

Lightning cracked a third time, striking the truck Warren had arrived in. It exploded, raining twisted metal over the battlefield.

Warren and Aaron ducked.

The sky opened up. Chunks of heavy black hail began pelting them.

The four rear teachers whose names she had never learned recovered quickly, but they fled, not using the guns they'd brought as their bluff. They couldn't use the power if they killed her.

The witch held out a hand; flames danced along her fingertips. The two remaining men stopped.

"If you push me, I will kill you." The witch's voice was ice cold.

Aaron lifted his gun, finger tightening on the trigger.

The witch surged forward to laugh at him. "The woman may die, but I am immortal!"

Aaron paled at her glowing red orbs.

Horns sprouted; her long, crooked mouth opened to reveal sharp, needlelike teeth. When the forked tongue lashed out at him, Aaron ran. He didn't look back.

The witch remained, resisting Angela's attempts to get her under control, but the preacher revealed no fear even though he was now facing her alone.

"You are not strong enough to override her morals. She's a doctor. She will not let you kill me." Warren was sure of his answer.

The witch grinned, red eyes becoming reptilian. "Doctors kill often. They don't murder. This will be self-defense."

Warren grabbed her arm again, Bible in his hand. "I am the Lord's prophet! I see you, Demon of Souls! Surrender yourself to me in the name of the Father, the Son—"

The witch released the ball of flames before Angela could stop her.

"Ahh!" Fire leapt up the preacher's bare hands. He slapped at himself.

Angela shoved the witch back before she could deliver a final, consuming blast. *Stop! It's enough.*

*Never! Never be enough!* The witch roared, furious at the attempted theft of her power.

Angela glowered at Warren, ignoring his pain as he tried to put the fire out. "You have offended us. The witch wants your lifeforce as payment."

Fear filled his face.

“She’ll settle for your death.” Angela held out a hand, where tiny flames were growing, shaping into a ball. “Does it have to be today?”

Warren wanted to push anyway; she could feel it. Angela let the witch’s red orbs blend with her own again. “Last warning...”

The religious fanatic spun away, tattered book falling to the muddy ground.

Angela sucked air into lungs burning from holding her breath. She’d won. *I’m free!*

Her scream of triumph echoed as her attackers fled.

More confident now that she had another defense to depend on, Angela strode to her Blazer. Warren wouldn’t die and the others wouldn’t follow her even if he wanted them to. If he came for her later, it would just be him, and maybe Aaron. *Two against one is much better odds.*

Fate laughed at her.

Angela pulled the Blazer door shut as Warren vanished into the thick, rolling black smoke billowing from his burning truck. When his faint outline was gone, the witch retreated to allow Angela an untainted view of the home she had lived in for the last fourteen years.

Angela pushed the grief away as she swept the tiny grave. Shadows darted through the rolling smoke around her.

Angela started the engine and shifted into drive. She was sad and excited, but mostly scared, even with the gun. *My kind is not meant to be alone.* She pulled her sunglasses over teary eyes and drove away.

Empty and full mailboxes waved a final, hard goodbye in the mirror. Angela was suddenly sure she would never be back here.

### 3

It was a long day.

The slow going made Angela grit her teeth in frustration and curse as she spent the entire morning creeping west. She squeezed

through wherever she could, pushing dog houses, a dumpster, furniture, and even cars out of the way.

The pavement everywhere was cracked, full of spring potholes. She found herself listening for the hit that would give her the first flat tire of her journey. Worried, she began to ease through muddy yards to avoid the glass littering the streets, then berated herself for only making two miles in four hours. More than once, she found her way blocked and had to drive through fences, wincing at every snap of wood, plastic, and bone as she traveled through the riot ravaged areas she had known before the war. Everything was so different, so dangerous; she would never have recognized the towns if she hadn't been there before. Doubts about her ability to make the trip hit her hardest as she passed through Cheviot, Ohio.

Angela tried to steel herself as she entered the city limits, assuming it would be as bad as her own neighborhood. It was worse. She cried as she drove, tears blurring the awful scene but not enough. The medical salve under her nose pushed back the stench, but again, not enough as the gritty wind gusted harder.

Half of the buildings were gone, burned to charred, blackened frames. Those remaining had shattered doors. The main street was crammed with abandoned cars and wrecks; the corpses made her heart ache. Had no one in this small town found safety?

Angela steered around the blackened shell of an Army transport truck where the driver's uniformed body was rotting. She sucked in a horrified breath as she cleared the vehicle, able to see what remained of the local municipal building. Only the tall pillars still stood. The wide field of rubble behind it was unrecognizable. Tears came harder at the sight of so many who had represented authority decaying on those charred stone steps. Police, soldiers, and citizens lay in a tangled, gruesome heap.

The Blazer fishtailed on the ice.

Angela hit the brakes too hard and slid on the slushy street. Her front tires slammed into the curb, throwing her against the seatbelt.

The scare allowed her to get control of herself. She concentrated on the quiet rumble of her engine. After a moment, she felt better.

Angela started to reverse... Something changed in the air. She switched off the heater to listen as she swept the area.

*Not a threat*, the witch informed her, settling back. *Just more starving refugees.*

Angela put the Blazer in park. She climbed into the rear seat, ignoring the greed insisting she couldn't spare anything. *Yes, I can.*

It only took her a few minutes to gather a few things and write a note. She set the two bags outside her door, then got moving again. She had included a list of local stores that still had nonperishables, but Angela knew she'd only delayed the inevitable. Guilt slapped her. She was leaving them here to die.

*Because they're lost*, the witch commented sleepily. *Without a shepherd, they'll stay out in the cold and freeze to death. They've lost their strength. Those who cannot find hope will not survive.*

Those words pulled at Angela, echoing in her bitter heart. Kenny had found his reason to fight. Charlie's dreams were full of the survivors they'd joined. She knew they were going to Montana. It made her stomach burn to wonder what kind of sorry bastard was now in charge of her child. She didn't trust Kenny's judgment at all; she paid little attention to her son's inexperienced impressions. No one Kenn approved of could be good.

Angela drove by long gravel driveways surrounded in pine trees and shrubs gone wild from lack of care. The houses on the outskirts gave no comfort as she left the ghost town behind. They were sprawling beasts with paint-chipped porches and untended lawns, their fields ready to be planted. The two-car garages would hold one white or red Ford Crown Victoria, and one midnight blue Starfire that would wait forever for its owner to restore it. There were no signs of normal life, or any other. She drove faster, holding tight to her determination. She was terrified, but she could never turn back and live with herself. Her firstborn son was out here in this hell. *I'll get him back or die trying.*

Angela made camp her first night in an old cornfield lined in patches of black ice and dirty snow drifts. It was half a mile from the jammed lanes of Interstate 74. The brown, brittle stalks didn't come to the roof, but when she threw a wide, dark tarp over the top of the car, then scattered slushy snow on it, the vehicle blended in. She felt better as darkness rolled over the broken land.

Angela went to the area she had driven through, straightening rows until the path was normal again, eyes darting at every sound or shift of shadows. She didn't see any insects or other wildlife, not even ants crawling over the dirt as she set camp. She did hear a robin, but she was unable to pinpoint its location by the weak call. Things were no better here than what she'd left behind.

Angela only got out what she needed for dinner. Nursing a smashed thumb and a sore finger she'd pulled a large splinter from after making her fire and hanging the tarp (nailing things and lighting them up were what her Marine was good at), she left the rear hatch open. The ends of the wide tarp hung to the ground, almost shielding her from the road as she ate.

The sandwiches were gone quickly, as was the vivid green sunset. She sat on the tailgate, surrounded by pillows, sipping a hot cup of chamomile as darkness filled the land. The warmth of the heater pushed back a little of the loneliness as she drank her tea, mourning.

She hadn't heard anyone on the CB, but gunshots in the distance had made her drive faster through some places. She hadn't expected to find normal towns, but not seeing any survivors bothered her. When she filled in a page on her journal from now on, she would include how many people she saw and what each town was like. She wasn't sure why she wanted to do it, but instinct said she should. In this new world, instincts were a defense that had to be used. She'd only managed eight miles, but it was enough to drive it home. The world had changed. Danger was her new constant companion.



More of it waited for her upon success. Once she found Charlie, there would be a price to pay for leaving when her significant other had made it clear he wanted her to wait for him in Ohio. Until the war, she'd never disobeyed Kenny. They had a deal and he got mean when she broke the rules. He would be upset about her leaving, but he would be furious about Marc. Blood would spill, likely hers. Kenny would never believe anything she offered as an explanation. She would have to warn Marc that it might come to violence. It was only fair he knew what he was getting into.

*I wonder where he is now...?*

The witch tried to seduce her. *You can call him again and ask.*

Angie didn't fall for it. Not because it was wrong, but because a part of her was too excited. She couldn't wait to see him again.

*What if I still love him?*

Angela told herself she was eager because it meant getting to her son. She was finally able to sleep.

Her dreams were haunted by visions of spending eternity searching the wastelands, but never finding him.

Chapter Eleven  
**Dangerous Secrets**  
February 10th

1

“**A**ngie!”

Marc snapped out of the nightmare. He focused on steamed windows as sweat rolled down his neck in torrents.

He could still see Angie’s long, brittle hair flaring in the dust; blood smeared footprints had stretched out behind her as she walked the broken landscape, searching for her son. The victims from his draft escape followed on her heels. *Was it a dream or a warning?* There was no way to know for sure.

Marc snapped his seatbelt over his long black coat. It didn’t matter. Wherever she went, he would find her.

A soft whine echoed.

Marc glanced over his shoulder at the animal curled up on the rear seat. “How’s it hangin’, Dog?”

The big timber wolf ducked his snout under a wide paw and groaned.

Marc grunted agreement, wishing the sun would hurry and rise so he could make better time. He was sick of the damp, cold air that always hinted of snow. “Just a few more days and then we’ll take a break, get me some hot food and extra sleep, and there’s Kibble for you.”

*Not more of the crusty crunchy!* The blackish-red and gray animal rolled over and stared at his master upside down with piercing gold eyes full of impatience. *I can hunt, you know.*

Marc yawned again, wanting a shave and shower. He swallowed a pill instead. He needed to be alert enough to drive. He was exhausted. He had made two hundred fifty miles in eleven days, with over half of it in the last five. He’d even been eating

while he traveled, and only pulled over whenever he couldn't stay awake any longer.

Marc calculated Angie was only a hundred miles ahead of him now. He'd pushed hard to get here. As a result, he wasn't completely sure where in southwest Ohio he had stopped. The roads here were unbelievable. Some intersections required hours to get through. It had taken him a full day to cross the suspension bridge from Kentucky. It would have been faster if he'd left his vehicle behind, but Marc wouldn't unless he had another one lined up.

He rolled the window down to view the foggy street sign.

The first thing he noticed was the billboard above him wishing the city of Cincinnati a happy, prosperous New Year.

"Some great joke." Marc scanned the muddy, rusting CSX rail yard that was under inches of sludge. The dark trestles were barely visible. Even the graffiti (Die Milton! Hondo eats draft ballz. Px2012 yo!) looked as if it had been there for years instead of eight weeks.

Nothing moved around the dirty suspension bridge swaying precariously behind him, just the same wind and rain blown debris that was everywhere. The burned frames of two Hum-vees with charred Wright Patterson logos stared in reproach. Both had crashed into a thicket of dead and dying pines.

It was bad here. Marc was glad Angie had left, even though he was worried about her being alone. Clearly, it had become too dangerous to stay.

Marc consulted the map. *Where am I?*

His heart leapt as he figured out his location. *Close.*

Marc got rolling, scanning the foggy city for trouble. He found nothing, but the sense of a problem coming lifted his neck hair again.

Dog came up to the front seat and dropped into the passenger side. He pawed the button for the warmer, then sank down. He stretched his head over and rested it on Marc's knee.

Marc rolled up Queen City Hill, not worried about the cleared lanes. It had probably happened in the first weeks after the war,

when some cities had tried to recover. Then the power had gone off.

Marc wondered again why he was here. Angie had a man. Why wasn't he helping get their son back? Had her husband run out on her? Maybe he'd been taken in the draft, along with the boy. That made sense.

*Maybe he's dead.* Marc's heart whispered the alternative.

Marc shoved the secret desire away as he braked in front of the brick apartment building. He'd come here a decade ago, but hadn't possessed the courage, or the callousness, to knock. She'd had a new life by then; it didn't include him. He'd had no right to disrupt her happiness.

Marc had returned to duty and thrown himself into his career. By saving, fixing, impressing, he'd ended up in MARSOC, where they used his brains as well as his brawn. But he had never married. He was unable to settle for another female. He'd never regretted loving Angie, only that he'd let them be caught before they could run.

"She's not here now. Place is empty." Marc scolded himself again for coming. Chasing ghosts was always a bad idea, but here he was, drawn into the past. He had spent his adult life trying to convince himself that it hadn't meant much, that she hadn't been the one. Marc was filled with familiar shame. He'd taken advantage of her. He'd known it was wrong, but he had been unable to resist, and oh God, hadn't every orgasm since paled in comparison?

*I just want to know what kind of life she's had. That's why I came—recon. I don't want to face her in the dark.*

He left the engine running, Dog watching anxiously through the dirty window. He didn't lock the door, though the remote entry was in his pocket. Anyone who tried to enter the Blazer would get a major surprise.

Marc jogged through the drizzle to the front of the building, noting a burnt truck by an oak tree that had been hit by something harsh.

Marc slid his coat behind his holsters as he opened the cracked glass door.

The dark hallway smelled like burnt sugar. Two sheets of paper on the carpeted floor caught his attention. Marc knew instinctively who had written them.

*I'll settle for whatever's in that letter.* Marc flipped on his penlight and retrieved the pages from the mud tracked carpet. He didn't really want to go in the home where some lucky bastard had lived the life he had dreamed about every night since being ripped from Angela's side. Marc read the letter with a sharp curiosity that missed little.

*Charlie, lock yourself in and be as quiet as you can. Do it right now!*

*If you're reading this, either we missed each other, or I didn't survive the trip. I'm terrified of that, of leaving you on your own. I wish I could be with you! I love you. I miss you so much it's like there's a knife in my gut.*

*I have a big secret to tell you, one that was supposed to wait until you were grown and out of the house. Kenny is not your dad. I know you've suspected, but I couldn't tell you before. I'm sure you understand why. Your dad is Marcus Charles Brady.*

*Our family was strict Christian. When your dad and I fell for each other, cousins by marriage, it was too close for anyone to accept. We didn't plan on it; we were swept away. We had decided to leave when I was older, but fate didn't give us time. A bit after your dad was sent away, I realized you were coming, and I wanted you more than anything. I didn't tell anyone. I just ran as fast as I could. The family had legal control until I was of age. They could have taken you. Worse, I'll always believe they would have made me get an abortion. So I ran.*

*And Kenny found me. Kenny and I made a deal that said we would become his obedient family. It seemed like the best I could do at the time. I know it was the wrong choice. How could I not know, when I can feel it in your looks? He's been our master.*

*Yet, after all that's happened, he has chosen not to come back. He's tired of me. That only leaves one person you can trust—your real dad. You have to call Marc. You know what I mean by that. He'll come once he knows it's true. I'm sorry I never told him, never gave him the chance to be your father. He had no idea you existed, or he would have come for us. I know it in my...*

Marc stopped reading. Anger, guilt, and joy warred in his heart. He had a son. *We made a baby! She should have told me! I would have come back a happy man.*

*Really?* His mind was cruel. *You wouldn't have felt like a criminal, sure it was wrong?*

Marc let out a harsh sound. That's exactly how it would have felt back then, but it didn't matter. He hadn't knocked, and she'd been forced to survive on her own. "I should have talked to her that day."

"Yes," another voice answered. "You should have."

Marc drew his gun as he turned.

"You must be the sinner she talks about in the letter. Her lover." Warren sneered, pain on his face.

Marc took in the clothes, and the charred skin, connecting him to the wreck outside. Marc was suddenly sure the preacher had forced Angie to defend herself. "You're the reason she couldn't wait here for me."

Warren scowled at the confirmation of their relationship, lifting his own gun as he came out of the dark corner where he'd been lurking. "My daughter and my leadership are gone because of the witch. Will she come back for you?"

Marc's anger grew. "She's not who you should worry about." Marc's Colt barked in a flash of death before Warren could fire.

Warren's gun dropped to the carpeted floor, blood blooming on his chest. The broken preacher dropped to his knees as blood ran from a corner of his mouth.

Marc stared at the shuddering man for whom death was fast approaching. When Warren's mouth opened but no sound came

out, Marc understood anyway. “She’s not here to serve any man. She’s special.”

“A demon!” Warren choked out.

Marc’s sympathy vanished. He watched the preacher take his last breath while either thunder or gunfire cracked in the distance. “You’re no better. You had no right to judge.”

## 2

After pulling Warren’s cooling corpse around the corner of the building, Marc put the papers back together on the glass door, where he was sure the letter had originally been.

He returned to his warm vehicle, giving the anxious wolf a quick rub of comfort. He flipped on the wipers to clear the heavy layer of rain thumping on the window, then wiped the stinking liquid from his hands.

Marc called out as the riot ravaged streets of Cincinnati rolled by. He had to know she was okay. *Angie!*

He hit the brakes as a child’s faded ball rolled across the dirty pavement. He rolled on. *Angie!*

*I’m here.*

“Where? I just left Queen City Hill.”

Angela hesitated, knowing by his tone that he had read the letter meant for their son. *How long has he known where I lived?*

“Angie?”

*I’m ten miles north of Greensburg, Indiana.*

“I understand why you didn’t tell me, but I wish you had. I’m thrilled.”

She sent a clear warning. *He’s mine. Parentage doesn’t matter.*

Marc didn’t respond, though he wanted to. If she sensed the things floating through his mind, she would disappear. It hit him again. *I have a son!* It was a reason to have hope, a goal. His heart was lighter than it had been since the war. He would now serve his child...and maybe that child’s mother. “I ran into a friend of yours

here. He had some burns.” Marc could feel her scowling at the words. He was aware of Dog observing alertly.

*Warren. He’s dead?*

Now, Marc was the one frowning. Something else she should have mentioned...though she hadn’t known he would go there. “Yes.”

*I had hoped he was no longer a threat.*

“It was his choice.”

Silence hung between them for a moment, broken by the drumming rain and squeak of his wipers, but the connection between them was strong. It allowed him to hear stray noises—a clink, a snap, a grunt of effort. She was breaking camp. She didn’t want him around yet. “Where are you holed up?”

Marc felt her wondering how he knew she wasn’t on the road, but she didn’t ask. That meant she didn’t know how much he was picking up. *Good. More time to recon.*

*I’m in a cornfield off Highway 3.*

“You could stay there, take a break for the holiday. It wouldn’t take me long to catch up.” He sent the option carefully, not mentioning Valentine’s Day by name.

*No.*

He was glad she didn’t sound mad, but he still frowned at how set her tone was. “You okay?” Marc was flooded by the old need to protect her.

*I’m fine.*

“Okay... I can’t wait to see you.”

The words were normal for the situation, but she couldn’t mistake his eagerness.

Another cold warning rushed out to slap at him.

*Nothing’s changed for us, Marc. Don’t think it has.*

“I don’t, but I had reasons, Angie.”

*I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. Only my son does.*

Marc wished he could see her, so he would know if she really meant that. He couldn’t say it and mean it.

Angela let go of the connection.



Marc didn't protest as he steered around fresh bodies. She wasn't ready to deal with him yet. She probably hated him, despite what she had written to soothe their child. He would let her have the lead when it came to settling their past. If he pushed, she would slip away. If he wanted to get to know his child, he needed her along.

*If?* A big grin filled Marc's face. There was no if. He would track her down if he had to, but as long as he made it clear that he wouldn't hound her, things should be okay. She would have her missing child and he would only ask for time with the son he hadn't known existed. Marc was a little surprised by how much he already wanted the boy. His heart liked it that their love had created a life. He was grateful for the chance to love again.

In Indiana, Angie got into the driver's seat of her Blazer, emotions chaotic. If Marc was in Cincinnati now, he was a week behind her. Angela wanted to keep that distance a bit longer. She needed to be able to look back after this was all over and know she had gotten the journey started. She was also stalling. She had no idea how to ask Marc for what she needed. Only a fool would agree and that, Marc had never been.

Chapter Twelve  
**The Doctor**  
Rawlins, Wyoming  
February 11th

1

“**Y**ou’re not fooling me. You don’t know who to call, even if you do fix it.”

John Harmon MD flinched at his wife’s voice echoing across the living room. He put a hand to his chest, trying to catch his breath.

“Sorry.”

“Uh-huh.” John studied his wife; he was glad she had finally gained a little weight while they’d been hiding in their home. Anne was half of his 240lbs, with hair still brown instead of his salt and pepper. She was beautiful for fifty-eight. He hadn’t been as lucky. “You did that on purpose.”

Anne’s brown eyes flashed concern above fine age lines. She set the large green afghan she was knitting on the recliner’s matching brown end table. “I had to. You’re sad again.”

Stalling, he took off his glasses and laid them on the device he really didn’t know how to repair. He stared through the only window in the large two-story farmhouse they hadn’t covered in thick layers of plastic. John frowned at the Discovery Channel special going on in their muddy yard. Their neighbor’s dog had collapsed and died near the barn yesterday. The collie’s carcass was now a carpet of ants. Their bloated bodies twitched in effort and obvious communication as they struggled to cut up and relocate the food. Backdropped by a sunset view of the hazy Rocky Mountains, the foraging ants were each the size of a quarter.

They were the biggest John had seen around here yet; their bodies were constantly changing from the contaminated carrion they were ingesting. All the nests were getting regular doses of contaminated Miracle Gro from the rain and snow. John hated to think about what it was doing to the rats and spiders, who could hatch or birth young every few weeks.

Once nature finished cleaning, leaving only bones, predators would change to other food sources, like people. The death toll from this hell wouldn't end for a century or more. Everything had changed. It had been thirty-eight years since he and Anne were in the army at the same MASH unit. He had to remember what had kept him alive then, so they could use it now. "We have to pack up and go. The weather's not as bad now that two months have passed. We've cleaned out the local stock."

Anne stared.

John was sure he had caught her off guard with his words. He didn't know where they would end up, or if they would even be able to make the trip. It definitely wouldn't be a blow off. Their hometown of Rawlins was no longer safe, but the temperatures were still falling too. They couldn't stay here. The food would cover them for another month and a half, but nature wouldn't wait.

The lonely echo of his wife's shoes on the bare floor made John wonder what the footsteps sounded like as they floated down to the dark, flooded tunnels of their barricaded basement. Was it a dinner bell to those open dark ways and everything that might now be calling that nasty area home? They heard noises sometimes. He was never sure if it was the moment that they would have to defend themselves. They didn't go down there. They also didn't take down the boards he'd used to seal the door, but they did occasionally tense and glance that way. John was glad Anne knew how to use the shotgun and the rifle he kept by her chair. Not that a firearm would be effective against sewer rats.

"But why, Johnnie? We get along here."

"We've seen no sign of anyone coming to save us." John sighed. "And because of the basement."

*Scratch. Sniff...sniff.*

As if to prove his point, they heard the curious, hungry rodents near the door. The sewer grates at the other end of the treeless land kept out the bigger problems, but the rats had come in by the hundreds after the war. He and his wife had sealed off the unused parts of their home. The rats were too big to get under the floors, but their pups weren't. John expected to see them in substantial numbers soon.

"Where would we go? Other than those men with the guns, we ain't seen a healthy person in nigh on two weeks."

John forced his hand away from his aching stomach, gaze still on the yard. He hoped that ugly green twilight would finish setting and hide the view so Anne wouldn't get upset.

"Johnnie?"

The thought of leaving their home obviously hadn't occurred to her. John felt that terror too, but it wasn't strong enough to get him to change his mind. She had to do things his way now. Her life depended on it. "To NORAD, for starters. We'll surrender to the draft."

"What if it's all like here, or worse?"

She was referring to the dead pets, dead police, dead crops, and of course, dead friends and neighbors they'd known all their lives. He knew the horror was still fresh for her—especially the memory of passing a neighbor's wrecked truck on the two-lane dirt road to their farm. Both doors had been open, and they'd seen the bullet holes in the windshield as they returned from their burning office to avoid the panic gripping their town, their country. Anne had wanted to stop, but there hadn't been a reason to. The elderly couple was dead, brains blown all over the road.

"We'll have to do some searching. Other healthy survivors are out there. I know it doesn't feel that way when you look out the window." John winced at his reference.

"But we're old; they won't want us. Shouldn't we stay hidden?"

"That, my dear Anne, is exactly what most people will do, and they will die. What the weather and disease don't take, the gangs and starvation will. All these threats are lessened when humanity

comes together. Despite the flaws, we are not better off without society.”

When she leaned toward him, tan slacks rustling, John gently surrounded her with his arms, hoping she wouldn't notice his racing pulse. “You're a nurse. I'm a doctor. It's wrong of us to deny them our help. They need us now more than ever.” He kissed her wrinkled hand. “Our age will make us more valuable because of our experience.”

John played his trump card without guilt, knowing her inability to get pregnant, which he believed to be his fault, would keep her from arguing more. “There are a lot of kids out there too, Anna, kids who are alone and hurting. They need us. Trust me, my sweet, I do this for you.”

“I do, Johnnie. You know that. I always have.”

John gritted his teeth against a wave of pain that settled deep into his guts. “Good. We'll leave this week.”

Anne turned her head.

John tensed, expecting a bad reaction as her eyes landed on the gruesome scene outside.

She shuddered.

He opened his mouth to comfort her.

“I never did like that damned dog. It barked too much.” Anne returned to her knitting, leaving him with a shocked look on his lightly bearded face.

Even after all these years, she was still capable of surprising him. John was happier than he could say that they had survived the actual war together. *There's no one I'd rather be with as I die.*

## 2

A while later, John was still at the window. The big ants and most of their dinner were gone. Freezing rain was falling again, but John didn't see it. He dwelled on his wife, on the half-truths he'd told her. He never lied, but he sometimes left things out and this time it was huge. He would tell her soon, though. She had a right to know that this next year together would probably be their

last. He had to get her to some kind of safety, and he had to do it now. She would refuse to budge if he told her why they were really going.

Movement in the dimness caught John's attention, mostly because there was so little of it now. He watched a shadow limp across their driveway, keeping to the line of dormant bushes around the edge of the long porch. He and Anne had seen a lot of radiation victims right after the war, in the initial stages where travel was still possible. John tensed, expecting one of the walking dead.

Tall and thin, with dirty curls under goggles, the young woman wore a muddy coat that came to the top of her boots. *Should I call to her?* She looked healthy, other than a slight limp.

Before John could decide, she turned toward the window.

Her mouth opened in fear, panicked feet slipping on muddy debris, and then she was gone, disappearing into the hazy darkness.

John rose to go to the door anyway.

Another lance of burning pain struck. He dropped back into the chair, breath stolen. He held his swollen stomach, wishing the pills would hurry. He needed a lab that still had power, so he could run some tests. It would be easier to plan his wife's future if he knew how long he had before the cancer took him.

John sighed again. He wouldn't stop until he found someone to protect his sweet, gentle mate. Anne would never last in this hard, new world alone.

Anne tied the last knot of string on the blanket and then began to put away her supplies. She didn't look at her husband. She didn't need to see him to know he was in pain and gunny sacking to keep her from finding out. He could try to distract her with talk of kids all he wanted—she did feel a bit of regret that she had never been able to bear him a son and hadn't wanted to take one in that wasn't theirs—but it didn't keep her from noticing things.

His eating and sleeping habits had changed drastically; she'd seen the empty pill bottles in the trash. He was protecting her, like he always did from the dreadful things. She would do what he

wanted and pretend she didn't have a clue, but Anne knew he was sick and hunting for a place to leave her. John wanted to be alone when he died. He'd said it many times. He claimed it would hurt too much to say goodbye, and while she would do anything for him, she simply couldn't allow that. Leaving him alone to die would be a betrayal of their life together, and now, after all that had happened, any betrayal of life was wrong. *When we go, it will be together.*

### **A week later**

“Go faster! Faster!”

“Hold on!” The horrified doctor swung the wagon into the dark woods that lined the road and killed the engine a few yards in. He was glad for the heavy fog and cover of night. “Get down! Low as you can!”

The elderly couple shoved themselves onto the floorboard as best they could.

John stifled a groan at the cramped position, glasses sliding from his face as the engines grew closer.

*Pop-Pop!*

*Screeechh!*

Headlights flashed their way. The gunshots and engines echoed as the storm rolled overhead.

“I love you, Johnnie. Have since we was kids.”

A cold hand locked onto his hairy wrist through the sleeve of his plaid shirt. John covered it with his own shaking fingers, afraid he might wet himself despite all his determination not to. “I adore you, my sweet.”

The large group of vehicles began to fly by.

The couple froze, listening to the gunshots, wincing at each whine and ricochet.

Drunken shouts echoed, along with thuds of metal hitting, scraping. Rain thumped on the roof; a tire squealed.

A bullet pinged off their bumper, making them both flinch. Their grip on each other tightened, both aware the fog was the only thing keeping them from certain, painful death. A long two minutes later, the gang was out of sight; their noises faded to silence.

Terrified it was a trick, John kept them still for another fifteen minutes. He finally moved when the bands of pain in his stomach caused tears to slip from his eyes.

Driving without lights, John took them west on 40, away from the gang. They would still go to Cheyenne Mountain. They would just take a different path. They'd been on the road for five days now. John had been careful to use methods that didn't require much physical labor. They weren't spring chickens. He wasn't taking any more chances than he had to. So far, they were a bit stiff and a little sore, but they both felt more alert than they had in years.

"How long will this add?"

John slid his glasses into place. "Couple hours. We have to get off these frontage roads, but we'll still make Routt Ridge by dawn."

Anne nodded, wrinkled fingers turning on the heat and defroster before digging into the kit behind his seat. "Take these." She dropped two white pills into his wrinkled hand and held out an open mason jar of clear liquid.

John took them gratefully. His gut was on fire; the blood in his veins was pounding in rhythm with his pain. "I'm sorry."

"I know." Anne flipped on the CB and went back to checking channels. He was her man, her love, and she wouldn't let him suffer. She had a good idea what was wrong. She had been a nurse long enough to read the signs he couldn't hide on this journey. Now, it wasn't a secret anymore.

John scanned the foggy landscape, able to see faint outlines of dude ranches and hunting lodges. Other than those, and the occasional farm or dead vehicle in the road, there was nothing around here. It had been isolated before. Now, it was desolate.



Wind howled through the shadowy darkness around their vehicle, warning of more ugliness to come.

#### 4

*Damn.* John swept the ugly scene coming up in front of them. It had been a group of travelers, or maybe a large family, and the gang had killed them all. The trail was leading straight to NORAD. *Has the gang been there too?*

John winced as another bump jarred him against a spring sticking out of the seat. He shifted, trying to avoid it as the wagon chugged along the smoldering streets of Granby, Colorado. He hoped Anne stayed asleep. The gentle snoring coming from the blanket filled passenger seat gave him hope that she might get to miss this particular stretch. One glance out the foggy window would reveal that they were in danger again. Signs of a battle littered the area. The winners had marked their victory with devastation. Homes were in flames—even trees on front lawns were burning. Cheery Christmas lights had melted onto the branches. Cars had been rammed through buildings, and bodies lay where they'd been shot. The blood hadn't dried yet.

The doctor was horrified to see their tires leaving bloody tracks, but the puddles were unavoidable. So was the smell. Even with the windows up, it was revolting.

John lowered the glass, stopping to listen for survivors.

He heard only wind and crackling flames. The equality state was no longer that. Now, only the strongest would survive.

*And those with them.* John scanned his wife once more before sending his attention back to the apocalyptic road. He and Anne had been that type in their youth, but now, he could only hope to find people who would protect her.

John continued to look for survivors, but the gang had been thorough. After another long minute, he got out of the area. Granby was just a huge cemetery without a marker now.

Dawn was starting to break as he cleared the city limits. The dusty sky barely hinted at light. John knew he couldn't go another full day without sleep, but they weren't stopping near here, not even for a stretch. *Those men might—*

“Want me to drive? I've got my glasses.”

John jumped. He hid the pain from it with a tight smile while loosening the belt over his swollen abdomen. “We'll switch after brunch. I'll snooze in your warm spot.”

Anne adjusted her silk shawl tighter over her sweater, then shut her eyes and laid on the pillow against the locked door. Instead of giving him hell about not telling her he was sick, she had adjusted to caring for him as they traveled. She was handling the journey well. *Was I a little bored, a little restless? Hell of a way to have an adventure.*

The rain began to solidify into snow.

John wasn't happy about it, but he didn't stop. There had already been a bite to the wind that warned they would be running the heater the entire trip. John was glad to have the cans of gas on the luggage rack. Three hours at a station with a foot pump had given him a nasty backache, but they were good for two weeks of driving. He hoped to find a safe place long before it ran out. Along with the gang they had hidden from, there had also been other dangers on this trip—like the radiation victim that had snuck up on them in the fog three days ago and almost got the door open before John could get the wagon into drive.

*Talk about taking some years off my life,* John thought with a touch of bitterness. The weather was also hard to drive in, but at least the acid rain would force the rest of the mortally injured to hole up somewhere and finish dying.

John scanned the tarp in the rear of the wagon that hid their belongings, the last remnants of their life before the war. He desperately wanted to find a group of people like themselves... John knew they were out there, gathering somewhere. He could feel the pull of their calls, but he saw no one.

The old Ford kept on chugging.

An hour after dawn lit the sky, the snow had lightened, and the wagon sat on Routt Ridge. The older couple observed in silence, hope gone. NORAD had fallen.

“Check the radio again. Maybe we’ll hear survivors.”

Anne did it slowly, but they heard nothing as she flipped through...

John caught something. He put a gentle hand on his wife’s wrist to keep her from changing to the next channel. “Wait.”

A second later, the radio lit up with heavy static and a man’s calm words.

“Safe Haven... Red Cross... Welcome all survivors... follow... clear means closer.”

They lost the transmission. The radio went to full static.

John looked over Routt Ridge, not needing to see the horrors in the bunker to know they were there.

“Whatever you think, Johnnie.” Anne’s voice was shaky, but there was confidence too—confidence in him.

John considered. They could at least check the new people out from a distance. With NORAD gone, there was nowhere else John could think of to try. If that complex had fallen, no place was safe.

John turned around and headed the wagon west, sure they couldn’t have heard the transmission if the new people were south. The mountains wouldn’t allow the waves to carry that well on their cheap radio. He would narrow it down by the clarity of the calls, and then determine if this so-called Safe Haven was aptly named.

John still believed leaving their home had been the right thing to do. They had started seeing rats the day before. His last memory of the home they’d shared for so long was of nailing the *Warning! Rodents!* sign on the front door. They would probably be sick from rat bites by now if they’d stayed. He had waited as long as he could.

John assumed the group they ended up with wouldn’t be exactly what he was hoping for, but if his beloved wife would be

safe and have a good place after he was gone, he would offer his services in exchange.

*If that doesn't work, I'll get on my knees and beg.*

Chapter Thirteen  
**Guns And Magic**  
Indiana  
February 14<sup>th</sup>

1

**T**he twin brothers crawled toward the dim campfire and the quilt covered woman sleeping behind it, coordinating with simple hand signals. The area around them was wooded, dark; there was no glare of moonlight off bald scalps to give them away as they stalked the female. The Morgan Monroe State Forest had been remote even before the war. There was no one to help her.

The brothers had come far east of their main group to take revenge on the snitch who'd put them in prison. After those two bloody days, the brothers had resumed their travels, ferreting out survivors whenever they wanted shelter or sex. They'd found girls and their mothers huddled in basements after the draft had taken their men, but the waves of energy this lone woman was sending out had called to them. They'd followed from a distance to make sure she was alone. When the woman stopped to change a tire—her third in two days—they'd made plans based on knowing she would have to rest afterward. She wasn't healthy.

Now, she was sleeping.

Dean and Dillan had been dishonorably discharged from the Army for the murder of a Korean civilian. They expected no trouble from one lone woman. The assassins excelled at front line infiltration; only the sound of the cold, Indiana wind howling through the trees echoed as they slipped from rough trunk to yellow grass. Their movements were so alike they appeared to be one 6', 220lb threat instead of two.

Exhausted, Angela was dreaming of murder, rape, torture. The men in her nightmare were giving no mercy. Their knives flashed across the girl's body while they talked.

*"They'll throw us out for this." One of the men sank his blade deep into a soft, dead breast.*

*His twin nodded, poking her bruised thigh. "We're not going back. Come on. Her daughter's awake."*

Angela snapped awake as mental alarms blared, telling her she'd let danger get too close to run. She jerked her gun from under the blanket, searched the darkness beyond the dim firelight.

The grove of trees she had eased the Blazer into were the only things in sight through the darkness. There were no sounds, not even a cricket—just the wind and the popping of her small, unevenly rocked fire. His cover was good. She found the intruder by the layers of overlapping slime in his mind. Angela pointed her gun in his direction, not sure if she could shoot a person.

*Defend yourself! Use the fire!*

The witch ordered it, but Angela couldn't. The intruder hadn't done anything wrong, though she knew his lean body was ready to react. She could feel it.

"Don't make me shoot you!" Angela hated her shaky tone. The flag blanket fell unnoticed to the damp dirt as she stood.

*"I'm hungry. Got any food?"*

The words fell awkwardly, tone devoid of empathy. It gave her a chill of terror when he took a small step closer. She lifted the weapon. "Don't! I will shoot you!"

Energy, fear, and adrenaline raced through Angela. She called for a defense other than her gun. She wasn't good enough with it.

A door appeared in her mind, one carrying a feel of death. She put a hand on the knob, but hesitated, not wanting to take a life.

*"What's your name? Pretty bitch?"*

The intruder's simple, awful words made her understand the smoke and mirrors she had used on Warren wouldn't deter this seasoned hunter. She opened the mental door, preparing to do battle for her life. *Nothing will keep me from my son!*

The witch whispered again, revealing secrets.

Angela's stomach clenched. "Where's your brother?"

The witch took immense pleasure in the surprise that spread across his smooth face.

Angela darted a quick glance at her Blazer while he was distracted. It was too far away.

"How do you know that?" The hunter stalked through the cool darkness.

*Dean. His name is Dean.* Angela felt a great wave of heat jump from her chest to form a thin shield between them.

The shield was only visible for a second, but Dean saw it.

"Be gone, killer. You have no welcome here!" Angela forked her hands at him.

The burned-out fire flared to life; the crackling flames reached for the surprised man.

The mercenary took an unconscious step backward, revealing his brother and the barrel of his gun.

"Drop it!" Dillan wasn't sure why his brother had hesitated. It had never happened before; he couldn't think of anything that would cause it now. They feared nothing. "You shoot, you die slow."

Angela stepped through the mental door.

A dangerous voice echoed from the dark distance in her mind.  
*You accept?*

*I do.*

Power flew from her chest. It slammed against the brothers, knocking them both to the ground.

Angela's breathing was harsh as silence fell; the thin shield vanished as the fire sank to a dim glow.

"Whhooooo!"

The wolf call was close, as if it was responding to her cry for help.

Dean gaped at his twin. "What is she?"

Dillan frowned at his brother's spooked tone. He hadn't seen the shield or the fire; he'd already passed off being knocked down

to gusting wind. “Ours. We’ll have her now!” Dillan reminded his brother of who they were.

They shared an evil leer, then spun, rushing her.

Angela threw herself toward the Blazer, firing wildly.

The twins dropped low.

The dry click of her gun echoed.

They stood up, closing in for the kill.

“Fire! Ice!”

The flames blazed between them again but faded just as fast. Her energy was spent.

The brothers leapt at the same time, ignoring bits of hail falling on them.

*Crack! Crack!*

Only Dillan made it across the short flames as bullets flew through the air.

A predator padded into the circle of light as Dean hit the tall grass beyond the fire, clutching his leg.

Dillan grabbed for Angela’s arm, meaning to use her as a shield against whoever was shooting at them.

Powerful jaws sank into his wrist.

Dillan let go of her, bullets forgotten. “Ahh! Dean!”

The timber wolf shook, not letting go.

Dillan punched the creature with hard, serious blows that had no effect.

Angela winced, retreating as bones crunched between the wolf’s teeth.

“Kill it! Dean! Help!”

Dean stayed quiet, hands searching for the gun he’d lost when the slug had slammed into his leg, but his gaze was fixed on the shadows. He hunted for the dead man who had done this.

“Dean! Shoot it!”

The wolf jerked the hurt brother to his knees, blood covering his muzzle.

When the beast finally let go, baring sharp, red teeth, Dillan scrambled to get away.



“He’ll go for your throat if you move.” Angela forwarded the warning from the beautiful predator, stunned.

The twin stilled, holding his mauled arm.

Angela retrieved the gun she had dropped as the injured killer glowered at her. His hatred gave her another deep chill. Her death was in those remorseless eyes; it was ugly.

“This isn’t over!” Dillan was almost crying tears of rage.

Angela paled.

“Yes, it is! You’re both dead!” Marc stepped from behind her muddy Blazer, Colt aimed where the other man had fallen out of sight. He advanced in that direction, content the wolf had things under control here.

“Marc.” Angela stopped him despite the witch warning her not to interfere with the defense she had chosen. “I’m not hurt. Let’s just go.”

Marc hesitated. “It’s a bad idea.”

Her heart thumped at the sound of his voice. “I know.”

Marc gave in, fading into the shadowy darkness by her vehicle to provide cover without being a clear target. “Go on, then. I’ll catch up.”

Angela grabbed her things. She was glad when the wolf stayed between her and the furious killer on the ground. The doctor inside wanted to help, but his hatred! Even if she could change the way the brothers saw her, they would always loathe her for this surprise defeat. She would be healing them so they could hunt her.

*They will anyway, the voice behind the now shut mental door warned. Better to let your new man kill them.*

*No killing. And Marc isn’t my man.*

“We’ll come for you!” Dillan sat up, shirt soaked with blood.

The wolf snarled, telling Angela to stay away. If Dillan got a hand on her, he would snap her neck with his good arm.

“You’ll look over your shoulder forever, witch!” Dean shouted from the tall grass, still searching for his gun. “You’ll bleed rivers while we have you!”

Evil laughter floated on the wind, giving Angela another chill despite Marc’s presence.

When she lifted a brow, Marc sighed heavily, cold gaze returning to the snake in the grass. “You already know what I think.”

Angela studied her conscience for a brief second, but she had lived by the old rules for a long time. “Let’s just go.”

Dillan was in agony; the mangled wrist was excruciating. He was horrified to find himself relieved by her decision. For the first time since they were teenagers, the twins had underestimated their prey. It was humbling for men who had engaged entire military units alone, but especially for Dillan, who was more aggressive. This humiliation would never be forgotten.

Angela opened the door, but she hesitated to leave Marc with the two killers.

“Now. Take Dog if he’ll go.”

Marc’s words held a tone of command she responded to, even as she frowned.

*Man is your guardian. I am his. Go.* The wolf pushed against her leg.

Surprised by the clear answer from the animal, Angela climbed into the Blazer and shut the door. The powerful engine fired up. She slid the window down. “That should be a fatal injury now. Will you die?”

“Who are you?!” Dillan demanded.

The witch smiled through her lips, hunger glinting. “You’ve called enough of my names. Stay clear of me.”

The Blazer was out of sight a few seconds later.

When both man and beast started to retreat, the twins began to hurl insults, hoping to grab Marc and use him to draw Angela back.

“The railbird is running!”

“Coward! Can’t you finish the job?” Dean stood, gun now in hand.

Dillan was furious. He didn’t care that he was an easy target if Marc chose to fight. “Hell won’t be far enough for you to run! We will have her!”

Marc stayed silent, aware of their tactics (hadn't Warren tried the same thing?) but he was sure they meant every word they screamed. Unlike the bitter preacher from her hallway, these two could back it up.

Out of sight now, Marc wound through tall oaks and high bushes, leaving muddy prints in the grass. The wolf kept pace.

The big animal leapt into the vehicle the second he opened the door, going to his spot in the rear.

Marc slid in and started the engine.

The radio lit up, making them both flinch from the unfamiliar sound.

"You there?"

He shifted and hit the gas as he keyed the mike. "Be in your mirror in a click. Kill your lights; stay close."

The bright red tattles disappeared. "I will."

Marc slowed a little as he went around her on the gravel road, pleased she had left room for him to take the lead. When she fell in tight behind him, he let his knowledge of the area take over. He swung them onto an old dirt path that would bring them out well away from the vengeful threats they were leaving alive. It would help that the ground here was dry but not dusty enough to leave tracks.

Ignoring his gut that said doing this was a huge mistake, Marc lit a smoke and lowered the window. Angie hadn't wanted it. The last thing he needed was for her to know he was a hardened killer... *Even though I am.*

They rolled over streets and dirt roads that Angela didn't have time to find on her map before they took a different one. She kept her doors locked and her attention on the *Born Free & Die that Way!* bumper sticker she could read whenever Marc hit his brakes. *He's here. Marc came!*

Marc kept one eye on the winding dirt road and one on the vehicle in his mirror, glad when she copied his path. They rolled around downed trees, crushed cars, and wireless telephone poles—damage he was almost sure had been caused by an earthquake. She was following him as he had followed her, trusting the choices he

made—like he had trusted her choices when he'd tracked her here. It occurred to him again that some of her decisions had been reckless. Finding her had been easy because she wasn't taking the easiest or most reasonable path, just the quickest—like the water crossing in Geneva. They'd both been lucky that bridge had held.

Marc stared at her shadowy form in the mirror. *That's Angie!* Marc wanted to grab the mike and tell her how happy he was that she'd called, but he resisted. This wasn't the time or place, and not just because of anyone who might be listening. He had to get himself under control first.

His mind flashed to the image of her bathed in firelight, no longer the innocent young girl of his memories but a rounded, beautiful woman. He felt the pain keenly. Slender curves, a pale, flawless profile, midnight black hair... It was suddenly easy to remember how silky it had felt under his trembling fingers. It had only been one weekend, fifteen long years ago, but he had never gotten close to it again. The occasional barracks bait he'd succumbed to had been blue-eyed, with long dark hair, and he had loved them all in the dark. Searching for what he'd lost, he was always unsatisfied when it was over. Being with Angie for just these few minutes had already reminded him of how lonely he'd been. Unless he could hide it, she would know his one weakness. *I never got over her. I never will.*

## 2

Nerves began to eat at Angela as the miles passed. She found herself hoping he would keep driving all night. She was grateful for the rescue, but she had counted on at least one more day to figure out what to say to him. What she needed was dangerous. She was crazy to try guiltting him into it using something that had happened so long ago. It would never hold him.

*Then tell him the basics and let him make his own choices.*

Angela agreed with the witch's advice. *That's what I'll do, and hope the rest takes care of itself.*

Her dreams had kept some things alive in her memory, but she had forgotten about his hard, tanned skin and the way a couple days' stubble was attractive on him. Marc was a modern-day cowboy now, with wide shoulders and lean hips in dusty jeans and scuffed boots. He wore a wide brimmed, faded black hat, and a dog tag under his shirt and black trench coat. He also sported a gun on each hip; the crisscrossed belts accented the great shape he was in. Her Marc was all grown up. They had been devoted friends once, lovers... Maybe even soul mates. She was counting on his sense of honor, but also worrying about how to protect her heart. *I have to be careful not to encourage anything. The past is done. We can't go back.*

By 2:00 am, storm clouds were rolling, and Angela was ready to stop. She was too tired to worry about talking. She yawned as they rolled onto yet another weed dotted gravel road; a street sign flashed by too fast in the darkness.

They drove by small buildings she recognized as restrooms and showers. She assumed this path wound around a campground of some kind, or maybe even the rear of the state forest she had been in.

Marc's brake lights stayed lit as he came to a stop in front of a wide log house overtop a two-car garage with a dark second-floor window. A caretaker's home, maybe. Garbage littered the area. The trees were spaced out; spots were cleared for campsites. Only oddly colored weeds grew in those neat rock circles now. It was spooky. She jumped when the radio lit up.

"I need to check it out. Stay close, okay?"

"Yes." Angela shut off her engine, but she didn't get out as Marc exited and Dog took off to water the weeds. She wanted to watch and see if the Marine took over Marc the way it did Kenny, but she also needed to know where her enemies were. Angela shut her burning eyes, searching for the evil twins she had stopped Marc from killing.

### 3

Dillan and Dean tracked the couple with their lights out, blood-soaked clothes sticking to the seats of their jeep. The two Blazers were easy to spot when brake lights flashed like beacons in the darkness. Not disconnecting those bulbs was a mistake. It was understandable, considering the circumstances, but it was also enough to get them trapped.

“You have gas left?” Dean stayed low as Dillan observed their prey through the binoculars. They had followed separate trails for the first two days of tracking the woman, being careful not to lose her, until tonight, when they’d come together for the attack.

“Two gallons. You?”

Dean smothered a cry, fingers digging into his thigh for a bullet. “Four. We’ll wait until they’re asleep and send them both to hell.”

Dillan wrapped his mauled wrist. “Yes. I need to hear her scream while she burns.”

### 4

Marc frowned as he came out of the garage. Angie hadn’t emerged from the Blazer that was the exact same shade of mud-spattered black as his own. Able to feel the hum of raw energy, he stopped himself from reaching for the handle. *She’s hunting for the brothers.*

When she opened the door, Marc stepped closer. She didn’t look thirty. He, on the other hand, knew he was five years older by the age lines and gray starting to show in the mirror. His birthday had been eight days before the war. Marc wished he had celebrated it this time. “Everything okay?”

Angela shrugged, coming out of the zone. “For now, but they’ll come for us... For me.”

*She doesn’t sound right.*

Angela didn’t tell him she had seen only darkness in their future. She eased out of the Blazer, trying not to wince at the pain in her gut.

Marc saw she had a Therma Care patch stuck to her seat. *What a great idea.* He scanned the .357 on her hip. Her random firing at the twins said she didn't know what she was doing with the six-shooter. It was probably too big for her hands, chosen because it was pretty. Marc sighed inwardly. She'd be better off using his old piece of shit. Though really, the M9 in the bottom of his kit didn't fit that old USMC nickname. He'd had more respect than that. "We'll make some distance in the next few days and lose them for good."

Angela shivered as the fog cleared, hoping he was right. The two men were dangerous. *I should have let Marc take care of them... Marc. We're together again.* She peered up, becoming aware of the tension.

Marc couldn't fight the stunned happiness. He felt as if he was in one of his dreams. He didn't register her fear as his arms came up, nor the rigid body he wrapped them around with a groan of longing. "God, I've missed—"

"Let go of me!"

Marc retreated as if burned. *Angie's afraid of me?*

"Not at all." She hoped he hadn't noticed her hand plunging toward her gun. "I just don't like to be touched."

His expression darkened. *Since when?*

"Is it okay to go in?" She buttoned her long black sweater, then slung two big duffle bags over her shoulder.

"Yes. Window's covered, so our lights won't be seen."

Angela hit her rear latch button and shut her door, not staring at the decaying bodies of two wood thrushes near her tire, or the man she'd dreamed about almost nightly for years. During the day, she'd been careful to keep Kenny from catching her loneliness, but dreams were hers. She'd used them to remember.

"Get out what you need, I'll take it in."

"I've got it."

Marc wasn't surprised when she stepped by him. The waves of anger coming from her stiff form were hard to mistake. He went to get his own gear, stealing little glances. He felt her doing the same, despite her anger shield.

When she stepped into the dark garage without hesitation, it surprised him. The Angie he had known was afraid of the dark, terrified even.

*This isn't her*, the voice inside advised. *Go slowly.*

Marc stepped in behind her. He waited for Dog, then shut the door.

Dog began sniffing the bottom floor.

Angela switched to the far side of the small, mostly empty top room; the pen light on the chain around her neck shined dimly. “Figured we’d use the loft. It’s a good vantage point.”

Angela slid her bags back over one shoulder.

Marc was unable to keep his eyes from her ass as she disappeared into the darker shadows of the second floor. She came back down less than a minute later. He said nothing about her cushioned movements as they brought in the vehicles. *Is she in pain?*

Angela backed her muddy SUV in first, while Marc held the garage door and kept Dog out of the way. As they switched places, he delivered a silly wave that reminded her of the past, when he had been willing to try anything to pull a laugh from her.

Instantly sad, Angela climbed to the loft and set up the heater. *Having emotions sucks.* Angela sighed in relief as the red glow came on. She had chosen the far rear corner floor that was just bare, dusty planks. She was making her bed as Marc came up the stairs.

Angela knew from her life with a Marine that he would want the spot closest to the exit. She unrolled her bag in the far corner.

One of them had to say something soon to cut the tension. It was awkward, sad.

“Where did you find a heater? I kept finding cylinders, but no base.” He was impressed.

Angela tried to pretend it wasn’t relief filling her at the sound of another human voice. “The basement of a Goodwill. It’s great to have.”

Marc studied her, hunting for clues.



Angela began to set up the Coleman stove he had brought in, not sure how to begin the conversation.

Rain began to fall, drowning out the hard, new world on the other side of their four walls. Below them, Dog curled up on a pile of old hides and drifted off.

Marc took off the long leather coat and draped it over the rail.

Angela was drawn to his thick arms as he dug out his own bedroll. He did indeed put it between her and the ladder.

They both avoided the boxes, bags, tarp covered bike frames, and tall mirrors layered in thick dust. There were a million things she wanted to say. *Where to start?* “Want some hot chocolate?”

“Sounds good.”

She handled his stove confidently; she knew what she was doing. Marc kept quiet, wishing she would meet his stare for more than a second at a time. *What’s her problem?* The urge to ask questions was hard to resist, even for him, but he knew she was tired. If she said she’d rather wait until morning to talk, he would agree, but he wouldn’t be able to sleep.

Angela lit the Coleman, a twin of the one sitting in the rear of her Blazer. When she’d noticed him taking his in, she had left her own packed. It made her think about their vehicles. They hadn’t just chosen the same camping equipment. Of all the cars and trucks in the country, they had picked the same color, year, and make. *Is that a coincidence?*

“Can you use the gun on your hip?”

Angela increased the fire on the small pot of water. “I can load it and pull the trigger. Does that count?”

Marc noticed she bagged the garbage instead of leaving it. *I like that.* “Not really. You use it before tonight?”

“No. I didn’t want to attract attention. Guess I did anyway, but I had a flat and the flashlight wasn’t enough to see by.” She tried to keep an even tone as her mind flashed memories.

His dread of her story increased.

“Thank you for coming. There’s no one else I can ask.”

Marc wanted to insist she could count on him but stopped himself. “I’ll help if I can.”

Angela poured the hot water and stirred. When she brought their cups over, she quickly retreated despite his hand reaching out.

She balanced on each foot to slide her shoes off. Settling herself on her bedroll, Angela pulled the blanket over her lap before easing out of her sweater to reveal a simple white T-shirt with a flag on the front. The jeans hidden under the quilt were unfastened around her aching guts. She had been pushing herself and she was paying for it.

Marc also settled on the floor, lips tightening at the attempt to hide her pain. He busied his hands cleaning one of his Colts, but his attention stayed on her and the details his years of experience allowed him to glean. A pretty (*small*) diamond ring hung on a chain around her slender neck. It was a claim of ownership that she obviously still felt or she wouldn't be wearing it. She was thinner than she should be—probably only 120lbs, and her nose was crooked, though that was barely noticeable. He also spotted the shadow of a scar under the edge of her wrinkled shirt sleeve. She looked scared, sick.

Instead of the guilt or anger he had expected her to use, Marc now sensed sadness. The old need to protect her rose, stronger than ever. He kept his mouth shut by a hair, sure anything he said would be met by scorn or sarcasm. This was her show until he agreed, and he hadn't yet.

Their eyes locked; heat began to melt the ice wall between them.

Her gaze flinched away.

There was joy and pain in that brief glance, enough to make his heart skip a beat. *I was right. There's little she can ask for that I won't give. I haven't felt so alive in a decade. Exploding buildings and flying bullets are nothing compared to being with my Angie again.*

Chapter Fourteen  
**Mine First**

1

“Are you really a Marine or do you just like being a moving target?”

Marc grinned, a bit surprised she knew he was military and what branch. Most civilians didn't. He wondered what had given him away. “Been doing it a long time. Saw no reason to change.” Marc slowed his hands on the gun. This talk was clearly going to take a while.

“What's your rank?”

“Sergeant.”

She stared at him. “Why only an E5?”

He was surprised again by her knowledge. He shrugged, starting to worry. *Is her man military too?* “I disobeyed a direct order too many times. Lost rank.”

“When did you enlist?” She hated herself for asking, but she couldn't deny the need to know.

Marc snorted and noticed she jumped. She'd been attacked. She had every reason to be a little twitchy. “I didn't *enlist*.” He tried to control the heavy sarcasm. “It was either put in my time or go to prison for statutory rape. I've been a jarhead for fifteen years.”

Her expression became guarded. *Fifteen years. Right after we were caught in my bedroom.*

“The first year was bad, but I learned not to draw fire, and I made a life. I do...did things most people can't even imagine.”

Her lips thinned. “Sounds like you've enjoyed it.”

“For the most part, yes. It was good, knowing I was making a difference.” Marc tried to get her to meet his eye. “What about you, Angie? Have you been okay?”

She shrugged. "It's had good days and bad days."

*Simple.* Marc studied the bags under her dark lashes, the broken, jagged fingernails, the unhealthy pallor of her skin. *Too simple.* "More bad than good though, right? Otherwise, you wouldn't have called me."

She nodded, but didn't give details.

Guilt rolled over Marc as if she was screaming. "I'm sorry. I made a mistake."

Angela lit a smoke, flash of annoyance streaking across her mind. *Does he regret loving me or not coming back for me?* "I don't need your apology, just your help."

Marc winced. "I will if I can. Tell me."

She let out a deep sigh that told him he wouldn't like any of it. "I left some things out of the letter. Important to you and me, but it's nothing my son needs to feel bad for."

Marc waved a hand, understanding what she wanted. "This stays between us. My word."

The wind gusted outside.

She flinched again.

Dog got up and began pacing in front of the door, noticing her tension, Marc assumed. It was hard to miss.

Angela blew out a thick cloud of smoke. "We've been living with a man named Kenny for the last fourteen years. We met at the hospital where I gave birth. He was there for rehab on his arm. I had talked my way into a job as a lab assistant, running packages between floors to pay for my medical classes. He was normal, safe, dependable. I ended up telling him everything one night on my break." She paused, sucked in a breath. "He acted horrified that I was a single, underage mother on the run, living in a sleazy hotel, working ten-hour shifts, and spending another six hours, four days a week, in classes. He was scandalized that I had to have the hotel manager's drunken sister and teenage daughter babysit."

Rage was filling Marc's heart now. "And the concerned Samaritan offered you a deal you couldn't refuse?"

She nodded again.

The hate in her eyes left no doubt that she had been hurt. Marc braced. “What was the deal?”

“Me. I had to accept him as my...owner, until my son is nineteen.”

“Nineteen?”

Angela crushed out her butt and opened a flat black case to pull out a thick blunt. The wind howled in warning again, but neither of them noticed. “He said the extra year was his bonus for being such a good citizen. He never let me forget he was caring for someone’s bastard.”

Marc couldn’t say anything in defense. After all, it was true. “What do you need me for?” He couldn’t help the defensive tone.

Angela lit the weed, inhaled.

When she passed it, he noted how careful she was not to touch him.

“Help me get my son back.” She gestured. “Clearly, I’m not cut out for the environment.”

Marc knew it couldn’t be as easy as that. “So, just for the trip?”

Angela shuddered. “No. Kenny’s also a Marine. My son is a cadet. They’re together now, in western Utah. Kenny can be...harsh when he doesn’t get his way.”

Marc didn’t respond, mind running over what that confrontation might be like. She did want him to challenge a fellow Marine. He could, but only for the right reasons.

“When he gets like that, I can’t handle him alone. I need you to stay close once we find them, for a little while. Maybe he and I will work things out.”

Marc heard a mix of emotions in her words; doubt was the clearest. “But?”

She took the smoldering blunt back, and again, made sure they didn’t touch, drawing a deeper frown from Marc. *Where’s my Angie?*

“Kenny doesn’t know what a compromise is. He’s never had to before, and unless the war changed him, he’ll fight to keep what he considers his. I still owe him five years.”

Marc knew trouble when he heard it. “So, I get you there, and what? Protect you while you tell your man you don’t love him anymore?”

Angela bristled. “It was never love! We made an unfair deal, and he’s had over a decade of my life that I can’t get back! You don’t know! Kenny will be furious. He won’t care about my reasons or needs. When he finds out I want to change the terms of our deal, that maybe I want complete freedom, he’ll do whatever it takes to hold onto me. Unless he’s changed.”

“And you hope he has?” Marc didn’t want to know, and yet he needed to. When she hesitated, his heart stirred. *There’s room there...*

“We were a family for a long time, and if he can just stop—” Angela caught herself. “If he can compromise, I might be willing to resume our life.”

“And if he won’t?” Marc took the blunt and stubbed it out. When she met his eye again, there was no mistaking the fear, but the determination under it reminded him of the old Angie.

“I’ll grab Charlie and go north. Kenny would never expect a weak woman who speaks a little Spanish to pick Canada.”

Marc let out a frustrated sigh. *She’s not telling me everything.* “We could do that anyway.”

“No. I have to give him a chance to do the right thing.”

Marc frowned at her. “So, I take you there and hang around until you make up your mind, and then maybe take you north. What’s the catch?”

Angela sighed ruefully. “There’s more than one, but the biggest is Charlie doesn’t know for sure Kenny is not his father. I’ve never been able to tell him, but he’ll figure it out when we show up. Then Kenny will know. Once he realizes who you are, he’ll never agree to anything. You may have to fight for both of us.”

Marc said nothing, waiting for more details.

Angela let out a worried noise. “He’ll be madder than I’ve ever made him...and maybe it’ll come to blood.”

His frown deepened. “Surely you’re exaggerating?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m not. He’ll recognize you for the threat you are and try to run you off. It’s only fair you know what you’re getting into.”

Marc felt a fresh tremor of unease at her serious tone. “Then why take the chance the boy will get caught in the crossfire? We’ll just grab him and go.”

Angela shook her head. “No, Marc. I would have been sent home; they would have taken my baby. Kenny saved me from that. We made a deal, and while I can’t keep that promise now, I at least owe him the chance to accept that things have changed and keep the family he had—just on different terms.”

Marc studied her, not liking any of it. If her man was that possessive, there was bound to be ugliness. “What you’re asking is unfair. I can’t even spend time with my son. It’s a bad deal now too.”

She stared at him. “You won’t help me?”

The crushing disappointment made him look away, sure if he held her gaze, he would give in. “I can’t be your show of force, and maybe even your attack dog just because you can’t honor an old promise and are too honest to skip out on it even after all that’s happened. I won’t challenge a fellow Marine for those reasons.”

Angela held in hot tears. “I understand. I’ll go my own way come morning... I’m sorry, Marc, for all of it.”

She laid down, trying not to cry. She couldn’t bring herself to tell him the awful truth about how bad her life had been. He had to see on his own how much she needed him.

Marc wanted to talk more. He wanted to convince her that she didn’t have to stay with someone she didn’t love, that even after all these years, he was still waiting. But he also loathed the idea of being a Jody. No real Marine let himself become the guy who stole a fellow grunt’s girl while they were away.

Marc blew out a sigh of frustration, frown growing when the small sound made her flinch again. *What am I supposed to do?*

*Whatever she asks!* his heart reproached miserably, already aching at the thought of being split from her again. His emotions insisted she was the real thing, a true damsel in distress. He went

over her words and reactions repeatedly, searching for clues. *What didn't she tell me?*

## 2

Angela jerked out of the first deep sleep she'd had since leaving Cincinnati. Weak alarm bells blared for the second time in the same night, but the mental door refused to open. She was too tired.

Marc woke the second she sat up, heart thumping at the sight of his dream woman with sleep on her.

“We have to get out of here.”

Marc began pulling on his boots, not hesitating.

The clink of his dog tag caught Angela's attention as he stood to fasten the jeans that he'd discreetly loosened. A sexy strip of hair running from his flat, tanned stomach to his groin grabbed her next. She snatched in a surprised breath at the chill of desire. It had been a long time since she'd felt anything close to passion.

“What is it?”

Angela grabbed her blankets, sweater, the heater. “I can't tell. Big and fast.” She hurried to the ladder, leaving the rest of her things.

Dog whined in the darkness below. Whatever it was, the wolf felt it too.

Angela climbed down, going for the door. She opened it... “Oh, my God!”

That brought Marc from gathering the rest of their things. He stopped in the doorway behind her, stunned.

Thick, orange flames twined up the porch rails of the house; the tree line was ablaze in every direction. Even the air was burning. Fat drops of rain were catching fire as they hit a burning branch or rail. It was as if the sky was on fire from the ground up; tiny sparks flew into the night like fire following gasoline. The rear of the garage was also sending up smoke, telling Marc that direction wasn't safe either. He scanned for an escape. “Dog, heel.”



The wolf came to Marc's side, fur up.

Angie was frozen.

Marc gave her a nudge as a thick wave of black smoke gusted over them. He noticed she cringed away from him, even in a moment of danger. "Back the way we came and stay on my ass!"

Angela hurried to her vehicle, heart thumping.

Marc kept track of her and Dog. He was glad when they were all inside. They were rolling a few seconds later, tires traveling over hot, smoldering branches and limbs that had already fallen. The smoke grew thicker, making it harder to see as they went by burning cabins and tall, flaming trees that threw showers of sparks over the vehicles.

*Pop!*

*Pop!*

Neither of them noticed bullets barely missing tires. Slugs slammed into the ground in hard, quiet thuds that couldn't be heard over the crackling, popping rumble of the fire.

Smoke rolled across the road; flames blocked their way in places. Marc was forced to lead them in and out of trees that had become giant torches. Dead limbs fell behind them, thumping to the ground in geysers of flaming debris.

Angela's grip on the wheel was white as she followed, neck sweaty, cheeks streaked in soot. *We almost burned!* Angela tried to keep her attention on his bumper sticker instead of the flames and her panic. *Death! One wrong turn from death!*

Marc went back the way they'd come, instinct screaming this wasn't a natural fire.

The flames thickened.

Marc took them west as sweat poured off his neck.

Dog growled. *Watch out!*

The flames rose in a thick wall. He keyed the mike. "Hit the gas! We'll go right through!"

The Blazers plunged into the fire at high speed. The heat rose to intolerable, and then they were through, coming out unharmed on the other side. The temperature was instantly cooler.

Marc took them down the next steep hill, winding into the coolness with long, bone jarring bumps. The flames hadn't been through this brown and green terrain yet. *Maybe we got out in time. Because of Angie.*

He could still see the flames in their mirror, though. Marc aimed for White Creek, where animals were following the current in the creek and walking the bank. He eased the Blazer into the half foot of steadily flowing water.

Angela followed, relieved Marc had found them safety.

Marc rolled into the middle of the creek, hunting the tree line for a dirt path that he'd only been on twice. It was nearly inaccessible to anything but a bike or jeep unless the driver was skilled. It would take the fire a while to spread up that hill.

Spotting the path, he steered that way, being careful not to crush animals darting into the water for shelter. Marc keyed the mike. "Remember how we used to ride dirt bikes behind Daniel's house?"

"Yes."

"This is trickier. Stay a few car lengths behind and remember, an uncontrolled slide doesn't happen unless you hit the brakes too hard."

Angela had to grin at his tone. He was eager for the next thrill, like she'd been when they were young. She hadn't allowed herself to think about the fun they'd had together in a long time. She hadn't been able to deal with the crushing pain, or the anger if Kenny sensed it and reacted. It still hit her at odd times that she was now free to think about anything she wanted. "You lead, I'll follow."

*Since when?* Marc shifted gears. He felt her catch his mutter; he smiled at the feeling of the old connection. He went up the next steep hill with an easy burst of speed.

Angela counted to five before following, glad when he didn't seem to have trouble on the dark path.

His Blazer fishtailed as it hit the top, brake lights flashing briefly before he dropped out of sight.

Heart in her throat, Angela hit the gas harder as she neared the top and tapped the brakes as she started to drop into thin air.

She saw Marc halfway up the next incline, and then she had her hands full as gravity pulled hard. She landed on a narrow path that shot downward at an awful left tilt. The Blazer slid heavily. Thick gobs of mud sprayed the trees.

Her hands worked the wheel, foot on the gas... She made the curve, shooting up the hill where Marc was disappearing.

Her Blazer slid to the right again when she made it to the top. Angela winced as she scraped branches and trees, forcing her foot away from the brake. She used loose hands on the wheel to keep the teetering vehicle on the edge of control.

Angela brought it away from the steep hill, proud of herself. She jumped as Marc's thought came flying at her.

*It gets bad from here. I'll tell you which way to aim.*

She heard him in her mind this time, catching the worry and the excitement. She was suddenly sure Marc would never let her go on alone. His sense of honor would be the excuse he gave himself, but it was really the old hunger and restless need. Her life had been in grave danger twice in the same eight hours. *The Marc I grew up with would never—*

Angela stopped, not ready for the pain that would come upon completing the thought. This trip would be easier on both of them if she remembered the past was gone.

### 3

The twins had come up, and then down, the steep mining road much more slowly than Angela and Marc. They were barely able to make the muddy, hairpin curves. As they reached the summit of the last dark, treacherous hill, Dillan pointed at two sets of brake lights disappearing into the smoky valley below. They watched for a long moment but saw nothing else.

“Still going west.”

“Meeting someone?”

Dillan shrugged. “Cesar, if she goes far enough. He’s in that area by now.”

“She won’t be able to handle all those men.”

“Neither can we. We’ll have to share.”

Dean scowled. “No.”

“Exactly. We’ll follow but hang back, let them believe we gave up. Our chance will come.”

Dean dug through his kit for two capsules, glad to be traveling in the same vehicle together again. He’d missed his brother’s warmth. “Start out again at daylight?”

“Yeah. We know which direction she’s going. We’ll camp high before dusk each night and keep track by their lights or fires. They’ll relax, and we’ll take ‘em off guard.”

“We need a stronger tranquilizer.”

“And sharper knives.”

#### 4

Angela and Marc didn’t stop until almost noon. They were both exhausted as they sat on opposite corners of their tailgates for the tuna sandwiches and coffee she’d made. Marc had gassed their vehicles while she cooked.

Dog had stayed close, not wanting to leave them alone. He spent the time sniffing Angela’s feet as she worked.

The layer of grit in the sky appeared thicker. The depressing view matched from land as well. Angela tried to avoid staring at the suburbs of identical condominiums crammed together across from the field. The windows with corpses of starved pets were hard on her. Most of the skeletons appeared to still be searching for the masters who had left them to such an awful fate.

“We have to come to some terms before we go any further together.”

A sweet smile of relief lit her tired face.

Marc sucked air into lungs that felt too small. It was no surprise he’d never gotten over her. *No one else will ever hit me this hard.*

Dog looked up, head tilting.

Marc saw her happiness cool and knew she was waiting to see if she could pay the price he was about to demand. “First and most important, I’ll teach you some basic defense and how to use your gun.” Marc knelt by her bumper and worked with his smaller tools kit while they talked.

Angela nodded, frowning at the notion of being close enough to him, or anyone, long enough to learn something like that. “Okay, to both.”

“Good. We’ll plan routes together and share the chores. I’ll keep my distance as best I can and still protect you.” Marc extracted the brake lightbulb and placed it in the bag with the bulbs from his vehicle. “In return, I’ll need more than an introduction. It can wait until you decide about your future, but then they’ll both have to be told. I already want to spend time with my son. That’s just going to grow for me.”

Angela frowned again. The things he wanted were reasonable, but fear beat in her heart. “Agreed. Anything else?”

“Yes.” He didn’t look at her. “I need to know things about your life. We can leave that for when you’re ready, but on the way, I’d like you to tell me about...Charlie. Everything I missed. Bedtime stories, any pictures you have?”

She gave him a cool smile. He wondered what words she hadn’t liked. *All of it?*

Angela gave him a cool stare. “Is that it? Good. Now, I have conditions. First and most important, we will travel every day. I’m in a hurry, and I want that clear. Second, you’re in charge, but when I say to change direction, we do it. We’ll use maps, but I’m tracking him too, and I trust *me*.”

To a man who hadn’t had anything but guilt and loneliness for a long time even before the war, her protectiveness was attractive. “Agreed, next?”

“Next is last. When we get there, do as I ask and abide by my choice. I don’t want violence.”

He locked eyes with her, not letting her look away. “You’ll make sure I get time with my son, even if we have to sneak?”

“Yes.” She swallowed nervously. “You’ll protect us from Kenny, even if it comes to blood?”

The open fear in her expression hurt him. “With my life, baby.” The answer fell easily despite all the years between them.

“Then I agree.”

Mindful about keeping his distance (*still stinging from it*) Marc didn’t put out his hand until she did.

Angela almost drew back, then placed her fingers against his.

Lightning flashed, forking into thick clouds that rolled across the sky as the lovers touched. Electricity sparked, threatening to sweep them into the past.

Marc let go. He was a man of his word.

For Angela, the silence after the crash was deafening, but she didn’t apologize for the small theft of some of his healthy energy. She was almost sure he hadn’t noticed anyway. Her gifts were something she planned to rely on now. He would have to get used to it. Kenny couldn’t. He hadn’t even been able to consider accepting her for what she was without using it for his own gain. *Is Marc different?* She began cleaning their lunch mess. *Time will tell.* “Come on, Sir Lancelot. I’d like to make another three miles by dark.”

Marc snapped a stiff salute.

Angela glanced away, not wanting him to see her disappointment. Had a tiny part of her heart been hoping that one of his conditions might be another chance with her?

She shut and locked her door, swallowing bitter pain. That was exactly what the old Angela had been hoping for.

It was a struggle not to cry as she shifted into gear.

## 5

They traveled until it began to get dark. The rain had finally cleared, leaving damp, reeking wind as they rolled over dead wires attached to downed poles and hundreds of trees that had their tops sheared off. It was sad and monotonous. Despite her need to hurry, Angela was glad when Marc called her on the radio. She was beat.

“Ready?”

“Yes. You pick, I’ll cook.”

“Deal. Take that first long driveway on your right.”

Angela saw the benefits of his choice as she eased up a muddy driveway full of cracks and weeds. Thick trees blocked the view on one side. A neglected cornfield did the same for the rest of the property surrounding the small farmhouse. A few of the big windows were broken, but the home appeared otherwise undamaged.

Marc drove toward the small carport, hoping there was room for two. He had expected Angie to be driving something flashy and unusable. Her seriousness about making this trip was something of a relief, as well as a worry. It spoke of someone who didn’t exaggerate.

Marc stopped as Angela eased her vehicle into the hard dirt row of corn near the carport. She snapped a surprising few of the knee-high stalks. Obviously, she’d done it a few times. Closing his mouth on the correction he had started to give, Marc waited to see what she had in mind.

Angela pulled out a rolled-up camouflage tarp and took it to the roof. When she tossed it over her Blazer, pulling on the stiff ends, the muddy vehicle disappeared. The Marine inside stirred in respect at her resourcefulness. Fresh recruits tried hard to impress him, usually without success, for the full eight weeks. She’d done it in less than a day.

“There should be room for both of us.”

The radio made him jump. She’d crawled under the tarp. “Copy.”

Angela stood on her roof, holding up the tarp for him to enter.

Marc concentrated on what he was doing instead of her long legs. He put the Blazer in park and killed the engine.

Angela stepped across his hood and jumped down. She tugged the tarp until he had to flip on his light to see.

Angela was driving thick steel pegs into the corners of the large tarp when he emerged, wearing gloves and a heavier coat.

Marc went to secure the house, Dog at his hip, but his mind stayed on the woman he could hear. She was an asset in this new world. She was strong, smart, and a possible target for every person who spotted her. That was what had stopped him from leaving. Marc was almost sure the fire had been set. He'd found damage on the corner of his tailgate that could be the trim from a bullet. The brothers had tried to fry her in her sleep. When she'd woken too soon, they had started shooting. The smoke had ruined their aim and saved Angela's life. Amid the cracking tree branches and roar of the flames, Marc hadn't even known they were under attack. She wouldn't stand a chance without him; he had loved her too much to let her go on this suicide mission unprotected.

They would stay on side roads and be careful with shooting lessons that might draw attention. *One glimpse of her and we'll be under attack again. Everything else in this new world is so ugly, people need beauty in any form. Then they'll crush it under obsessive care. I won't let that happen to her.*

## 6

"You don't wear any insignia." Angela couldn't take any more of the silence. "What branch of the Marines were you in?"

They were settled in bedrolls on the floor, eating and trying not to stare at each other. Dog was curled up out of sight. Angela didn't know exactly where, but it was still a comfort.

Marc was still dwelling on her story of finding fresh meat in the basement of a lavish home she'd passed in Edinburgh. Drawn by lights in the windows, she'd found a generator running. There had obviously been people there recently, but she hadn't run into anyone while exploring the big house. What courage that must have taken!

"Marc?"

He replayed her words. "The one with no name."

His answer drew a frown. Kenny had said the same thing a few years ago when she'd asked about his advancement. She sighed, staring at the bedroll between her and the doorway as the wind



howled. Kenny was going to be so pissed she couldn't even predict what he might do. *Is Marc equal to that?* "Like The Unit?"

Marc snorted. "You watched that BS?"

"Every Tuesday, no matter what."

Her bitter tone made his smile fade. He sensed she wanted to ask if he was that good. He admired her control when she didn't. "Yes, I am."

Angela met his eye. "Honestly?"

He nodded, not quite thinking about the harshest things he'd done.

Angela felt the darkness on his soul; it comforted her. "Him too. He's got six years in now."

Marc's expression became shuttered. "Most men don't do it that long. It's dangerous work."

"How long for you?"

"Eight. I had my own team."

Angela heard his pain over the personal loss, but she couldn't bring herself to mouth the pleasantries the old world would have required. He was mourning a great life. She'd barely had one to lose. She had clung to her sons and now, one was rotting in the ground and the other was lost in the wilderness.

Belly content for the first time in a while, Marc flipped through the pictures she'd set by his plate. He was glad she hadn't pushed him on why he stayed in the service. The question required trust, and they didn't have any. *Time to start building some.* "Why didn't you call me, Angie? I would have taken responsibility."

She pushed away her half-finished burger and corn. "I wanted more than. I wanted all of you or nothing." She lit a smoke. "They wouldn't have left us alone anyway and you know it. Between their religious crap, and your shame, we didn't stand a chance."

"Didn't I deserve a say in that choice?"

Angela took the cigarette from her mouth with shaky hands she knew he saw. There was probably little he didn't notice. "We both deserved to be happy, but it was taken away. I found out about the baby, and I was alone. I made hard choices that were

wrong sometimes, but we've always been together, and no one has ever told him he's going to hell because of our sins against God."

Marc winced, fading back in time to the confrontation with his mother.

*"She's your family! How could you?!"*

*"Not by blood!"*

*Slap! "By God!"*

Angela sighed. "That was a long time ago."

"Yep. A lot of hurt between then and now."

"We made our choices. What's done is done." She yawned and stood, surprised to discover his misery didn't please her. She really did owe him much worse for the way he'd abandoned her. She strode toward the door, pulling on her sweater.

When he followed, Angela felt better that he was taking her request for protection seriously. "Where all have you been since the war?" She went to her Blazer.

Her waist was so small he could span it with both hands. Marc shoved them into his pockets instead, remembering a time when he'd been free to do that and a lot more. "I was in Virginia when the bombs fell, going to the new family house for a funeral."

She tensed. "Whose?"

"Mother."

Angela started to offer sympathy.

Marc waved a hand. "Don't bother. I went home to bury the past, not her. She's been dead to me for a long time." He lit a smoke, casual tone not changing. "After Roanoke, I traveled northeast for a couple weeks, but it was all worse. There were already mutations in West Virginia. After that, I changed directions. I've been to about twenty big bases, offices, centers. There's nothing."

Hearing it only made Angela a bit sadder. That world was gone; eventually they would all stop expecting its return. Angela got another duffle bag from the rear seat and disappeared behind a tree, liking it when Marc waved the wolf after her. This was why

she needed him. He would teach her to be strong and protect her while she learned.

*What happens when he runs out of things to teach?* the witch asked ominously.

Angela wasn't in any state to search that far ahead. She didn't answer.

They went into the tepid warmth of the faded, drafty farmhouse a minute later, both avoiding looking at the happy profiles of the family who had lived here. Pictures smiled at them from all the walls.

"How much gas do you have?" Marc pushed the heater closer to the window so the draft would carry warmth farther into the room.

"Only quarter of a tank, but I have two five-gallon cans in the rear."

"Great. I've got about the same. We should be okay for a few days." Marc spent a minute at the window, scanning the landscape around their vehicles. He had chosen this room because it was the closest one to their wheels that had a window for a quick escape. Marc wondered if he should point it out to her. *How much does she want to learn while we travel?*

Angela wondered if his home had included a wife. The pain was staggering.

"So, he's a HAC-RAM?"

Angela smiled.

Marc stared. Enough of those happy looks could blind a man from even noticing other women. He knew.

"He has been for three years. Have a Child, Raise a Marine, was one of Kenny's better ideas. They were in Arizona, at an annual competition when the war came. They usually bring home a box of trophies. From the outside, he's the perfect dad." Angela settled on the couch.

Marc forced his mouth shut. He was going slow to avoid missing clues, but he was already picking out things that bothered him. The jumpiness and hand flinching toward her gun at every sound could be attributed to her being attacked, but she also

hesitated to walk close or look him in the eye. No physical contact was a given, but her cold reaction to his hug had been unexpected, uncalled for. *What did she go—*

“Where’d you get the wolf?”

“Dog?” Marc smiled awkwardly, not sure how much of his thoughts she was picking up. “He was part of a pack before we met up. Rangers caught him after a kid was taken.”

“They were going to put him down?”

“Yeah. My buddy had a farm. Dog settled in and we made friends.”

“He obeys well for being mostly wild. It’s good you didn’t take that from him.”

Marc lit a smoke. Most people didn’t realize that when they heard the story. “I only changed him where I had to. He went on base with me, on missions a few times. It saved my ass more than once to have him along.”

“It sounds like you’ve lived the ideal bachelor’s life.” Angela hated herself for being too weak to resist probing.

Marc didn’t hesitate. “There was never anyone serious for me after you. You’re a tough act to follow.”

The old Angela did enjoy his pain this time. She slapped at him with sharp claws not quite fully extended. “Hell, Marc. You could have had a supermodel. I never figured you for a swinging single.”

Marc shrugged, mind screaming *ambush* at her accusing tone. “I wasn’t that either. Too many strange ones out there. I had one fast date with a girl who had a nose ring and three-inch purple fingernails. Strange.”

Angela opened her mouth before she could censor the words and was appalled by the jealousy that spewed out. “Did she have long black curls and pale white skin like all the others? Did you see my face when you exploded in her?”

Marc sucked in a breath.

Angela scrambled up to put distance between them. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe I said that.”

“After everything you’ve been through, I guess you owe me a few.” Marc stood too, reeling from the blow that she already knew he wasn’t over her. He frowned when he caught her flinch.

Angela tensed. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

The fear was unmistakable. Marc put his back to her so she couldn’t see his rage. *She is afraid of me, terrified.* “Better to let it out, honey. The sooner we clear the air, the sooner you’ll trust me again.”

“But I do!”

Marc moved toward the door, subtly watching her expression. He recognized her relief when he went by without punishing her.

“I called you, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t want to.” He forced the words out. “And you don’t trust me. It’s a problem we’ll have to work on.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m fine.” Angela was afraid he was about to leave her here.

“Then why do you almost go for your gun every time I move?” He watched her slide trembling hands into her pockets. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Marc waved at the wolf. “Stay. Guard her.”

The animal sat down by her feet.

Marc shut the door, leaving Angela relieved, confused, and sorry that she hadn’t hidden her feelings.

Marc walked the perimeter, furious. *Angie’s scared, and not that childish shit women do over mice and spiders.* It was real fear of being hurt. He loathed the people who had taught her that. He was hoping her life hadn’t been as bad as observing her implied, but every minute they spent together said it had. The fear she was carrying wasn’t from being attacked just since she’d left Ohio. It wasn’t new. She was honestly terrified of men and that only came from being hurt by one.

*What if she has been abused by her man? What if he is as violent as she’s implying?*

“Then I’ll fight for her.” Marc thought he’d probably end up doing that anyway.

*But only if she chooses not to honor their relationship.* His conscience threw in the condition, but Marc lashed out in bitter anger.

“To hell with her relationship! She was mine first!”

Angela emerged from the house as he came up the steps, swallowed by her bigger coat and hat this time. Dog stayed next to her.

Sweet vanilla filled his nose as they passed. Marc gritted his teeth to keep from reaching out. *I’ve missed her so much!*

Angela heard him as if he’d spoken. She forced herself to stop as the stiff wind blew her curls around. Marc was doing her a great service. She didn’t want him to be upset. “It wasn’t meant to be, but we’ll be friends again, in time. That’s something, right?”

Marc wanted to say she was wrong; they had been soul mates. “You’ll be safe with me,” came out instead.

Marc was glad he’d reassured her when she flashed an honest smile.

“I know it deep down, but...” Angela shrugged, not wanting to expect more than he was willing to give.

Marc understood. “But it helps you to hear it, and you’ll probably need me to do it again.”

She flushed, brows drawing together. He recognized her needs so quickly. *Why couldn’t Kenny have been half the man Marc is?* She went to the Blazer, aware of him like she’d known she would be. *Some things never change.*

## 7

When Angela stepped out of the Blazer, she found the wolf sitting on the porch. “Hi, Dog. We haven’t been properly introduced yet. I’m Angie.”

The big animal resignedly held up a paw. *We’ve met.*

Marc grinned as Angela’s laughter rang out. She bent to shake without hesitation. Even most Marines were too leery. He observed from the impenetrable darkness of the doorway, heart

thumping when she pulled her clothes to the side to adjust a lacy, white bra strap. The desire changed as his gaze went to the jagged knife scar on her shoulder. It was rough, ugly, and out of place on her pale skin.

A hard knot formed in Marc's gut as his mind played a video of her being held down, struggling and screaming, while someone carved what could be a grotesque letter K into her flesh. *Isn't her man's name Kenny?*

There were a lot of possibilities, like a car wreck, shrapnel, falling on something, bobbing when she should have weaved, and still, he knew what he knew. Marc went back to their den, counting the ways he would make her man pay if he was the one responsible.

Five minutes later, Angela still hadn't come in.

Marc went back out, though Dog was guarding her. He didn't like the lack of noise.

Angie was in the darkest corner of the porch. If not for the sound of her pen scratching on the paper, Marc would have missed her. *How can she write in total darkness?*

"Something about the way my vision works. What's the temperature?"

Using his lighter, Marc checked the small stick-on disc she had put there earlier. "Either thirty or twenty-eight. Can't tell which."

"Thanks."

"Sure." He lit a smoke, staring into the thick shadows around them. "I need to ask you something."

Angela shut her notebook. "Shoot."

"Was calling me just a way to make him realize you don't need him, so you can get what you want? Are you using me against him?"

Angela flipped on her penlight as she stepped toward the rail. "Not in the way you're thinking. He isn't coming back for me, but he intends to keep my son."

"Why doesn't he want you anymore?"

Fathomless grief flashed out. Marc drew in a sharp breath at the pain he read. Something awful had caused it, something she wasn't going to tell him yet.

"I'm a burden."

He scowled. "You've done well."

"I was never allowed to be this person before." Angela stared at him. The bags under her eyes were almost like bruises. "He heard the calls too; he knows I'm on my way. He doesn't expect me to bring help that he can't handle, so yes, I am using you, but only in the ways you've agreed to."

Marc knew from her tone she wanted to be done with this topic for now. He pointed at the small black discs he'd set out. "Those are motion alarms." He picked up a rock and a stick and tossed them in different directions. Two tones chimed from his wristband.

Marc hit a button to give them silence, holding his arm up for her to see the sequence.

Angela controlled her flinch.

"Different sound for each breach tells how many intruders. Red button shuts it off; green arms it."

"You learn that in the Corps?"

He smiled. "Along with a few other things."

"Like what?"

"Survival stuff mostly. It'll come in handier now, I suspect."

He sounded wide awake. Angela frowned. "Aren't you tired?"

"I'm a Marine, honey. This is par for the course." Marc didn't say he'd only gotten a short snooze before their escape from the fire. His mind had been too busy racing to sleep. He had taken a pep pill after lunch.

They were both quiet for a minute, scanning, listening. There were no lights or noises in the cold darkness around them, no insects or rodents in the brush. Angela shivered. The world was dying. Would they too? Shaking off the morbidity, Angela followed Marc into the warmth of their den. When he took off his coat, thick arms flexing, her gaze was drawn to his muscular body.

"I grew up, didn't I?" He grinned, hoping for a laugh.



“Yes.” Angela slid into her blankets. It was all going to be much harder than she’d expected. She tossed the black case toward his feet, observing for anger in case the throw made him jump. “Light the big one, will ya?”

Marc leaned against an end table as he fired it up. His gun belts were under his pillow, boots nearby. Sweet smoke curled around them.

Marc hated the tension, but it was a step up from what Angela had lived each day.

“In the mornings before we leave, I’ll start showing you how to use that gun.” He tried not to gawk. She was unbraiding long curls he longed to touch.

“Okay. Will you tell me about some of your missions another night?” She smothered a yawn, watching the wolf pick a bed under a dusty cabinet.

Marc frowned. “You mean the places I’ve come through since the war?”

“No, your time in the Corps.”

“Okay. Pick a city, state, or country.”

“New Orleans.”

Marc tensed. “Before or after Katrina?”

Angela heard the change in tone. “During.”

“Okay.”

She shivered at a strong draft.

Marc pushed the heater closer to her with his foot, aware of the spark between them trying to flare up.

So was Angela. She tried another topic. “What’s the first thing I should know about guns?”

“Don’t have one if you don’t know how to use it.”

Angela understood the answer had been drilled into him, but she found his tone smug. “The second?”

“When it’s life or death, like now, rule one means shit.”

She gave a tiny smile, head starting to thump. “What will you do with me first?”

His eyes went to her mouth. Marc dropped them to the floor; wind howled through the dead cornstalks around the farmhouse.

“We’ll work on target practice for a few minutes before we leave each morning. We’re not as likely to be tracked by the noise.”

“That’s smart.”

He stifled a groan of relief as he laid on his side, facing her. “Won’t matter if someone’s nearby.” He stared at the ebony curls now resting on the blankets. *Would her hair still feel like silk against my skin?*

Angela’s nostrils flared, as if she had smelled the thought. The fear on her face made him roll onto his back. Marc didn’t want this moment to end. He was enjoying the buzz, the heat on his feet, and most of all, the sight, smell, and sounds of Angela invading his senses. She too had grown up.

*Yes, I have.* Angela eased down as mild stomach cramps continued. *Enough to not encourage what I’ll never be free to give.*

“Night, honey. See you in the morning.”

The old saying reached that cold, dark place in her heart with a single, beautiful, fiery blast of heat. “Yes, you will.” The old, familiar, hurtful response came from her lips as if no years had gone by. It was hard not to let the tears escape. Marc was here, but every wall that had stood between them before was still up, only they were twice as tall. It would be a long time before they were even friends again.

Marc laid with his hands under his neck until her even breathing told him she was asleep. Then he eased back onto his side, letting his eyes go where they wanted. *How am I going to do this?*

Fifteen years had gone by, but Marc had never put her out of his heart. He would never make it a thousand miles without telling her the truth. *I came for another chance at our love. This pain has been unbearable. I’ll agree to any deal you offer.*

Chapter Fifteen  
**No Pain, No Gain**  
Colorado  
February 15th

1

“**D**amned spider wasn’t even the size of my fingernail.” Samantha was about to cause herself a lot of pain because of it. Her leg was bad. The wound was hard and swollen, black in the center with angry red lines of infection crawling up toward her heart.

Green Falls and Woodland Park had been looted, like every other place she’d come through, but the pharmacy had been intact. Samantha had tried all the antibiotics she found, giving each a few days to take effect. Though they had slowed the infection that had made walking impossible, it was now life or death. She had to do surgery on herself.

Samantha was holed up in the Devil’s Head Hunting Lodge, taking shelter in one of the large, rustic cabins. Old, uncomfortable furnishings sat around a beautiful stone fireplace, with an outhouse in the rear, and huge glass windows in the front that gave her a view of dwarf birch trees with black moss. The other walls were decorated by a buck, a bear, a snarling bobcat, and a calendar showing December. Isolated, she was hoping to recover here while waiting out the approaching blizzard.

Terrified of passing out and bleeding to death, Samantha let her mind go where it wanted as she worked on her courage. The thick layer of dust on the floor said no one had been here since all hell broke out. There were a few bloody smears outside, but no bodies, not even a stray cat. That worried her. It said predators around here were cleaning up the carrion.

Her stomach dipped. Samantha saw the doomed press secretary on the sofa again, heard the single shot. The compound was fifty miles behind her, but Pat's grotesque face was a daily companion.

"You won't last as long as he did if you don't do this, Sammi." She could only hope this drastic action would succeed. Bandages and supplies were spread out next to her; flames were roaring in the fireplace at her booted feet. Samantha pulled her cap over her long braid. "It's time to shoot, Luke, or give up the gun."

Samantha, who had once created useful technology for the government and saved the life of a president, picked up the hot knife. A second blade glowed in the fire. A shoelace was tied around her upper thigh, cutting off circulation. She clenched her teeth as she pinched up the swollen flesh around the stinking wound. Thick, yellow clots gushed out and rolled down her thigh.

"Don't need someone to ride the river with." The leg of her sweatpants was cut away from the thigh to the knee. If she passed out, she wouldn't freeze to death. "It's do or die time, Sammi."

The steel in her spine stiffened into an iron bar. After a quick prayer that she had no faith in, Sam drew in a deep breath and pushed the glowing knife against her leg.

It sank into her flesh like it was butter.

She screamed as pain raced up her leg. White and yellow pus shot out, followed by scarlet streams.

She cut again, hoarse cry never completely stopping as a chunk of her leg slid to the sticky floor.

Stomach and teeth clenched, the sobbing woman forced her shaking hands to drop the knife and grab the full, open bottle of rubbing alcohol.

Sam dumped it over the bleeding wound, still screaming. She snatched up the second knife before the agony could overwhelm her. Tears blurred her vision as she shoved the red-hot end over the gaping, bleeding hole.

Her lungs were raw before she stopped shouting.

Sam used the iron twice more to be sure she had closed the odd, deep wound. She could feel her heart thudding in her chest,

but nothing else except the flames that had become her leg. She dropped the bloody metal into the fire and grasped the syringe of morphine with jerking fingers.

She gave herself half of the green liquid; the pain immediately sank down into a monster she could tolerate. The morphine was powerful, consuming. She was unprepared for the strength as it made her mind swim.

When she thought she had herself under control, Samantha shot a generous dose of antibiotics into her thigh and then sat still, trying to stay awake. She was afraid of the wound breaking open and terrified of her dreams. Melvin and Henry were her companions most nights, often joined by the press secretary from the bunker. She knew it was just her mind sorting through it all, but she couldn't help being afraid. If this surgery succeeded, she might make it to Cheyenne by April Fools' Day. If it didn't, she would die here.

Pain came in thick waves, stealing her breath. Samantha reflected on her Seattle office as a distraction. She had spent more time there than in the condo she'd inherited from her parents. She hadn't been a public member of the weather service, just a computer message they had been told to listen to no matter what their own data said. She'd been well treated, with a home office full of luxuries designed to keep her happy and working.

"Prize rat in a cushy run," she slurred, crying. *I was part of the problem. Some of this is my fault.*

Samantha slumped against the bed of cushions and pillows she'd made.

Outside, snow began to fall.

## 2

*Wwhhho!!!*

Sam moaned in agony before her eyes were even open, hands going to her wound. She screamed as clumsy fingers found the raw, angry flesh of her leg.

Sam jerked awake. She took shallow, rapid breaths as she slammed the needle into her other thigh, shoving in the rest of the morphine. Her empty stomach churned. She gagged. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Sam concentrated on holding in her guts as the pain started to sink back down.

After a moment, she pried her lids open. Cleanup had to be done. An animal outside had woken her. The mess was already drawing predators, even though she could hear wind beating against the cabin. Her dream flashed. A blizzard was coming. Places on the edge of the storm would experience sudden temperature drops. The war's death count was about to climb.

As if to prove her point, the storm picked up; freezing rain slammed against the windows.

Sam jumped at a blur in the corner. Squinting, her blurry vision told her it wasn't a threat. The long mouse appeared normal.

Samantha forced herself to use the bedpan, leg flaring at each jar and wobble. She cleaned herself with alcohol pads, relieved to see the infection lines were already lighter.

She forced herself to drink a cup of water and eat a pack of stale peanut butter crackers. She also tossed one into the corner for the mouse to find.

Samantha missed the fire. She hated shivering in the dark, but she wasn't up to the effort required to relight it. For now, she had a big stack of blankets and a couple of flashlights. That would have to be enough.

Sam took another half syringe of morphine. She tugged the covers over herself with numb hands. "I'll rest a while and then I'll be okay."

She told herself that repeatedly, needing comfort now that loneliness had caught up on her solitary journey. Samantha had finally come to hate the constant silence of the new world. She needed to be with people again. As soon as she was able, she would get on her way to Cheyenne and the EPA weather shelter that was there. She would check it out and stock it for the winter, then make it her hideout. She couldn't help hoping other survivors

would be there, but she knew that was too much to ask for. *All roads lead to death now. It's just a matter of how we get there.*

Part Two:  
**On The Road**  
February



Chapter Sixteen  
**Birds Of A Feather**

Near Roosevelt, Utah

**February 16th**

1

“**H**arrison to Eagle One. Twelve o’clock, up high.”

Adrian glanced up from the roadmap he had splayed across the steering wheel. He narrowed in on an enormous black cloud coming over the distant hill toward them. It was like a badly trained platoon, spreading an evil shadow over the land.

Adrian leaned forward, squinting. He grabbed the mike. “Shit! Convoy, halt! Put it in park and get as low as you can!” Doing 35mph, Adrian slammed both feet down, reaching for the trailer brake. Pulling the curved handle, he applied the clutch as he downshifted through half the gears and then tugged the rear controls harder.

The semi shuddered, grinding as the tires locked up. Thick white smoke rolled from the rear wheels.

Left hand straining to keep the loaded truck straight, he let go of the chicken stick, using the pedals again. The semi finally shuddered to a stop. “Neil, Kyle, get that truck of turkeys away from us!”

“Copy!”

“What is it?”

Adrian groaned as their birds clucked loudly, responding to the echoes. “Everybody stay down! Fate sent us a wild card!”

The birds flew straight for the convoy.

Adrian had enough time to wonder what species they had been as he spotted blackened wings and dead eyes, and then the flock arrived.

Birds slammed into them, shattering windows, banging off doors and hoods in awful thuds that sent blood and guts flying as the blind victims came in for a landing. They squelched against trees, ripped apart on sharp, bare juniper branches, and hit the ground in wet, sickening thuds. The gusting wind carried them in faster than the Eagles could shoot. The flock was huge.

Adrian knew the sounds of their guns wouldn't be enough to carry through the din of the birds calling, people screaming, glass cracking, and awful, wet thuds. *A fire? Stereos?* Now holding his spare vest over the cracked, gory windshield, Adrian spotted Kenn coming from his truck. He knew instantly the Marine was about to work his bolt and make himself look good while doing it. *About damn time!*

That's what Kenn was thinking as he climbed onto the roof of the school bus. Birds were diving in for sightless landings all around him as he blew the air horn he'd taken from his glovebox. The kids next to him had their windows down. They were being pecked and scratched. Kenn knew Adrian would be relieved only a couple had gotten through. The lower half of the glass was taking the brunt of the aerial assault. Kenn blew birds out of the sky before they could get into an open window, rotating and blasting the piercing air horn between shots.

People were amazed when the flock began to divert from their straight-at-the-ground course. Birds were sensitive to high-pitched noises, like whistles and horns. It cut through the din.

Kenn soaked up the feeling of being the hero.

The Eagles followed Kenn's lead with both defenses. All the guards carried loud horns in case the weather knocked out their radios.

The flock circled the camp in groups, dipping and spinning. Some stayed high, but most were confused, not sure where to go. Their bodies dropped from the sky like rain as the guns took their toll. The ground was littered in carnage as the rest of the flock finally understood. They returned to the air in ragged staggers. Neat lines had also become a thing of the past for animal populations.

Now, the guns were louder than the cries of the sick birds. The rest of the flock flew by instead of trying to land. They called anxiously to each other to keep from getting lost.

A minute later, they were out of sight, but their calls echoed for a long time through the gritty February sky.

Adrian keyed his mike. "We'll call that a day. Man on point, take over."

"Yes, sir!" Kenn jumped from the bus, jeans and army jacket splattered in gore. He rotated, evaluating, and then gestured to Kyle. He would cover things in the order he knew Adrian would want, and enjoy it that the mobster wouldn't be able to argue. Kenn considered Kyle a rival. Though he still had some hopes of swaying the Italian to his side, he enjoyed putting the man in his place. "Have Neil set a perimeter in that onion field. Tape it and get the camp in it. Send someone to the bus with first aid kits, then set showers and wash areas over here so we don't contaminate our campsite. Make the wire tight and short." Kenn peered at his wrist while Kyle scribbled it all down. "It's almost lunch. Tell Hilda to scrub the tuna sandwiches. There's no way anyone will eat that shit now. Also, have Doug handle the reporter. She's taking pictures. When all that's done, we'll need a few new vehicles. You and your team can handle it personally."

Kyle swallowed a nasty remark and got busy. He did have a beef with Adrian's new suit, but now wasn't the time to voice it.

## 2

Adrian groaned as he lowered his 6'1", 230lb body to the dark bank of Duchesne Creek six hours later; mud began soaking into his dusty jeans. His head ached from the fumes of all the cars they'd stripped, the gas tanks they'd emptied. It had been a twenty-hour day for him already, but it wasn't over. This area was ugly, full of death and devoid of normal life. Even the ants wouldn't live here, and that frightened him. *Will spending a day or two on this ground make us sick?*

Adrian sighed. They had to have a break soon, but not tomorrow or the next day. He had settled for making camp under the retractable awning of an apple orchard that had been long since stripped. After satisfying himself that Kenn knew how he wanted things for tonight, Adrian had come here to steal a few minutes alone in the darkness. The tired leader tensed at a ripple from the creek. Something was alive in that reeking liquid. Adrian tried to take hope from it. They were fifteen miles from Roosevelt, Utah. Horrible things had happened there. It was bad enough to make Adrian consider backtracking despite the extra miles it would add.

This land was broken, rotting, and muddy. The roads were impassable without using tow trucks. Bridges had collapsed or washed away, and nearly every street was crammed full of vehicles—most empty of their drivers. Adrian assumed they were from people who'd fled California and Washington. They'd witnessed entire distant hills of mud collapse in the last few days. The thick, reddish ooze swallowed homes and highways, and the weather was the cause. It sleeted or rained each morning now, but the saturated ground couldn't hold it. Barely above freezing most nights, the sleet was the color of ashes and added more weight to the muddy hills.

Adrian was almost positive they were on the edge of a ground zero here. Besides the possible dangers, the views added proof to that theory. Twisted metal, crushed cars, and building walls laid over the ground like grave markers. There were charred shoes, flattened fire hydrants and bones. Human and animal bones were scattered across the sagebrush like a jigsaw puzzle that had been shoved off a table.

*Where did all this damage come from?* The nearest ground zero was in California, too far to have caused this, but even Adrian's military mind couldn't come up with another reason. This had to be the edge of a bomb zone, one that had come after communication lines fell. *I'll add it to the map I'm keeping.*

Lightning flashed in the distance. The vivid red and gold drew his eye, but Adrian's mind stayed on his broken country. How much of his homeland was like this? Most? Would they be forced

into the caves to survive? “What new life can there be if we have to live it in the rotting shell of the old one?”

Adrian tensed again, this time at the soft crunch of a boot. His hand dropped to his hip, despite being sure no one had gotten by the guards. Three full shifts of men were on the perimeter. They were protecting him too, though he wasn't training them to do it. They were following Kenn's lead.

“Adrian?”

“Down here.” *Maybe the future won't be as bad as I'm expecting.* Safe Haven hadn't chosen a final place to settle yet, but Adrian was certain the mountains would win the vote when the time came. And he already had doubts about being able to make such a place safe for even a month, let alone for the nuclear winter he feared was coming. The first one would be the hardest.

Kenn eased across the sloppy hill and sat, handing over a mug of hot coffee. Like Adrian, he didn't care that mud seeped into his clothes. It didn't matter anymore.

“How are they?”

Kenn's answer was simple, honest. “Tired and down, same as you.”

Adrian didn't offer excuses that would be obvious lies. It was impossible to pretend everything was fine when they were rolling over the unburied bones of their fellow citizens.

“We'll be better when we're away from here.” Kenn took a sheet of paper from his pocket. He'd been thrilled to discover *Man on Point* on his schedule this morning. When the birds hit them, he'd come through with full marks. Before the sick flyers though, there had been surprise from the Eagles. Now, Kenn had more pals than he needed. He had chosen to keep them at arm's length for the moment and search for allies among the camp later if he needed them. Adrian was the only one he really gave a damn about.

“Sitrep, whenever you're ready.” Adrian relit the cigarette he'd been ignoring.

“Perimeter is good. No serious injuries. Radio is quiet. Everyone is accounted for. The pictures from Cheyenne Mountain are in your tent.”

Adrian was sure those images would be worse than the ones from Salt Lake City. “Anything I should see?”

“No.” When Adrian didn’t ask for details, Kenn didn’t offer any. Their leader was depressed enough. He didn’t need to see the fry-room at NORAD they’d forced open, but Kenn was sure Adrian would recognize the clever way it had been done. Someone among the slavers had military knowledge and that didn’t bode well. Kenn planned to give Adrian the full in the evening report he had been asked to deliver about various issues and setups.

“Neil get the pictures yet?”

“No.”

Adrian was unhappy the state trooper hadn’t been chosen to go along for that run, but it had been Kenn’s mission and he hadn’t intervened. To make it up a bit, Adrian wanted Neil to see the photos before the camp did. The people here didn’t have access to all the pictures the Eagles took, but big places still gave them hope. He had to show them those photos or they would go off on their own to check and maybe not return. Some did anyway. Adrian was never offended, just relieved when they did return. He needed them all.

“We have two new arrivals that weren’t in the group following us. They wanted to know if we had any use for a doctor and nurse.”

Adrian’s surprised laugh was music to his ears. Kenn loved this feeling of pleasing the leader. “I knew you’d like that. John and Anne Harmon are husband and wife of almost forty years; they had their own office. They were going to NORAD, but they heard Mitch on the CB and decided to come in. They’d like to trade their medical skills for food and protection.”

“Damn, that’s great! It’s exactly what we need. Give ‘em a couple days to settle in and then put them to work.”

“Too late. He noticed Zack’s arm and insisted on cleaning and stitching it right then, along with handling any other injuries. Neil is setting him up in the corner near the livestock. Right now, *our*

*doctor* is examining the scratches the kids got. He says the birds were American Gulls.”

“Give him one of the biggest tents and have a red cross painted on it. The doctor’s name should be in red, white and blue—Safe Haven colors.” Adrian made a mental note to talk to the doctor in the next week. With that eager attitude, he would probably be well liked. That was one of the reasons Kenn was settling in so fast. People were realizing his only goal was to give whatever was needed. Only those closest to Adrian still had objections. Not that they would go against his wishes after the meeting tomorrow. Adrian intended to make it clear where the Marine belonged. It would help that Kenn never stole his thunder. His willingness to be just support had earned him respect. His quick reaction to the birds had to be counted in too. Giving Kenn point duty had been a great idea at the perfect time.

“You wanna do this later?”

“No.” Adrian huffed at himself in the windy darkness. “I’m easily distracted tonight. Go on.” Adrian wondered if Kenn still planned to go back to Ohio. Kenn hadn’t mentioned leaving since that first day. He didn’t have much to say about his old life at all—something most people here liked, but not Adrian. Kenn was busy carving out a place for himself, but the feeling of something not being right was stronger now than when he’d first arrived. *Is it because Kenn thinks no one noticed?*

“...and both women are on livestock duty, like you wanted. Water is down to three tankers; toilet paper is at twelve cases. We changed four flats, two windshields, and exchanged ten vehicles for the others Kyle’s team found. The tires came from the reserve.”

Adrian had known they would be into the reserve this week, but it still made his stomach burn. Their transportation was as important as the food, but water was priority one. If they didn’t keep moving and locating supplies, they would die, but their reserve wasn’t growing. “What’s the biggest problem?” He already knew. Even with the carpool law he had insisted on, they used a lot of fuel.

“Gas. We’re down to the reserves on it too after we fill up tomorrow.”

The reserve of gas was only a tenth of what they’d found. It would hold them for two days, at best. They should have more by now, but people were scared to leave camp. That was also about to change. “We’ll get away from here, then drain the tanks on every car, tractor, and lawn mower we find. At some point, we’ll get lucky and run across a station with something left in it.”

“We could try 191.”

Adrian glanced over, catching Kenn’s excited tone. “That’s a highway crammed with dead traffic.”

Kenn was eager to score bonus points to go with the full set of marks he’d earned earlier. “Exactly. Dead vehicles—like trucks and semis of food and water. Maybe even a fuel tanker or two.”

Adrian clapped him on the shoulder as the wind gusted again, carrying a chill they both felt and ignored. “You’re full of good shit today.”

Kenn soaked up the praise, ready to volunteer, but he stopped himself. He waited to see if it would be offered. He’d made progress with the camp. Not as much as he wanted, but it would always come down to Adrian’s opinion in the end.

“You’d like to go? Be in charge?”

Kenn nodded once. “Sure.”

The lightning storm to the west hadn’t died down. They both stared, human souls more afraid than in awe. Things in nature were bad now.

“When?”

“Leave in the morning, early. Catch up by mess, day after tomorrow. I’ll have Eagles meet you by the trucks. Anything else for me?”

“Nothing but Tonya. She wants to meet you in your tent.”

“Yeah, that’ll happen.”

Kenn kept quiet, brow puckering at the quickly thrown sarcasm. Tonya insisted to anyone who would listen that she and their leader were sleeping together. Adrian laughed when confronted with it. Most people had decided she was chasing what



she couldn't have. Not Kenn. Adrian and Tonya might not be a legal couple, but he didn't believe Safe Haven's commander was refusing that pogue bait when no one was around.

"Kenn."

He glanced up to find Adrian's sharp eyes on him.

"You got a thing for redheads?"

Kenn dropped his baby-blues, shrugging. "When they look like her, who doesn't?"

Adrian chuckled, liking the honest answer. He wanted to trust Kenn as much as Kenn wanted to be trusted. "She gets a man's attention, but she'll do whatever she has to if it will get her what she wants."

"What does she want?" Kenn wasn't sure why he was asking.

"For me to either be her legal mate, or out of this job, so she can put someone else in my place and have power through them. She doesn't care which. She's as much as said so, to my face."

Kenn laughed, despite wanting to do and say all the right things. "She's got guts; she takes care of herself. That kind of woman was rare even before the war."

Adrian didn't like the tone, but he let it go. "Tonya is strong, and we need that, but we're weaker with her too, because she uses her strength for selfish reasons. She would have to do a world of changing for anyone to accept her here. It would be a hard sell."

Kenn took the warning to heart. He didn't say more on the subject.

Adrian stood, scanning the lights, sights, and sounds. A neatly organized camp met his gaze. Fires drove back the darkness while dogs yapped for dinner, doors opened and shut, calm voices echoed, and steady footsteps crunched over the ground. *Normal as it gets now.* Kenn had done an excellent job. "We'll need to add safety glass to our lists. I don't like how easily a flock of birds put us in danger."

Kenn said what his boss was thinking. "Be too easy for bullets."

Adrian was more than pleased. Finally, some of the born help was here. "I'll do rounds in an hour. Wanna come along?"

“You know it.”

Adrian strode to his tent, eager to have a little time to himself.

Kenn’s mind stayed on Tonya as he joined the dozen camp members setting up base around the huge bonfire. It wasn’t the first time he’d been drawn to the sullen woman. Tonya was selfish, greedy, and a troublemaker. Kenn recognized her streak of meanness, but she was also strong, smart, and determined to have Adrian. The people here hated the idea, but Tonya was openly hostile to anyone who spoke against it. She had even earned a day of hard labor for a slapping contest with Big Billy, a 300lb schoolteacher from Oregon. She had won, hands down. Tonya wasn’t afraid of anything, and that had earned Kenn’s respect—something women didn’t get from him.

Kenn responded to the greetings and gratitude of those around the flames being teased by chilly wind, but he stood by himself. He hoped this fuel trip would secure his place in Adrian’s chain of command. Kyle and Neil were tied for second. Doug was in third, but to Kenn’s selfish mind, they weren’t Marines. Kenn didn’t think it would take long to get what he wanted, just more hard chores. No one held the XO position here and Kenn had found himself longing for it. Then the birds had come and helped.

Kenn passed on the bottles and joints going around the fire, noting the lantern was out in the tent he shared with Charlie. *Good.* As Kenn grew closer to Adrian, the time he spent around the teenager reminded him of the secrets he was keeping.

Kenn stared into the dark, unable to pick out the surrounding mountains. His mind returned to Tonya. She wanted Adrian in a way that was almost an obsession. His name was always on her pouty lips. Kenn felt a sharp connection to her because of that. It wasn’t a sexual thing for Kenn. *I just need to be near Adrian and the authority he represents.*

Others felt it. Kyle and Neil did, and Doug too, but Tonya was the only one to pursue Adrian openly. She was often humiliated by him and the camp as punishment for it.

Kenn spied a flash of flame red. He studied Tonya as she came through the crowd of drunken, unfriendly people with an air of haughty contempt.

Everyone shifted, whispering, staring at her.

Tonya held her chin up, glaring at some of them when the whispers became too loud.

Each time, the person fell silent. They all knew Tonya would back up her challenges.

Kenn felt a new bolt of desire for her. Those skintight black slacks caressed her long legs and her red net top made men consider breaking rules. It also caused the women here to hate her for making them feel plain.

Kenn was disappointed when she slipped into her tent. He almost had to force himself to stay where he was as conversations resumed. The camp had mostly accepted him, but the Eagles were hoping for him to cross even the smallest line and be denied the position he was aiming for. Kenn wouldn't ruin his chances here on a piece of ass, no matter how hot. It would be a betrayal of Adrian, but worse, of the wife in Ohio he'd spoken of. That would be unforgivable, thanks to Adrian's strict but simple moral code: Do what you want and be shunned or do the accepted thing and be welcome. Both types lived here, but only one held any power.

"You wanna hit this, man?"

Zack, a truck driver, was holding out a thick blunt. He was unarmed, alone, and carried himself like a fellow controller. Arm in a white sling, the driver smelled new. It took a while for that to fade. Kenn assessed him. Like Adrian, he would also need a right hand. *Is this it?* "Sure, thanks." Kenn hit it hard, keeping it for a long moment, waiting. He wasn't disappointed.

Zack eyed Kenn's arm and wrist tattoos. "I hear you handle the big man's shit and your own. Interested in some backup?"

Kenn handed over the smoldering blunt, stubbing out the part of the cherry that had fallen and landed in the trampled needle grass. "I'll get back to you on that."

Zack's green eyes darkened.

Kenn could tell the prematurely graying trucker was used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted it.

“And in the meantime?”

Kenn shrugged, turning away. “Anyone who wanted to watch my six would have to be an Eagle, and in charge of his team. That’s a deal breaker.”

### 3

Kenn was in his sleeping bag three hours later, cold, uncomfortable, and sure his past was catching up. He could feel Angela hunting for her son at night, searching the vast darkness for their location. He was livid that she wouldn’t answer him, even though she’d heard him calling. He was no stranger to what she could do. Kenn had done his homework before trapping her, but he couldn’t accept it with her in control. She couldn’t come here, not ever.

*She’s already on her way, his mind insisted brutally. When she arrives, she’ll not only rock your boat, she’ll sink it. Adrian will find out what kind of man you were before, how you dishonored the Corps repeatedly. You’ll be banished.*

Kenn hated Angela for the worm of fear growing deep in his heart. *If she makes it to this camp, I’ll lose everything.*

## Chapter Seventeen

# Decisions

### 1

**M**onthly meetings were mandatory for everyone except guards who had duty right then. Kenn was impressed by the tarp roof that provided more room, the snacks and drinks, the neat orderliness of it. This didn't feel like the apocalypse.

All the seats were taken as Adrian stepped under the awning.

A dozen men lined the corners of the gathering. Kenn now knew they were off duty guards being trained to do their jobs even when not on a shift. Adrian explained it as civic service, and from what Kenn had experienced here so far, it was succeeding. It didn't hurt that it also gained Adrian's respect. Everyone wanted that. They didn't know it was standard Marine training.

The big crowd waited for Adrian to get a cup of coffee and a few cookies. He had a thick red notebook under his arm as he made his way to the table in the center of the crowd; he shunned the one in front that had been left for him.

Kenn recognized the bonding moment as a clever political move, but he also recognized the danger. He kept his hand near his holster. He noticed a few of the others—Kyle, Neil, Seth—did the same while easing closer.

Adrian remained standing as he got started, meeting tense glances to calm them. He could smell the reeking rot of bodies in the towns around them, even over the odors of their cooking and port-o-lets. *This is winter. What will it be like in July?* “This is the third meeting of Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We have ninety-one people.”

Safety in numbers was mentioned through the crowd, producing a pleased ripple. Few of them realized it was President's Day. Those who did know didn't care. That world was gone. Safe Haven didn't need it. They had Adrian.

“We also have a doctor now!”

A cheer echoed. People scanned the organized mess, but not the Eagles. Kenn saw their attention stayed on their surroundings. Kyle and his team never slacked.

“We’ll sort out a schedule.” Adrian gestured. “For now, sign the sheet Neil has; put your problem on it if you can. The doctor will use it to decide who needs to be seen first.”

Neil passed the clipboard while people chatted.

“You gonna run those tests now?” An eager voice echoed from the rear of the crowd. “The ones to tell us if anyone here’s sick?”

Adrian chose his words carefully as people turned to stare. “I’d like to, yes, but—”

“And we’re gonna kick ‘em out right? Like we voted on?” Tony, a low-fare grease monkey, interrupted him again.

Adrian frowned at the short, balding mechanic. “We won’t be so nasty, but yes. They’ll be asked to leave.”

People talked to each other, some sulking, some agreeing.

The drunkard sat down, satisfied.

Adrian flipped the page, smothering a curse. *That won’t encourage anyone to get checked out.* “Our new crew of guards has passed into level two, and that means we need another twenty men to try out for rookie level. Neil will pass that sheet around next. I’ll let you know my choices in a couple days. Next, our reserves aren’t growing. I understand that’s because no one feels safe. While I can’t take away all the danger, I can give you some protection. Kyle and his team are hereby on loan to protect any supply mission of six or more people that has been approved a day in advance.” Adrian’s tone hardened. “They get their orders from me. If they say no, it’s not safe, you’ll pick a different site. If something does go wrong, their priority is to get everyone back to camp. Also, schedule switches will no longer be handled by me. Kenn and Kyle will cover all changes. I’ll still make out the original, then give a final approval.” Adrian paused to light a stale smoke.

Kenn was almost positive Adrian was judging the reactions of the camp. People seemed fine with his choices, though there were

a few words being exchanged among some of the Eagles over the order of the names. *How important is that?*

“As of tomorrow, there will be a third meal. The appliances Kenn and Doug hooked up run great, so from now on, we get *three* squares, Monday-Friday. Saturday and Sunday will remain the same—lunch and dinner, with the truck open for coffee, toast, and cereal. A through L will be served the new meal first; M-Z will go thirty-five minutes later, starting at noon.” He flipped another page. “Effective immediately, everyone is back on full water rations.”

The cheer was louder this time. Adrian waved at the grinning Marine. “Thank Kenn. His idea of searching trucks on the highway was great. We’re good as long as we find at least one each week.”

Kenn soaked up the good vibes like a thirsty plant as he was slapped on the shoulders and congratulated, but he didn’t miss the gleam of satisfaction on Adrian’s face as the leader continued.

Neither did Charlie, or Tonya. One of them was thrilled; the other was furious they weren’t going back to Ohio for his mother.

“We have four new loads of clothes, shoes, blankets, and a lot of other gear we’ve been low on or were out of. The trucks will be open right after this meeting, M-Z goes first. A-L is twenty minutes later.” He paused, skimming his notes. “We have the photos from NORAD. They’re bad; they blow away the idea of getting help there. This odd weather is holding in some warmth, though. I say we keep hunting. If we haven’t found anything by the fourth of July, then we should pick a place to try rebuilding on our own.”

“You mean in the mountains?” someone called.

Kenn noticed the people here never really settled down. *Tense sheep, waiting for the dog to bite.*

Adrian had to raise his voice to be heard as stiff wind ran through camp, causing tents to flap. “Yes. The bunker under the base in Montana won’t hold us all, but this country is full of caves. I hope for something aboveground, but if we have to, we could take a big set of caves and block them off, make it work

temporarily.” He waved a dismissive hand, demeanor calmer than his stomach as his people muttered and frowned. “It’s just something to think about. We’ll have a final vote on it in July. For now, we’ll stay here tomorrow and have our contest, then leave the next morning. Where to from there? We’re picking that tonight, and voting on new rules.”

Adrian met nervous gazes with calm, reasonable words. “We have a lot of people here now; we pick up more nearly every day. That’s great, exactly what we want, but many people aren’t pulling their weight. The current rules say everyone has to help, but I’d like to be more specific. We need each person here to pull three shifts on sentry duty, and one shift on any other chore of their choice. We all want things to be better, right?” Adrian waited for a reaction, noting halfhearted agreement with faces a mix of resignation and suspicion. “Before, better was earning the finer things, the luxuries. Now, better means working to survive, to keep what we have—this second chance. These things have to be done, and we have to be the ones to do them. There is no one else.”

The tone had become scolding. Kenn was impressed, sure there would be extra hands for at least the next week. No one liked Adrian to be disappointed or unhappy.

“I’d like to have more of us taking the gun classes. There’s a large group of guerrillas moving up Interstate 25, as most of you know. We need to be able to defend ourselves.”

“Do you think we’ll be attacked?” Cynthia wiped her brow. She was squeezed into the front with the elderly so she wouldn’t miss a single word or reaction.

Adrian shrugged, expression unreadable even though he knew her from before the war. She hadn’t placed him yet. She might not if fate was on his side, but Adrian hadn’t considered refusing her entry, or worse, getting rid of her. That was the difference between him and his father. “I hope not, but it is a part of why we need more hands for guard duty. That reminds me—people are getting out of their cars in unfamiliar places way too soon. Many times, the Eagles haven’t cleared or roped off the area yet. I’m telling you now, someone will end up getting hurt because of it.” Adrian



went to the beaded doorway of the mess, nodding to the cook. Hilda was a plump German woman they'd picked up in central Nevada, and another one he wasn't sure about yet. Like the reporter, Adrian didn't know where she fit into his plans for their future, but he had little doubt they both did. If one of these two alert females discovered his secret, it was fate. They wouldn't, though—at least not until these people were able to survive without him. Then, it would be open season on all Mitchels. “Can I get a Bud?”

The big shouldered cook did it immediately.

Adrian continued his meeting. “This area is bad. We all feel it. We can't stay long or we'll get sick. After the contest, I'd like to make some real miles to get away from here now that we know NORAD's gone.”

Faces darkened at the second mention of the compound many of them had hoped would be standing and ready to accept survivors.

Adrian took the towel-wrapped beer from the cook. “Okay, any new business?”

“Yes.” Alex, a young math teacher from Montana, stood. “Are we going to... I mean... Can we celebrate the holidays? Some of the kids have asked, but we're not sure what to tell them.” The well-dressed bald man sat down.

Adrian appeared to be considering, but this was easy. It was one of the things he'd covered in his notebook a month ago. “Just the ones that matter to us as a country, I think. The Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, New Years. Memorial Day.”

“What about Easter and Christmas?” Cynthia didn't look up. She was hand copying the meeting in furious scribbles.

“Not as a whole camp. Hardly anyone believed in them. They used them as an excuse to indulge or buy off loved ones instead of spending real time with them. I won't even get into the money and stores, and what it did to our lives. Each person can do what they want. I won't be upset by kids hunting eggs or dressing up for Halloween, but I won't let a few people force it on everyone else either.”

There were shrugs and scowls, again about evenly split. Adrian took a moment to open his beer and take a healthy swallow. It would give his camp a few seconds to settle into the idea that even the holidays had changed for them. “Guess we might all like Halloween a little more if one of you could do some magic.”

His common joke drew chuckles.

“All right, anyone else have new business?”

“I have some suggestions.” The doctor’s voice was respectful.

Adrian liked the intelligence he read in the short, rounded man’s face. Fresh out of a self-imposed quarantine, John had already made a few friends. Adrian gestured. “Suggest away.”

The aging healer stood, sending a strong menthol whiff of BenGay over the gathered crowd. “There should be more fruit and juice for everyone, plus daily vitamins. We’re being exposed to a lot of poisons, especially in places like this, and the antioxidants in the fruits and juice will boost immune systems.”

Silence greeted his words.

John went on, hoping he wasn’t about to step on anyone’s toes. “I’ve only been here a couple days, but I’ve been a doctor a long time. I can tell you what illnesses we’ll face in the coming months, and how to prevent some of them.”

Adrian gave a barely perceptible nod of approval, pleased by the man’s use of *we*. “What can we expect if we ignore your suggestions?”

“Scurvy, rashes, colds, weak immune systems that will let the sniffles last for weeks instead of days. Migraines, vomiting, diarrhea that lasts for weeks at a time. The list gets bad after that. We’re absorbing the chemicals from the bombs, and what was released by meltdowns after the war. Once enough builds up, we’ll start getting sick...and dying.”

The crowd stirred uneasily, but Adrian did nothing to calm them. *All of you need a reality check.* Adrian remembered idiots catching rainwater on their tongues the last time it stormed, just to see if it would burn. They knew less than nothing.

John noted Adrian’s expression and recognized the unspoken order. Adrian wanted to scare them. That was easy. John used the

truth. “Our biggest threat is the radiation. It’s fatal at high doses, but it’s the low doses we have to worry about now. It’s a slow death that finds each person’s weak link. It wakes up dormant genes, like cancer or MS, and since exposure kills the immune system, we’ll be attacked from the inside even if we recover. The immune system is our army. The radiation can’t be stopped, but it can be slowed by an army that’s strong. For us, that it could mean only 30% will die, instead of 70%.”

“But the bombs came months ago. The toxics soaked into the ground. Why are we worryin’? We ain’t even found any radiation vics.” A slender, older woman in the front delivered a dismissive wave.

“I did.”

“We have.”

John held up a hand.

Adrian was pleased when the answering crowd fell off to mostly silence.

“People who were exposed during the war are gone. Our threats are coming from the weather dropping it on us, and from radioactive debris on the ground where we sleep and need to grow food. It takes a long time for the toxics, as you call them, to go away. You know that layer of smog above us when it’s daylight, the one that makes it feel like dusk all the time? It’s the toxins. Until that dissipates, we’re not safe. Near the bomb zones, that’ll take thirty years or more.”

The crowd muttered and murmured, whispering, worrying. Adrian finished his beer before he spoke, pleased. He would have no trouble getting a good day’s travel out of them now. “So, you want responsibility for our health? You want to care for us? The right to add to our laws, once voted on, comes with that job,” Adrian both offered and warned.

The doctor was aware of what was going on. He was just surprised it was being offered so soon. “Not the laws part. I’m no politician, but yes to the rest. My oath didn’t die with my country.” John slid his glasses back on as he sat down.

“Well said. You’ve got my vote, but it’s theirs that matters.” Adrian waved. “All those in favor of putting the doctor’s suggestions on the ballot?” Adrian held up his own hand.

Both men were relieved when nearly everyone else did too.

“So be it.” Adrian held up a sheet of paper. “The bottom of the ballot is blank. Fill it in as advice. A-D-V-I-C-E. Okay, any other new business?”

No one spoke.

Adrian motioned Neil to pass around the pens and papers.

Neil was emotionless while grinning and saying all the right things. Something was going on with Kenn and Adrian. Neil could feel it. What came to mind was the reason his mirth didn’t reach his eyes.

“All right, last thing.” Adrian got attention again. “Members of the moral board need to stay after the vote. We have a possible violation to judge.”

Kenn, like everyone else, wondered what unspoken rule had been broken. The big ones went to trials that were witnessed by the whole camp, or so he’d heard. There hadn’t been one since Kenn had been here; there hadn’t even been a case of thievery, but the moral code was strict. There had been a single private vote since he’d joined Safe Haven; the stalker was no longer a member.

“Which rule?” Roger Sawyer, the current moral board foreman, waited for an answer without smiling.

“None directly. That’s why we’re doing a closed hearing. I won’t ruin an innocent man’s chance for a new life here.” Adrian said it for ear candy, but he was sure the man would be gone before he did rounds tonight. Leon and the words *not guilty* hadn’t been on speaking terms in a long time.

Roger grinned. “Okay.”

Adrian hated the sudden eagerness in the ex-Pinkerton detective’s face, but he understood the deep need to punish those who were even the smallest bit responsible for all they had suffered.

Adrian waited until Kenn dropped his vote into the metal lockbox, then joined him at a small, empty table in the rear. The

rest of the camp crowded around the front tables to watch as the votes were counted.

Kenn kept his voice low. “That was some of the slickest shit I’ve ever heard.”

Adrian scanned the guards. “Thanks. Maybe you’ll MC for me sometime.”

Kenn laughed. “I’m not a public speaker.”

Adrian let it go. He was already sure the Marine would be exactly that, and there would be no one better. “How about coming by my tent an hour after everything’s done? We’ll have a conversation.”

“Sure.” Kenn kept his tone casual, heartrate picking up. *This is it.* “Should I bring anything?”

Adrian grunted. “Just your stamina. I’m going to need to get drunk when this night’s work is over.”

Kenn snickered. “You got it, Boss.”

Adrian’s heart eased. *I have my XO.*

Tonya slipped away, satisfied that her plans now stood a chance.

Charlie stomped away, fuming that his didn’t.

## 2

The vote went Adrian’s way on all the issues. As the crowd broke up, their faces were confident he was doing his job, but the sly eyes also said they would find out what rule had been broken and by whom.

In a brief time, the mess emptied as everyone settled in for the night. Kenn wanted to stay and watch the moral board trial, but he caught Adrian’s eye instead of waiting until he was asked to leave. “I volunteered for a double on sentry duty tomorrow. I’m going to hit the showers, then the rack. Call me if you need anything.” Kenn was showing humility he didn’t feel.

“Hang around, will ya?” Adrian took the opportunity, telling them all his status had changed. “I need someone on my right.”

The words held a ring of magic.

Kenn kept triumph out of his voice by will. “You know it.”

Adrian gave Neil a nod before motioning to the thirteen men and women waiting together.

Neil left, scowling. It was as he and Kyle feared. That coveted position was being given to Kenn.

Adrian led the small group. “We’ve set up a hooch near the parking area. Follow Doug. He’s the one with the red vest and shoulders so wide we could land a plane on them. Let’s get this done.”

The mood turned somber, but Kenn couldn’t help the swagger in his stride as he walked on Adrian’s right. They followed the board members, who had no trouble catching up to Doug. His limp was the only reason Kenn didn’t consider him competition.

Kyle was on Adrian’s left. Kenn wondered what the stocky goon thought. *Probably hated it. Nothing he can do but suck it up.* It made Kenn feel like laughing. He and Kyle hadn’t spoken a word to each other in two full days, not since the first gun class he’d taught where they’d both said too much and barely avoided a fight. Now Kenn was about to be given authority; he planned to rub it in every chance he got.

“Stay on this guy. He has a nasty temper. I’m sure this type of proceeding isn’t new to him.”

Kenn hid disappointment at Adrian’s words. *We’re just chasers for a prisoner?*

“The punishment might be new.” Kyle pulled his black cap tighter over dark curls.

Adrian nodded. “Don’t let him intimidate the girls. They’re already afraid he might sneak back to hurt them in retaliation.”

Kenn saw them exchange a glance that said the violator wouldn’t be able to return because he would be dead. Jealousy flared up in Kenn. It made him push, testing his new place before it was official. “Can I ask, or should I wait?”

Kyle listened. A refusal would mean they had read too much into Adrian’s words. Kenn might not be empty clothes, the bird attack proved that, but something was wrong with him.

“Sexual assault, threats against women and kids, two counts of physical assault. Those are all death penalty crimes here; he already knows it.”

*Sorry about your luck.* Kenn gloated silently, but he brought the inner Marine out when they entered the big tent and spotted the defendant’s huge body. Leon was easily three hundred pounds and little of it was fat.

As he and Kyle strode to each side of the sullen biker, they exchanged a look that said truce, for Adrian’s sake. It wouldn’t take much for this to get out of control. The suspect wasn’t even handcuffed. Neither man liked Adrian being in the tent with him. Anything could go wrong once the verdict was in.

### 3

Nothing did. Less than an hour later, a sedated Leon was being escorted out of the tape by men who had orders to kill him and piss on his body—a request from one of the victims.

Adrian wandered afterwards, worrying over the order. He walked in the darkest shadows around the flapping tents, occasionally listening to his people. Leon wouldn’t be missed. He had contributed almost nothing, but the loss of life still made Adrian feel like a failure as a leader.

Not that he would change his mind. He could still call Kyle, but he knew the mobster didn’t want the biker to get a stay of execution after what they’d listened to him admit, and he wouldn’t. The entire world was better off without Leon. Right or wrong, Adrian had made a choice based on what was best for everyone here. It was how he made all of his decisions now. It was the only way his people would survive.

Adrian’s feet carried him toward the medical tent, but he hesitated to go in despite knowing he needed to invite the doctor onto his payroll. Doctors were notoriously temperamental, and this one, having been here only a brief time, couldn’t be pleased. It had taken nearly a dozen men to hold Leon down, and though

John had done what was asked without protest, the hypocrisy of it had to be fresh in his mind.

Headlights flashed.

Adrian shifted deeper into the shadows as Tonya rolled into camp in a very red, very new convertible that was not easy on gas like they had voted for at the last meeting.

She parked in front of her tent, making him grumble at the second rule violation. As she disappeared into the deluxe vinyl structure, he scribbled a note in his book, wondering which sucker had helped her put it up. Tonya would gas her own car all this week, and maybe the doctor's idea about a mandatory quarantine zone would work. She could be—

“...new place, Anne. A hard new world, where everything has an uglier price.”

Adrian didn't budge as the husband and wife talked about what had happened, unknowingly approaching his hiding place while they cleaned up the large two-sided medical tent.

“But it's barbaric, Johnnie! Branding him like an animal! It's...barbaric!”

“What else is there? No jails, no drugs, no mental help, and really, those things never worked on men like that anyway.”

Adrian heard her frustrated sigh and understood that criminal justice was an old discussion between them.

“He couldn't just let him go, Anne. He had to make sure that everyone who meets that monster will see what he really is.”

“It isn't right! We heal. We don't hurt! This isn't how America's supposed to be!”

John gave a harsh snort that made Adrian tense.

“This is exactly how it should have been, and maybe we wouldn't have destroyed ourselves.”

“But the whole word?”

“It'll keep him from easily hiding or removing it.”

“It'll get him killed and you're responsible. You did it.”

“This is a good place, and I'll do what I have to so that we can stay, but this sin I'll pay for willingly. It's the only way now, and let me tell you a secret, my dear sweet wife. I won't carry the



burden alone. That young man feels it a lot more than he shows. Adrian values life, all life. It's in the way he cares for his people, for his farm of exotic humans. I'll give him my help in any way he needs, and I hope you will too. He's the few, the good, and I suspect we were allowed to survive because he needs us."

*Definitely right to offer John a place on the council.* Adrian moved away from their tent. That old man had his head on straight. Adrian had used it at the meeting and heard it just now, but he had witnessed it during the punishment too. John had handled not only himself, but also Anne and the Eagles around him with a calm sense of leadership. Because of that, the branding hadn't been as ugly as the members of the voting board had expected. Most of them would be able to sleep tonight.

It only eased Adrian's mind a little, though, that he now had at least two of the six or seven he'd been promised in his dreams. He spent a lot of time worrying over the rest. Had he passed them somewhere? He hoped not because he and his grunts couldn't keep doing all the work. Eventually, they would miss something that endangered these people and cost them the right to lead. The weight of this was heavier than anything Adrian had ever carried before the war and he was starting to feel a bit winded.

#### 4

*Life is good.* Kenn was sitting in an uncomfortable folding chair in the center of Adrian's perfectly neat tent. The camp was calm, and he was with the boss. *It doesn't get any better than this.*

"Here ya go. Try this." Adrian handed him a cool metal cup and a cigar.

Kenn noticed Adrian's five o'clock shadow and bloodshot eyes. Clearly, their leader had gotten a head start.

Kenn smelled his cup, liking the vanilla more than he would ever admit. He took a large swallow. It burned its way to his gut despite the sweet smell and aftertaste. He sucked in a breath, coughed.

The two men shared a snicker.

“Good?”

Kenn nodded, noting the patriotic designs on the cups. With Adrian, everything was about love of country.

Adrian studied Kenn, facade unreadable as the tension thickened.

Kenn forced himself to stay still, sensing if he was too eager now, he might lose it all before it was actually his.

“Do you have any idea why I asked you here?”

Kenn shook his head, instinctively knowing this was part of the ritual of being brought in. “Have I done something wrong?”

“Just the opposite. The guys tell me you like to stay busy.”

Kenn emptied his cup and sat it on the small folding table as the potent alcohol burned its way to his gut. “There’s a lot to be done...” He gasped, making Adrian snicker again.

“Ain’t that the truth. How long have you been here now?”

“Fifteen days.”

The quick answer made Adrian grimace. “You’ve done doubles on guard duty, taught two gun classes for the Eagles, helped find supplies, set up camp, broke down camp, and gassed up all the vehicles. There’s been something every day, all on top your regular schedule. That’s a busy two weeks.”

Kenn shrugged. “Unleaded is my new cologne.”

“Smells like a hard worker, someone with ambition searching for a mountain to climb.”

“I’ve got a lot to offer.”

“And I want it.” Adrian handed Kenn a thick black notebook and a silver pen. “Others recognize it too. Some have hinted you should be invited onto the payroll.”

“But?”

“It’s not up to some or even most of them. It has to be unanimous; that depends on you.”

Kenn met Adrian’s pointed look with one of his own. “I’m working on it.”

“Not fast enough, but I can’t wait any longer.” Adrian finished lighting his cigar. “We have to get these people ready to defend their freedom.”

Kenn asked himself if he could start out as a lowly drill instructor. He glanced up to say that wouldn't hold him for long.

Adrian was ready with careful wording. "I have important work for you. You'll be higher than any other here now. Together, we'll save some of what matters. If you have the time?"

"You make the schedules. I have the time if you say I do."

Adrian stiffened at the flippant tone. "This is no game. Be sure."

"I'd never treat it that way." Kenn was horrified he'd come across as anything less than serious.

Adrian knew, but the warning came with the offer. "I know why you survived. I know your destiny in this hard, new world." *The only thing I don't know, is if you're strong enough to pull it off.* "Effective immediately, you have the place at my side you began hoping for the day we found you. You'll always be my second in command and more trusted than anyone else. I'm offering you what the Corps couldn't—your purpose, the reason you were born, why you survived."

"What's the catch?"

"You're mine." Adrian's harsh tone said no going back would be allowed. "Be the anything and everything I need to keep these people alive. I make every choice based on what's best for the entire camp and nothing else takes priority, not even me. I'll do anything to keep us together, and I will expect your complete, immediate support, no matter the chore or situation."

Kenn didn't consider refusing. He held out a hand. "It's my honor to serve."

Chapter Eighteen  
**A New World**  
Devils Head, Colorado  
February 21st

1

**A***rrroooooo!*

Samantha's eyes flew open at the howling, drawn away from dreams of duty and honor.

She groaned. "You've got bigger things to worry about than wolves or coyotes." The pain in her leg was agony, and her hands and feet were so cold she couldn't feel anything in them but pain. It was dark and drafty in the cabin.

Samantha forced herself to scoot over to the fireplace. She clenched her teeth at every jar of her leg against the hard floor. She needed heat, but all she could think about was how much she wanted to shoot up. It was the same craving that made her drool when she woke with only flaring misery to comfort her. So she made herself wait. *I will not come out of the war an addict.*

It was frigid in the hunting lodge, but the front glass windows had survived the cold wave with only small cracks. The thick line of birch evergreens in front of the cabin had taken the brunt.

*And the birds.* She shuddered.

Samantha hadn't realized the birds were there until the freeze came. The larks had been huddled on an upper branch for warmth. She could still just make out the faint yellow hue of their snow-covered bodies. It was a mirror of her own fate, had the windows not held.

The temperature was a little better now. She could even go to the outhouse. Samantha was glad the freeze had let up, but she still had plenty of nasty weather to travel through. The feeling of

wrongness invading this place said it wasn't safe here anymore. She needed to get moving.

She stacked some of her dwindling supply of wood into the charred fireplace, adapting to the thick, groggy feeling of the morphine upon waking each day.

She surveyed the dark corner, but didn't spot the animal. She had noticed a cage in an SUV as she'd come up the driveway to this hunting lodge, but it hadn't registered then. She had mistaken the ferret for a mouse in her fear of doing self-surgery. The fur had hung from its narrow frame. She'd been feeding it whenever she ate, and leaving water out in a jar lid. If it would come to her, maybe she would have a companion.

Samantha squirted the lighter fluid, then struck a match. She had to use three before the fire roared to life, singeing her fingertips. Sam pulled the blanket tighter around her thin shoulders and huddled as close to the heat as she could get, vaguely thinking she had never smelled worse in her life.

Needing to know how her wound was doing, she pried off the bandage, being careful not to disturb the forming scabs.

It was ugly, but improving. She could even put a little weight on it now. Her shaking hands replaced the material. It had hurt—

*Arrrooooooo!*

Samantha froze at the sight of red, malevolent orbs glaring through the front window.

She stared back for a long moment, evaluating her situation. It had been three days. It was blizzard cold, the snow was still falling, and the wolves were still out there...stalking her.

*Scccraatch. Sssscchh.*

Paws dug at the small gap under the front door.

Samantha got moving, but her eyes stayed on the window, where more hungry snouts had appeared. She was in trouble once again, and there would be no rescue except for the one she provided.

Sam squared her shoulders, feeling the helpless anger that always rose when she thought about the old world now. *Fine, if they want a war, I'll give them a taste of what they're in for.*

The first thing the storm tracker did was give herself a light dose of morphine. Then she used the bedpan, glad her leg felt stronger. She would need that. She dressed as fast as she could, hoping the layered shirts would protect her from bites and scratches. The sweatpants went on over her jeans for the same reason. After tying her dirty blonde braid up, she strapped the gun belt around her hips, wishing the weapon had more than two bullets.

Samantha chose to make her stand in the corner, to the left of the stone fireplace. She was crying hard tears by the time she had tumbled the cumbersome desk onto its side and pulled it in like a three-sided wall. The light dose of morphine wasn't helping now.

After stowing all her things behind the desk, she filled half a dozen syringes with morphine, leaving the caps off. She added them to the knives already in the wide pockets of her trench coat. They made a comforting clink. When the wolves came, it would be through the windows that had been weakened by the first strong wave of the blizzard. It would get cold in here, fast.

“Sure could use a solid.” Sam was aware this was probably where her luck had run out. “If I’ve got any credit left, I’d like to use it now, please.”

She took a little more of the morphine she feared she would crave forever, recapping that needle with shaking fingers. *I’ve already survived worse.* Wolves, no matter how determined, were nothing compared to Melvin and Henry, both drunk, wanting sex. She would survive.

*Scratch. Paw. Sniff.*

Sam counted two shadows under the door, four pairs of eyes at the window. Six animals, and probably a few others hanging back, waiting. *But not for much longer.* She could feel their hatred as they glowered through the frosted glass. The storm had piled up a foot of thick snow, giving the wolves a ledge.

She glared back as she put the torches near the fire, not sure why she’d made them. They were a last—

*Smaaaaash!*

The front glass shattered under a huge black wolf. It landed on its side. Sharp pieces of glass flew across the floor; snow blew through the jagged hole.

Snarling as it gained its feet, the wolf padded her way, promising death.

*Crack! Thud. Crrrassshhh!*

The second window failed. Snow and wolves streamed through the gap.

Sam jerked two needles from her pocket; adrenaline squeezed her heart.

Long claws dug into the slippery wooden floor as the wolves advanced.

Sam waited. They had to get close enough for her meager weapons to be effective.

*Craasshh!*

A third window exploded under the weight of a large white wolf. The animal didn't slow as it hit the wooden floor, using it to jump again instead, mouth open in anticipation.

Sam slammed both syringes into the white wolf's furry chest as it leapt on her.

"Ahhh!" She pushed the double dose in, cringing away from the heavy, reeking weight and snapping teeth.

A second wolf had lunged with its leader and was hit by the first animal's convulsing body. It knocked them both into the corner of the desk.

The heavy marble slid against Sam's good leg, shoving her away from their snaps. Pictures crashed to the floor behind her.

Sam quickly looked up to find a lanky wolf flying through the air, with two more about to launch.

She fired the last bullets in her gun, with only one of them hitting. She jerked a kitchen knife from her pocket.

The third animal flew toward her, growling.

Sam leaned into the lunge and impaled it, ripping upward.

*Yiiipe!*

She let the bloody blade fall with the body as she grabbed the Taser she'd found refill packs for. She shocked the wolf she'd

missed with the gun. She hit it in the muzzle as it went for her injured limb.

The wolf fell, whining.

She kicked the animal that had recovered from hitting the sharp corner; blood flew from its ear.

*Iippe! Iippe!*

Her boot crunched against its ribs as the wolf continued to yelp.

The rest of the animals fled, retreating before the injured prey that had taken out half of their pack.

Sam rotated in time to see the remaining three wolves jump through the snowy window and vanish into the cold drifts of slush, tails tucked between their legs. Bloody paw prints marked their path of retreat. Their howls were haunting.

Samantha lowered her arms, struggling not to puke at all the blood.

The white wolf at her feet twitched, trying to recover.

Samantha lunged down and plunged her last knife deep into its thick neck.

*Scratch...*

Sam swung around, shoulders relaxing when she spotted the ferret.

It stared at her, tail twitching.

Sam's body pumped more adrenaline. *Why is it even out here? There was a lot of noi-*

The ferret charged.

Sam stomped with her injured leg as it lunged for her ankle, saliva dripping from its fangs. The ferret's body crunched under her boot, guts squeezing out as stabbing pain shot up her thigh.

Sam ground the ferret into the bloody floor, taking bitter satisfaction in every snap, crack, and splatter. "Slam you too!"

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Sam gathered her gear. *I don't care if my body isn't ready yet. I'm leaving now.*



Chapter Nineteen  
**The Castaway**

1

“**G**o away. Please, God. Make it go away.”

Kendle swallowed a groan as the shark fin rose out of the water and ran along the side of the faded speedboat. It had been stalking her for the last few days, almost certainly drawn by the blood in her urine. Today it had begun nudging her floating home until only her screams drove it off.

The great white shark was big. Twenty feet long, it acted as if it hadn't been in contact with a boat before. Kendle was sure the simple shot of a flare gun would get rid of it, but she had no flares, no gun, no knife, no gas, no radio. She was adrift on a dead stranger's boat somewhere in the Pacific Ocean—the sole survivor of a manifest that had numbered nearly a thousand.

The shark came in for another circle of the boat.

The red-skinned woman braced herself to follow through with the plan she'd made. Fight or die had served her well in the past and it would now too.

*Bump!*

The boat rocked; her grip tightened.

*Bump. Bump!*

More violent this time, it produced an awful creak of waterlogged wood that got Kendle up on her knees. Her boat wouldn't take much more, and she would likely only get one shot. She needed to get closer.

Kendle scooted to the side, not feeling the splinters digging into her skin. Her attention was on the shark streamlining toward her for another hit, this one likely an attack. It had also sensed the water-weakened wood.

The great white came in high on the water, the hunter moving in for its meal. *Don't they usually hit from beneath?* Kendle didn't have time to figure it out.

"Aaaahhh!" Kendle swung the claw hammer with all her strength, boat dipping with her weight, and buried the hammer in the shark.

Liquid squirted. The surprised predator jerked downward, yanking the weapon from her grip. It disappeared beneath the murky waves, tail thrashing against the battered boat.

Kendle searched intently, relaxing a little more with each second that passed. She'd lost her fishing hammer but kept her life and boat. That was a fair trade as far as she was concerned.

Kendle shifted, keeping her attention on the waves as the adrenaline rush faded and the crash arrived. It was gone.

*Like my world.* Kendle had no idea where she was. The gas had run out a long time ago, and she was alone, at the ocean's mercy. She searched the waves as they swelled and dipped around her, finding nothing but debris and endless water.

Forcing herself to ignore the waiting tears, she got out her strings and began to tie a square of net to fish. "Fifty days and nights," she muttered, cracked lips aching, skin a constant bruise from the gentlest bump. In all that time, she hadn't seen anyone, not a ship in the distance, not even a plane in the sky. Surely they had found the ship by now, counted bodies, and started a search for survivors. *Haven't they? Shouldn't I have at least spotted a plane, one of those big 747s?* They wouldn't be able to pick her out, of course, but knowing she wasn't alone would be a comfort.

Fingers aching as she tied off the ends, Kendle flexed her hand a couple of times before starting on the next side, making small, tight squares that would trap anything bigger than a marker. She let her mind wander as she labored on the net, each piece a different color or type of material. She was almost out of anything to drink and she was hoping to catch a bottle of water.

Kendle croaked a bitter laugh, thinking of the saying about water being everywhere but there not being a drop to drink.

“Definitely fits.” Her throat was raw from trying to scream the shark away.

She stared around wildly, searching for a great white with a hammer in its head and revenge in its heart. Instead, murky waves, the unnatural, vivid green sunset, and the dark layer of clouds in the sky were her only companions. Below was another world, but it was one she was terrified of; it was full of foreign creatures that brushed against her wooden home and stole her breath. *Where are the planes, the rescue ships? The land?*

“It was a Carnival Cruise Liner, for God sakes!” she blurted in frustrated fear, turning as if to discover the Coast Guard pulling alongside. “Front page news! Wealthy stars go missing, massive search ensues!”

Someone should be hunting for all those citizens, all those missing lifeboats. And what was with the ocean? While she was grateful—it had certainly kept her alive—she could only worry about an explosion that had been big enough to literally litter an ocean with debris.

Just about anything she could think of was floating in the salty waves—bottles, cans, cups, clothes, jugs. It was a constantly moving store shelf of surprises (some awful, like the hand she’d pulled up, still inside the leather glove), and she was constantly scanning, trying to find more each day than she used. She had three weeks’ worth of food, divided evenly into the corners of the boat for balance, but her stomach clenched painfully at the thought of being on the ocean long enough to consume it all. *Where is the land?*

Kendle used thick knots to tie the net to the remaining guardrail on the faded orange and white speedboat, finishing as a wave broke over the side and soaked her from shoulders to toes in cold saltwater.

Her vision faded, blurring. She was thrown backward in time to the storm that had taken her sister just days after they’d snuck off the doomed cruise ship.

*“Hold on!”*

*“Help me!” the terrified girl screamed again, nails drawing blood from Kendle’s wrist. The weight of the rail that had ripped away from the boat was pulling her down toward the angry sea, where the rest of their group, also still anchored to the heavy metal, was fighting for every breath.*

*“Dawn!”*

*Their wet fingers slipped. The screaming teenager was yanked off the boat as Kendle jerked frantically on the rope around her other wrist, unable to get free to follow. “Dawn!”*

*Bam!*

Kendle screamed as the speedboat was hit hard from underneath, rising out of the water. She slammed against the steering wheel; stars burst across her vision. Her hands found the wide, wooden spokes as the craft plunged down.

Sprays of water shot up as it landed. Kendle barely kept herself from flying out, arm wrenching painfully.

*Bump, splash. Bump!*

The boat rocked violently from the hits. She held onto the wheel, heart thudding at every creak of waterlogged wood.

*Thud. Splash!*

She saw the fin, watched it roll over...her net was wrapped around the shark’s streamlined body. It was trapped. If it dove, she would go under too.

*Do something!* She approached the wildly thrashing animal, fingers going for the net.

*No time!* the panic denied. Water sloshed into the shallow boat as the shark tried to roll itself free. *Kill it!*

How?

The claw hammer was still buried in the shark’s eye, the long handle being pried loose by the ropes of her net. Kendle grabbed the biggest can she had and hefted it up, waiting for the right angle.

The shark suddenly plunged downward, pulling the boat with it. Water poured in as she swung, slamming the heavy can down on top of the hammer to drive it in deep.

A sound of agony was ripped from the shark. More a vibration than a noise, the cry was one of a fatal wound.

Kendle shoved herself back against the side of the boat to rebalance it, shivering. *I just killed a shark.*

That was something she hadn't done before, when she couldn't wait to face nature's challenges.

After a minute, the shark stopped moving, blood leaking out into the softly lapping waves.

Kendle forced herself toward the corpse, spine and shoulder on fire. She ripped the hammer out of the animal. The tearing sound making her gag, but she didn't stop, swinging the slimy weapon right back into the shark's meaty area.

She ripped out a big chunk, coughing and retching. When her thumbnail tore off, she didn't notice her blood mixing with that of the shark.

Kendle wrapped the meat in a towel, and then untied the carcass, not sure if she had taken it to eat or to simply know for sure the shark was dead. She felt tears rise again and didn't stop them this time.

The cruise ship and the sisters had barely survived the rollover. Being right by the stairs had saved them, but after three days of looters, fights, illness, and drunken pounding on the doors, Kendle had chosen to get off the crippled ship before they were dragged from their staterooms. Others had been—they'd listened in horror, unable to help. On the fourth morning after the tidal wave, she and Dawn had crept out to one of the three remaining lifeboats.

There had been five men already there, but the girls had gone with them willingly. It had to be better than the rapes and murders on the boat that had started when the captain admitted he had no idea how to fix the ship and get them home. He'd said he didn't even know for sure where they were, and then barricaded himself in the wheelhouse.

One day after the seven of them jumped ship. They'd found this speedboat. Its owner had appeared like the bodies they'd left on the doomed cruise liner. When the engine fired up, they'd all been crying, hugging. It hadn't lasted long. The boat's radio,

compasses, and lights were out, the fuel used up before daylight. The speed runner had come to a heartbreakingly slow stop with no land in sight.

“Lost two in the first week,” she croaked, hating the sound of her rough voice, but needing to hear it just the same. “Didn’t even know their names.”

The third to go had either fallen in, or jumped, and was hit by something Dawn had sworn was the roof of a house. He hadn’t come up, but the loss hadn’t registered. There had been little conversation. Talking required awareness and no one wanted that until there was hope to go with it. They had survived by fishing garbage out of the ocean, slowly adjusting to life on a world that was never still.

Kendle had been marking the boat each morning since the storm that had taken the rest of her companions. It wasn’t the longest stretch she’d done. That would be her eighty-eight days spent hiking the Colorado, but it was the first time totally without backup. She had no phone, no steering, no map, and certainly no camera crew with access to the outside world.

“On my own for real this time.” Kendle’s skin felt hot as she turned to stare at the chunk of shark meat. “‘Cept for you.”

She laughed again. When it became sobs, she rocked herself gently for comfort. *I’ll get through this the same way I have all the other trials. One at a time.*

The sun vanished slowly, leaving eerie, beautiful trails of green and orange that threw strange shadows over the deep, dark waves. Kendle huddled in the middle of the boat while she dozed. She was miserable and heartbroken as the fading sun left her with only her sense of hearing and smell—both of which checked in and recorded lapping water but nothing more.

*Maybe the land is gone. Maybe that’s why I’m finding so much of the world in the water.* A war? Hell, maybe an asteroid had hit and flooded the earth. If so, Kendle hoped the water receded soon and set her ark on a mountain before she went mad.

Chapter Twenty  
**Cabin Fever**  
Illinois  
February 23rd

1

“**N**o, please. No more bodies. There’s no room for them!”

Angela’s haunted tone instantly brought Marc awake. He rose up on one elbow and found her tearstained cheeks in the dim lantern light.

Dog whined, also watching her cry in her sleep.

“Angie?”

There was no answer. She was having another nightmare. It wasn’t the first time she’d woken him this way. It bothered Marc that he couldn’t protect her in her dreams too. The small part of him that had suspected she was faking was gone. She’d been affectionate, passionate, loving. He loathed her man for changing that.

“It’s how he was raised. He didn’t know any other way to deal with someone like me.”

Marc gave her an awkward smile, prying his gaze from the dark curls messed sexily over her shoulder. “You would have made a good Marine.” Marc switched topics, not wanting to hear her defend someone who had obviously hurt her so much.

“Not me.” Angela sat up, pulling the thick quilt around her shoulders. She scanned the dusty pictures of foreign, seductive landscapes and the dark, dirty windows instead of looking at him. “I don’t kill. I won’t.”

He grimaced at her argumentative tone, wondering if it was caused by the dream or something that she had picked up from him. “You okay?” Her face was pale in the orange glow of the propane heater.

“I will be. Rough night.”

Marc grunted. *Five or six this week.* “Wanna talk about it?”

Angela tried to imagine telling him about her life of rape and assault, and total, unforgiving control. She shut her eyes against the shame. “No. How about you tell me something from your life that I don’t know. Shouldn’t be hard.”

He ignored her bitter tone. “Like what? After the war?”

“Tell me the answer to one of the questions we used to ask each other.”

“Why?” Marc’s mind screamed *ambush* from the resentful words. He could almost hear her telling herself to let it go, to preserve the careful peace they’d been sharing, but he couldn’t allow it. “The truth is all that’s left now. Tell me why.”

She opened her eyes; he was only a little surprised by the coldness there.

“I need to know what was more important than the way we felt. What was worth more than the love you left behind and forgot about?”

Marc pulled in a wounded breath. “I’ve never said it was worth it, and I never forgot you!”

“Clearly it was, or you would have at least had the decency to tell me where we stood!” Her words fell like chips of frosted glass. “You weighed the old life against the new one and if you ever looked back, I never knew. Last thing I heard was *I’ll find you.* And don’t give me that *it was for the best* crap because it wasn’t.”

“I wouldn’t. I did a lot, helped a lot of people, but I’ve never considered it a fair trade. For the most part, it’s been lonely...cold. I’ve spent the last decade aware that I made a mistake.”

She shrugged, not interested in his apologies, and too angry and hurt to be afraid of arguing with him. Her life with Kenny was all she could think about at night while Marc was being nice to her, seeing to her needs. The pain in his voice was finally a balm to the old Angela. “Tell me something I don’t know about your life.”

“I don’t... Okay. You remember how we wanted matching tattoos? I have four now. Three can be shown in public.”



Her rage began to calm. “I’m public. Let’s see ‘em.”

Marc pushed up his camouflage sleeve to reveal a simple, thin green band around his upper arm, edges artfully spiked. The other sleeve hid a neat eagle on top of the earth. She stared at his thick arm as she wondered where the politically incorrect one was. *His ass?* “And the third?”

Amused when he hesitated, she threw a rare grin. “Come on. You said three were politically correct.”

Marc stared. *It’s been so long!* He was immediately sorry her already swinging mood was about to take a hit. He uncovered slowly, hating the fear on her face when his hands went to the buckle of his dusty jeans. He only slid the waistband over his hip a couple of inches as he rolled toward her.

“Those are Recon wings! Kenny has the same—” She stopped, heart clenching. Kenny had the traditional *Mother* in the center of his. Marc had *Angie Forever*.

Their eyes met, locked. Memories swirled between them, old and powerful.

*“You’ll love me forever?”*

*The boy kissed her tenderly as his hips pushed between her long legs. “Just that long. Not a second more.”*

*She smiled, leaning into his thrust.*

Marc turned away with a heavy heart. That moment had been a long time ago, but right now, it felt as if it were yesterday. He had to fight with himself not to go to her, not to tell her how he felt or that he had come back for her. It had been too late by then, and it was too late now.

The big timber wolf stretched, yawning widely before following his master.

Angela studied Marc’s big shoulders as he lit the stove. Her name on his tanned hip flashed through her mind; she slammed her eyes shut. She was sure it had been done when he was fresh into the Marines and still pissed at his mother for putting him there. *If our love meant so much, he would have come back for me.*

He hadn't, and in the years that had passed, he'd changed. The boy she'd loved had been her willing slave on most things, her ally and best friend. This new man was closed off, adept at keeping to himself. She missed their intimacy, and hated the circumstances preventing them from having it again.

*It's for the best. What if friendship isn't enough?*

Angie gave the old dream only a brief glance before shoving it away. *The question doesn't matter. Kenny will never let me go.*

Marc was certain any of the things he might have said would only cause more tension. Until tonight, they'd been avoiding old wounds while concentrating on sorting out an efficient travel routine. In that way, he knew he'd pleased her. They'd made one hundred twenty-seven miles in the week since leaving the wounded brothers behind, compared to the one hundred twenty that Angie had made in nine days alone.

They also rotated the cooking and cleanup chores. She had expected to do all the work despite the agreement, and it bothered Marc to see her staring, wondering if he was up to something. She was jumpy, always reaching for the comfort of her gun. She never asked if they were safe; she wouldn't have believed him anyway if he said yes. He was doing things to make her feel better, like walking the perimeter often and always using the motion alarms. Marc was determined to show her that he could keep her alive, that she could count on him. He also kept his distance and kept his mouth shut, sure that when she relaxed a little more, she would remember he was the man who had taken her virginity with sweetness and care.

Feeling himself stir at that hot, shadowy memory, Marc motioned the wolf to stay as he pulled on his coat, then stepped into the cold Illinois air.

They were camped in a large, one-room log cabin deep in the Eagle Creek Recreation area. This particular building had been chosen for its complete lack of Christmas decorations. The area he had chosen was on the farthest edge of the resort complex, away from the main clubhouse and lavish apartments. He'd shunned the golf side, choosing to hole up in the campground. It was almost

serene here, with no visible damage from the St. Louis quake zone, thanks to the thick forest.

The cabin had a tiny yard lined in dense willow and oak trees that hung over the rustic porch rails. Marc hefted himself into the canopy, wanting to see who was around, but even with his scope, the leaves were too thick to see the wealthier area. Only the shadows of blackened foliage told him Angie's words of a huge fire were true. Not that he'd doubted her.

Frowning, Marc stayed in the tree. Their first week together had been smooth. He tried to make things easy for her, but she was stubborn, always insisting on the hardest path. The tone of desperation in her voice begged for another mile each time he asked if she was ready to stop for the night; he always gave in. As a result, she was exhausted and he was tired—so much that they weren't unpacking anything but bedrolls and the heater most nights. Marc sighed again. She needed a break. *Soon, we both will.*

## 2

Angela awoke abruptly, instantly sure she was alone in the chilly room. She concentrated, worried Marc had tired of babysitting her and left.

She found him outside and tried to relax. Between the fear of Kenny's reaction hanging over her like a noose and her dreams of the twins, she was freaking out a little. Marc did things to make her feel better, but there would be hell to pay once Kenny—

*Something's coming.*

A door appeared in her mind, pulling.

She immediately twisted the knob. *The brothers?! Are they coming for me now?!*

An icy wind blew her hair around as she waited in the doorway, knowing not to go further. She shivered as she peered into another world.

This landscape was blanketed by a thick blizzard and dotted with the shadowy forms of people, but only one of them—a dirty blonde with a nasty limp—appeared alive as she plowed

determinedly through the drifts. She came toward where Angela stood on the threshold; the edges of her filthy trench coat dragged over the deep snow, leaving a clear trail.

This world was solid white except for the people; even the trees were bent, covered in ice. Angela thought she saw a pack of dogs in the far distance, but she wasn't sure.

The other freezing souls paid no attention to the open door, but the blonde limped straight toward Angela, frozen eyelashes glistening like jewels. *It's coming. Get ready.*

A radar map glowed in the woman's eyes like an old weather broadcast.

Angela's heart raced as she realized she and Marc weren't the only ones in the path of the massive winter storm moving in from the south. Her son was in danger, along with all the other people Kenn had joined.

A strong wind pushed against her. The door slammed shut.

Angela jerked upright, eyes flying open. Fear raced through Angela. *I have to call Kenny.* He was about to find out the first rule she had broken. He would know for sure that she was on her way.

Angela rose, pulling on her coat. *I need to get stronger, fast.*

### 3

Angela went out to the porch. She found Marc instantly, though she couldn't see him from the doorway.

When she came into view and peered up with a hand over her eyes, Marc frowned. "Did you sense me?"

She shrugged, not entirely comfortable talking to him about the things she could do. "I'm not sure."

Marc dropped down onto the ground by the porch. "You all right?"

"I'll be better when we're rolling again." She lit a smoke, preparing herself to take a chance. *Will he believe me?*

Marc knew something was wrong. It was in her body language. "What's up?"

Angela drew in a deep breath. “There’s a bad storm coming. A winter storm.”

“Snow?”

“A lot. And it’s going to get very cold.” She didn’t look at him. “I’ve got a roll of plastic.”

“Okay. I’ve got a staple gun and duct tape.”

His unquestioning acceptance brought her eyes up. They stared, able to feel that old connection wanting to grow again.

He glanced away before she could. “What smells so good?”

“Omelets.” She went back in to the stove. “It’s all rehydrated or powdered, so don’t expect much.”

*Powdered eggs suck.*

Angela continued cooking with a chuckle of agreement, not searching for his thoughts but not blocking them either.

“Can I do anything?” He hung up his jacket and followed her, mindful about keeping his distance. *Did she cook a satisfying meal to soften me up in case I got upset at the news? I’ll bet that’s why she put on the thicker coat too and hasn’t removed it yet—a cushion for any blows.*

Angela winced at his accurate guess. She slipped out of the coat and draped it over a chair. *He’s smart. It took Kenny months to figure out those defenses.* “Teach me some fighting stuff today after lunch?”

Marc didn’t push, though her reaction was a confirmation. It was important that she learned to trust him first. “Sure. We’ll start with the basics and go from there.”

“No. I need something I can use now.”

Her insistent tone bothered him. “I know quick ways, but they’re for Marines. Not pretty.”

Angela shrugged, brushing a stray curl behind her ear as she shut off the stove. “Pretty doesn’t matter. Results do.”

He shrugged. “Remember you said that.”

Angela frowned at the second warning, but she didn’t ask for details or change her mind as she handed him a plate and sat on the farthest end of the couch. “I will. Let’s eat.”

Angela wrote in her journal during the meal, then bundled up and slipped out the door without a word.

Marc gestured Dog to follow her, worrying. Where was the carefree young girl who had insisted on building a clubhouse in the middle of a snowstorm? Where was the innocent enchantress he had eased into womanhood and how could he get her back? *There has to be a way.*

When he stepped out, Marc was surprised by how much gear she already had stacked on the porch. Obviously, she was serious about the storm. He kept his eyes from lingering on the rounded ass sticking from her Blazer each time she retrieved something. He carried her things inside instead.

Coming back out for the last load, he noticed the temperature. It had dropped nearly 5° in less than two hours. That definitely wasn't normal, and it confirmed her warning. Again, not that he'd really doubted. Her gift had always been a part of their lives and one of the reasons his mother had been so against her being in the family, but it didn't bother him anymore now than it had then. Her gift was useful. Marc had often wondered what it would be like to experience things the way she did, but he didn't envy her abilities. He knew she paid a terrible price for them. "Need some help?"

Angela hadn't known he was right behind her. Marc saw her hand flinch down before she stopped herself.

"I've got it."

Her tone was sharp. Marc backed off, stepping through thick Bermuda grass to get his things. She was keeping the wall up between them. He would respect her wishes. *For now.*

It took them half an hour to improve the cabin's temperature, using large sheets of plastic to enclose the area around the couch. They worked together in silence, Angela anticipating his needs as she had when they were kids. When they dug out warmer clothes, Marc tossed a plastic-wrapped pouch on her bedroll. "Thermal blanket. It was a part of my sniper gear."

She tossed a similar package onto the couch, trying not to frown. "He left some of his things behind this time."

Their similarity, from supplies to transportation, made them both sad. It also increased Marc's uneasiness about the future. *Her man has sniper training too. Great.*

#### 4

Angela tried to stay calm. She hoped Marc wouldn't hurt her; she flinched as the door opened and he came in from doing a walk of the perimeter.

"Ready for your first lesson?"

She rubbed sweaty palms down her jeans. "In here?"

He motioned at the small area, aware of how uncomfortable she was. "Warmer in here, more room out there. You pick."

"Outside." Angela hoped the cold might distract her from her fear of being touched, of being hurt. She was already shaking. She drew in a deep, calming breath as she stopped at the foot of the stairs.

Dog moved through the brush and debris around their location, ears straining for sounds that didn't belong.

Marc took off his gun belts and set them on the porch. He studied the fear as he stalked toward her. "We can start out slower."

Angela shook her head. "I can do this."

Marc began to circle her, steps barely making any noise. "I believe that too. Just remember to think."

She nodded.

He rushed her.

Marc swung a leg behind her knee and gently took them to the ground. He braced on his own arm, not letting his weight fall on her. His mind switched into cadet training.

Fear burst through her like a rocket. Angela struggled thoughtlessly.

Marc clenched his teeth in an effort to stay soft. *She feels good!* "Rubbin' that body against a man won't make him stop, honey."

Angela froze, cheeks bright red. "I don't want—"

“You can’t talk your way out, either. You have to think and then act. Lock your ankles together and try to throw me off.”

She did as he said, heart pounding, mind screaming.

Marc forced her to meet his eyes. “You have to get in control of it, Angie. Being scared makes you human, but you have to think. Your hands should be trying to find a weapon, while your legs keep trying to throw me off. Your gun, my knife, a rock—anything in reach—and don’t waste your time yelling. It’ll only tire you out.”

Angela sucked in air, closing her eyes against the fear.

“I’ll be saying things, pawing at you, but surprise is *your* weapon. Distract me and then bite, punch, kick; do whatever it takes, but don’t let me roll you over.”

It was hard to concentrate when she wanted him off her.

Marc raised a brow. “Make me.”

She surprised him with a gentle head butt to the chin. They struggled against each other, Marc using only pressure, no pain. Her fear was intense, preventing his body from responding. After a full minute, he let her roll him over and off.

She was on her feet in an instant, hair wild, eyes flashing.

Marc didn’t let her call it quits. “Lesson two. When a man corners a woman, he waits to see if she’s a runner or a fighter. Your body language will tell him how to prepare for you. Again, surprise is your weapon. Keep your hands at your sides. Make him think you’ve frozen, and when he moves in, cup your hands into a fist and bring them up at the same time as your knee. Pound his nuts into his stomach and run for a weapon or your car. If you miss, you’ll be on the ground again. Ready?”

Angela was glad he had given her the warning this time, but she couldn’t help freezing when he rushed her. They were on the ground again a second later.

“Lock those ankles. Use your knees! You can’t hurt me, but I could hurt you, if I were a bad man. You need to pretend that I am.”

She answered him with a harder hit to the chin that sent tiny stars across his vision. He let her roll them over again.



Angela quickly gained her feet for a second time.

Marc did a quick scan of the area as he got up. *Clear.* “Very good. Ready?” He moved in before she could respond.

Angela remembered to drop her hands, but she was afraid to hit him, terrified he would hurt her, as Kenny had so many times.

Marc tripped her easily, taking them down again. This time, her arms were pinned by his chest and the heavy weight of his body. “Don’t roll over and don’t unlock those ankles!”

Angela twisted her hips to loosen her hands. She flung a handful of dust halfheartedly in his direction.

Her knee brushed his groin, and again, he let her roll free.

She got up slower this time, winded as she tried to remember his instructions through the fear.

Marc realized he was going to have to use a different method to circumvent her terror. She had to handle him as a stranger.

He retreated a bit, ignoring the heart that didn’t want her to be afraid of him for any reason or length of time. She froze whenever he got close, obviously afraid of what would happen afterward if she hurt him, which she couldn’t. He needed to reach the place inside that came out when survival was on the line, so she would remember how to handle herself when it counted.

“Not going to the ground means the difference between rape and escape. You have to stop me by *any* means necessary.”

Angela frowned, retreating as he advanced. “I can’t just attack you.”

“I’m gonna make it so you can. Remember to think.” Marc gave an honest leer. “Pretty bitch.” He mimicked the brothers’ menacing tone and words perfectly. Marc hated her reaction, but he didn’t stop, forcing her to deal with it. “How ‘bout a kiss? Been alone a long time.”

Angela carefully retreated, observing his face and not his hands or body. At least she knew that much. He rushed her.

Angela brought a hand and knee up together. Neither said a word, Marc only letting his body strain against hers.

It took him a full minute to get her off her feet this time, Marc not trying, of course. Once on the ground, he kept her there, showing her where to hit, scratch, kick, punch.

A few minutes later, Angela knew she was done and stilled. She shut her eyes so Marc wouldn't see how afraid she was. "Done now... Let me up."

To her great relief, his weight was gone an instant later. There was no way she could have stopped him. She knew he felt her shaking when she allowed him to pull her to her feet. She let go and put some distance between them, stomach aching.

"You okay?"

Her words were breathy. "Good...exercise, even if I don't...learn anything."

"You will."

Their eyes met, sparked. Hers darted away, making his brow pucker. He had provoked real fear to teach, but it had taken so little!

"I'll work on it. Again...tomorrow?"

He was surprised she wanted to. "Absolutely. You did great. Next time, I'll teach you ways to keep anyone from getting close enough to grab you."

She nodded, sweating despite the chill in the gusting wind. She didn't notice the wolf on the porch, but Marc did and was glad. He was never completely sure the animal would return from his runs.

"Cool. Guns now?"

He considered. He had shown her proper cleaning and hand positions, and they'd done some dry fire exercises, but she needed to practice, and that made noise. It would draw attention they weren't ready to handle. "Not until we leave. For today, we'll use something quieter."

Pulse and respiration ragged, she only motioned agreement as they headed in, unwilling to ask for more. She needed to get used to caring for herself. *Isn't that why I called him, to teach me?*

"You mean that?"

Angela was surprised he was picking up her thoughts. The expression on his face said he hadn't been expecting it either. The

moment hung between them like a flame in the darkness. Back in the old days, they'd been open to each other in every way.

“Yes. Will you?”

He glanced away. *Her eyes are still the most beautiful things I've ever seen.* “Absolutely.” He dug in his kit. “I found this in Mattoon.” He handed her a small, purple gift bag from his kit. It held an orange dart gun with half a dozen darts and a paper target.

Angela saw the benefits even as she laughed at the toy. “I'll treasure it always.”

Marc taped the target to the wall.

She loaded the bright orange weapon and began to practice.

Marc stayed in a rear corner, occasionally offering corrections while trying not to sniff his hands. They reeked of her vanilla scent. He kept a groan to himself. *Damn, I've got it bad.*

When Angela looked around a bit later, Dog was at the door, gray ears up, reddish-black nose down, observing contentedly.

Marc had settled on the couch to clean his guns.

Angela felt peace and bitterness battling for space in her heart. *This is how it should have been for us. I don't know whether to laugh or cry.*

## 5

After a quiet meal of beans and Bambi, they went outside for bathroom breaks before the storm hit. It wasn't quite dark yet, but they were nervous upon moving outside. The amount of snow that had already fallen was amazing. It was coming down in thick sheets, with six inches of the dirty grey flakes covering everything in only two hours. The wind swirled flakes into tiny tornadoes that raced across the cornfield and slammed apart against broken stalks and their tarp covered vehicles.

The pair split up wordlessly.

Marc waved the wolf after her as she stepped out of his sight behind a wide, icing tree. The wind howled, growing stronger. Snowy wind whipped, producing a whiteout effect the flashlights

around their necks barely penetrated. Marc made a fast round of the perimeter to uncover alarms, then joined her on the porch.

Angela didn't look at him; she didn't want Marc to see how scared she was. *I have to warn Kenny this is coming.* "I'll be out here a few minutes."

Marc heard both statements. He wanted to listen somehow. He shut the cabin door instead, jealousy burning in his heart. A moment later, a powerful wave of energy vibrated in his teeth as it rushed over miles and miles of broken ground. He was hit with the urge to interrupt, to make his presence as her protector known, but that would give away the element of surprise. The Marine inside held him in check.

Marc sat on the couch to clean his guns. *Again.*

## 6

Angela slammed the door in her mind, trying to stop crying and shaking. Kenny was so mad! His anger had always terrified her. Today was no different.

She wiped at her face as she went inside. He wanted her to go back to Ohio; he said he would come get her when he was ready, but she could hear him wishing she would die anywhere along the way. Under the layers of fear, she was furious and more determined than ever. *I'll never give up. Never!*

Marc saw her face as she and Dog came in. Acid began to burn a hole in his gut. Her man couldn't reach her physically, but he could emotionally, and he had. Her face was tear-streaked; her beautiful black hair was flecked with dirty snow. "You okay?"

"Not even, but I can't fix it from here." She hung up her coat, voice emotionless. "Montana by the end of March sound right?"

That was exactly what he'd figured. Marc nodded. "Faster if we do some night traveling."

Angela sat on the couch and pulled the quilt around her shoulders, unable to stop hearing the threats, the ugliness. Kenny had been angry from the start, but he had spun out of control suddenly and started screaming. She tensed. *Did he see something*

*when I showed him the storm? Icy terror sank into her heart. Does Kenny know I'm not alone?*

Angela flinched as Marc pushed the heater closer to her.

Marc wished there was something he could do to make her feel better. When he looked up, she was staring at him with a desperate glare in her eyes.

“Tell me you’ll support me, no matter what. Tell me the code, the Corps, and everything else comes second to me.”

Marc sighed bitterly. “Wasn’t it always that way? According to our family, I went against them and God to have you, and there was never a second that I wouldn’t have come if you’d called.” He snorted. “Obviously, there still isn’t.”

Angela gave him a shaky smile. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Marc clamped down on another attempt to get her to change her mind. “Me too. Fifteen years was a long time.”

Angela shuddered, closing her mouth on the hell she’d been through. Only the future mattered, and that was Kenny. He was a violent man. Finding her and Marc together might be enough to send him over the edge, especially if he snuck up on them and saw the sparks. Blood would spill then; her son’s parentage wouldn’t even be an issue.

## 7

The frustrated twins watched the couple, both unhappy with the fighting lesson they had witnessed through shared binoculars.

The snow had Dean and Dillan pinned down in a thermal tent. They were unable to get closer because of the wolf and the tracks they would be too injured to cover. Forced to wait until the storm broke and their wounds healed, the brothers were studying every move the man and woman made as they plotted their revenge.

Shooting was talked about, as was an open ambush during the next fighting lesson, but neither plan was put into action. In their conditions—both their wounds were angry and leaking—they couldn’t be sure of victory. The twins chose to keep waiting for their moment of triumph.

## 8

Angela's dreams were worse than usual. She jerked awake to find Marc already sitting up, staring at her in concern.

"Is there a problem?"

"Just in my brain." She kept the thick quilt around her shoulders as she stumbled to the door. She slipped outside, not bothering with shoes.

"Dog, guard."

The wolf followed her, eager to be outside where he could smell things.

Marc got up. She was jumpier now than she had been when they were reunited. She couldn't sleep more than a few hours without nightmares interrupting. It made him nervous, and pissed him off. Her man would be taught a lesson. How harsh, was the only unknown.

Marc slid his guns into his holsters with a feeling of completeness he knew not to put faith in. Being good with a weapon wasn't enough now. Instincts mattered, and his was telling him the time had come to fix this mess. He was a United States Marine. It was his duty to give her freedom.

Angela sat in the rear seat of her Blazer; the open door let dark flakes swirl inside. Her mind was stuck in the past. Kenny's violence, childhood demons, and the horrors since the war mixed together to create a vision that made her wish she didn't have to sleep. She would never have an unbroken night's rest again until she was back with her son.

*The arms of your new guardian might ease these things. His heart is pure.*

Angela frowned at the wolf. She had little doubt it would work, but Marc would never offer, and she couldn't imagine asking. It went against everything she'd had beaten into her.

*This man is not the same. He is yours.*

She shook her head. “Not anymore. That was a long time ago.”  
*So why does it feel like it was yesterday?*

Her heart sobbed, giving the answer Kenny could never be allowed to discover. *Because I lied. I still love Marc. I never stopped.*

Chapter Twenty-One  
**Once A Liar...**  
Wyoming, near Kemmerer  
**February 24th**

1

**K**enn listened to the early morning chatter at the boss's center table with half an ear—something he usually never did. He was searching for a way to tell Adrian about the coming storm. He had seen the snow drifts around the tarp covered outlines of *two!* vehicles, but he couldn't convince Adrian without telling him about Angela.

*It's too quiet.* Kenn glanced up to find everyone staring at him. "Sorry, what?"

Adrian frowned. "Supply list."

Kenn handed it to him from the stack in his notebook, being careful not to let the stiff wind rip it from his fingers. "Here ya go."

Adrian scanned it. "Who's going?"

Neil handed Adrian a smaller sheet of paper as a bird call echoed. They all looked up at the grit-covered sky.

Tension gripped the crowd in the mess. Air horns came out...

When the bird wasn't spotted, normal noises resumed. Wind blew, tarps flapped, dishes clinked, footsteps crunched, and vehicles rolled into line for a full day of travel. Adrian hated their jumpiness as much as he approved of it. "These names are good. Do you want..."

Kenn let their conversation fade away from him again. *Angie is getting closer. I can almost feel—*

Adrian slapped his cup on the picnic table.

Everyone jumped.



Adrian gave Kenn a hard stare. “Is there something I should know?”

“Yeah.” Kenn braced. “It’s going to snow tonight. We’ll be caught out in the open unless we get ready.” Kenn waited, dreading the coming questions that would force him to lie to Adrian.

“Snow?”

Kenn squared his shoulders. “From the south, at least a foot by midnight, maybe more. We need to hole up somewhere.”

Kyle, Doug, and Neil all gawked with open mouths.

“What do you suggest?” Adrian’s tone was thoughtful.

“We passed a mall in Green River, and there’s a roller rink in Rock Springs, but really, Kemmerer’s only a few miles away. It has a mall across from a bowling alley. We’ll hook up heat, maybe even get a few lanes going.” Kenn ignored the suspicious guards. Only Adrian’s opinion mattered.

Adrian was weighing the options. “You’re sure?”

“I must be.” Kenn’s face darkened. “I’m risking my new place here on it, right?”

“Yes, you are.” Adrian cocked a brow. “The bowling alley in Kemmerer?”

“Yeah. Sage Lanes. It could snow for a week, and we’d be okay there.” Kenn saw the snow-covered vehicles in his mind again. Not one, but two. *Angie isn’t alone. What wife-stealing piece of shit agreed to bring her out here?*

The other men at the table wanted to ask Kenn questions, but didn’t. They also knew it was Adrian’s call. They could feel him considering the choice.

All five men paused to watch a large number of tens go blowing by in the gusty Wyoming wind. Two of the men still felt the urge to gather the cash.

Adrian glanced around. They had a relaxing view of the Rocky Mountains, where grizzly bear and elk were no doubt hiding from the survivors, but down here in the basin, there were bodies of lizards and gophers scattered around mesquite shrubs and cactus. There were barbed wire fences, rows of unplowed fields, and

garbage littered the area, but as for civilization, there wasn't any. He could see two farms, but they were both boarded, as if they'd been condemned before the war. They were very exposed here. If Kenn was right, they were in danger. "Notebooks open. Plans have changed."

The guards did it reluctantly.

Kenn gloated silently. *A Gulf War Veteran, a State Trooper, and a Mobster, all getting a taste of crow.*

"We'll need three generators, a full fuel truck, the big tool chest, and a crew for bathroom setups, since those scheduled for here already did theirs." He gestured to Kenn as the wind blew a fresh wave of recent decay over their table. "You'll do the hookups?"

Kenn nodded. "You know it."

Adrian lit a smoke. "Go spend some time on the radio. Tell Mitch and Matt I want them."

Kenn went right then. He heard it while monitoring the radio would be his excuse. While he was glad that he hadn't had to lie to Adrian yet, he knew the questions would come. *I better have an answer ready.*

Adrian gave his closest men understanding looks, sure their beards hid suspicion and dislike. "I know you don't trust him. That's all right, as long as you trust me. Do you?"

"Of course," came the unanimous answers, but all three men were indeed hiding disapproval under stubble and blank facades. They didn't even like Kenn, let alone trust him.

"Good. We'll see what happens." Adrian finished his cold coffee and stood. "In the meantime, a day in a bowling alley with heat and real electric sounds good. Who wants to be on my team?"

There were boasts and offers, with Adrian in the thick of it. His inscrutable face didn't hint at how much he needed Kenn to be proven right. It would cement the Marine's place here, but more than that, the ability to predict dangerous weather was invaluable. Adrian hadn't suspected the man of having skill.

The camp had no problem getting a break from the expected full day of traveling, but nearly all the Eagles cracked jokes about the calm skies and temperatures that were above freezing.

Kenn only told them to wait for it, but inside he was terrified. He knew Angela wasn't trying to trick him, but if the storm had dissipated or changed course, he would lose his place. Kenn's jaws hurt from forcing himself to laugh at the remarks, but through it all, he could feel Adrian's thoughtful blue gaze on him, watching and waiting.

## 2

Kemmerer appeared to be empty. The narrow roads were surprisingly clear of abandoned traffic, but looters had done heavy damage. Even the animal population hadn't been spared. The town pound was the site of a horrific battle that made Adrian drive faster past the decaying canine and human cadavers littering the courtyard of the brick complex.

Like the other towns they'd been through, Kemmerer also held dozens of rotting, gruesome corpses. The town itself housed burnt frames, broken windows, and looted stores, but no wrecked military vehicles and no kicked-in doors. Riots, not the draft, had conquered this American town.

The parking lot at Sage Lanes was deserted. Adrian steered into the hard breeze as he keyed his mike. "Back the mess truck up near the door. Supply trucks go in the rear. Double the duty guards. Eagles ten, seven, and twelve, secure our site. Eagle three, escort and assist Kenn. Everyone else, stand by."

Adrian walked through the waiting vehicles while the Eagles cleared their shelter. He saw only bored people who were eager for him to let them out; he felt their fear, however. *A night of fun is exactly what they need.* Lying or not, Kenn had given him an answer to a problem he hadn't known existed.

Adrian stepped into the building a few minutes later, sweeping arcades, cleaning machines, rows of welded tables and hard swivel chairs behind racks of heavy, dusty balls. The maroon carpet, with

a fine layer of dust devoid of footprints, led to separate bar and food areas. Wooden counters in front of brick walls were covered in glittery signs and unopened party favors. Adrian's sharp gaze picked out mouse droppings on the bar and a ceiling still pre-lined with canopies of New Year's confetti. He sighed, tired of the heartbreaking reminders of a world that was gone. "It'll do. Set us up."

### 3

It took them an hour to get everything in and set up. Dozens of lanterns gave the spacious room a dim, flickering light and a harsh odor Adrian knew wouldn't mix well with the other smells. He hung smoke detectors, air fresheners, and signs ordering the bathroom doors to be kept shut.

He went toward the basement door while the camp ate lunch and picked out sleeping areas away from the doors and windows. Adrian gestured at Kyle.

The stocky Eagle fell in step.

The two men stayed alert as they traveled the long, dark hall, flashlights on their belts casting eerie shadows.

"You been out since we got here?"

"Few minutes ago. Might be snow coming in. Temperature's dropping fast." Kyle wasn't exactly gunning for the Marine, but he would never be one of Kenn's many supporters. He liked it that the mean Marine had been behind the 8 ball, even if only for a few hours. "Don't think it'll hold till dark."

"It won't matter if Kenn can get the heat on."

Adrian's words were still hanging in the chilly air as a deep rumble started under their feet, rattling the building. It grew louder, drawing yells; dust flew from vents. It changed to a long, loud hiss that gradually faded.

A few seconds of tense silence lingered. Adrian stayed still in the darkness, hand on his holster as he listened to the unease of his people.

The rumbling came again, quieter this time. The two males got moving as dusty light bulbs flickered halfheartedly, then glowed bright and beautiful. They now had electricity.

A hearty cheer spread through the bowling alley, echoing to Kenn and Neil, who had heard steps coming and drawn their guns. No one else was allowed down here.

“Stand down.” Adrian came into view.

Kyle hung back to observe and guard.

Kenn flipped a switch as he holstered, killing the lights and drawing a loud moan of protest from upstairs.

Adrian joined him “What about heat?”

Kenn wiping stinging sweat from his eyes. “Our cords aren’t strong enough. We need something heavy duty. After that, it should just be a matter of bleeding out the system. We’ll have to make sure all the vents and ducts stay cleared.”

To Kenn’s pleasure, Adrian wrote it in his book while the Eagles watched.

“We rolled by a big laundromat on the way in. Wouldn’t they have the industrials?”

Kenn was glad it had been Neil who suggested it. He and the trooper got along better now, but Kenn couldn’t make peace with Kyle at all. He had officially given up trying.

“Good. Give them lights, then go get what we need. The space heaters will hold us a bit longer.”

Kenn got another cheer when he flipped the switch.

The four men were happier as they went up the hall together under full neon bulbs for the first time in nine weeks, but it was an odd feeling. No one spoke until they got to the rear loading dock where the supply trucks were lined up.

The guards tensed when four men exited through the rear doors. When they saw Adrian, they scanned the landscape harder, paying more attention. Kenn’s words had drawn them to an awareness of their unique positions. They were protecting their leader. By doing so, they were also securing their own places in this new world. Kenn had guards on Adrian almost all the time now. Even the new guy, Seth, was doing it, and he wasn’t even an

Eagle. The guards were all relieved when Kenn and Neil left, but Kyle and Adrian went back inside, where it was safer. As far as they were concerned, Adrian was the last of his kind.

#### 4

By the time full darkness fell, dinner was half over. Those already finished were enjoying the twenty-five lanes Kenn had managed to get working. Beautiful, warm heat gushed out of the vents while snow fell heavily outside. Nearly everyone who'd cracked a joke earlier had now given Kenn apologetic words for saving them. If they had been caught out in the open, even a little snow might have cost lives. The story of hearing it on the radio had already spread through camp. Kenn was their hero.

Adrian, Kenn, Kyle, Doug, and Neil were at a round table on the top deck of the bowling alley. The Eagles were watching the games below, laughing, letting the camp have their fill first, but Adrian's attention stayed on his right-hand man.

Kenn was playing with a deck of cards, fanning them out in different shapes and scooping them up like a professional. His face was pale. At that moment, Adrian found it hard to believe the Marine might be special. Loyal? Hardworking? *Yes*. A descendant? *No*, and it wasn't because Adrian believed he was the last of his kind. He longed for one of his top men to have gifts, but he couldn't place it with Kenn. *Then how did he know?*

The answer that came made Adrian grimace. Kenn was in contact with someone, and he was either lying or about to.

Almost as if Neil had caught Adrian's thought, he turned to Kenn. "So, how'd you know?"

Neil's question got the attention of the entire table.

Kenn dropped his head. "I'd rather not say."

Neil frowned. "Why? You're the hero now."

"You won't believe me."

Everyone looked to Adrian in the thick silence.

Kenn understood his moment of betrayal had come when those sharp eyes dug into him, searching. He sucked in a breath. “I feel things. Sometimes.”

It was the answer Adrian wanted; it was the magic he’d been hunting for, but it fell awkwardly from Kenn’s lips. *He’s right. None of us believe it.*

“Oh.”

“Okay.”

No one questioned yet despite the disbelief. That was Adrian’s job.

Kenn chose a topic change when the silence continued. “Who’s ready to bowl?”

Everyone except Adrian rose, ready for a break from the tension. “You guys go on. I’ll catch up after I do rounds.”

Kenn opened his mouth to offer company. He snapped it shut, sensing Adrian’s unease. Let the boss man have some time to consider how big an advantage it would be to have a severe weather alarm that was never wrong. With that skill on his list, he would never lose his place here.

*Until the real deal arrives.*

Kenn pushed away that fear. Angela wouldn’t make it this far, even with help. None of her weak hospital friends would be able to keep two people alive through a thousand miles of hell. *She might even be dead now.* Kenn went to join the bowlers and bask in the admiration of his followers.

## 5

Adrian did continue to think about it—not about how great it would be, but about the lie he’d been told. He stood inside the front glass doors as the snow fell harder, feeling the guards scan him as he sorted through it. Kenn was in contact with someone, but he didn’t want that someone here. It was the only answer that made sense. Why would he do that?

*Because they know the old Kenny.* They knew whatever it was that Neil and Kyle suspected, so Kenn was leaving them out there to die.

Adrian's face darkened. If that were true, he would have to change his plans for the future. By his own actions, Kenn would be unworthy. *The one I gift leadership to must value life the way I do.*

Thick, dark flakes fell harder. Adrian pushed Kenn from his mind for the moment as he scanned the town around them. His Eagles were doing Recon nearby—taking pictures and widening the perimeter as they'd been taught. He concentrated. *A foot or more. Are we prepared for that?*

No. Livestock trucks would have to be heated and covered; water and main supply trucks would have to be brought around front. Warmer clothes and shoes were needed, shovels too. Mind racing, Adrian went back inside and began putting his people to work.

As Adrian got them moving, he noticed Kenn's boy, Charlie, hanging around. When they were alone for a moment, the leader stepped over to him. *The kid needs to eat more and have some fun.* "You okay?"

The teenager nodded but said nothing.

Adrian lowered his voice. "You sure? I'm all yours right now."

"No big deal. Just bored."

Charlie's expression said differently, though. Dark circles under the teenager's eyes said he wasn't sleeping well, but Adrian was encouraged that he wasn't constantly standing at attention anymore. "Sounds like you need a job."

Charlie agreed right away.

Adrian wondered if he should give the boy make-work or something that mattered.

Charlie's head came up. "Something that matters?"

Adrian frowned slightly. "Everything matters now, son. I'll change your schedule when I do the next set. In the meantime,



how about some snow shoveling? We need to keep a clear path to the trucks.”

“Sure. Now?”

“No. We have to get some supplies first. You can beat me up at a game like your dad will.”

Adrian chose not to question the boy’s grimace.

Charlie forced a smile through the resentment. “Sure. Can I be on your team?”

“Absolutely. Lane 17, in half an hour. Bring coffee.”

Charlie shoved his hands into the pockets of the baggy, hooded shirt he wore over dusty jeans and left Adrian alone in the dim hallway by the main office.

Adrian was almost certain Charlie had wanted to scream something at him. That Kenn wasn’t his dad? *Maybe*. Adrian yawned and stepped into the cool darkness. It was yet another sign that something wasn’t right with his XO.

Adrian moved into the stale darkness of the office. Before he could flip on the light, a fake southern drawl mocked him.

“Avoidin’ people is bad for ya image.”

Adrian rotated with an annoyed scowl.

Tonya retreated from his glare of distaste.

“Not if they’re bad news.”

The sexy redhead gave him a knowing smile. “Wasn’t what ya were sayin’ when ya were between my legs.”

His body was tempted. It was peaceful right now, and the office was pitch black, but his face was emotionless as he returned her mocking tone. “Musta dreamed it. Never happened.”

Tonya gave him a sexy smirk, but her voice was unsure now. “We’re alone. Ya can’t deny it ta me.”

Adrian gave her a tight smile. “Yes, I can. Prove it.” He gave the door a gentle shove with his boot, unable to resist a parting blow. “Find someone else to spread those legs for. I’m busy.”

“Maybe I will.” Tonya’s accent faded as she returned to her sleeping bag near the basement door. “And maybe you’ll be surprised by who.”

Adrian was more worried about Tonya than he'd let on. He was glad no one had heard the short exchange. She was searching for a way to pay him back. Hell had no fury and all that, but even more, her kind had been a bitch before the war. That hadn't changed.

Adrian tensed at the creak of steps outside the open door.

"Can I talk to you?"

Adrian flipped the switch, then waved Neil in. The small room held a chair, a messy desk, a single filing cabinet in the corner, and a layer of dust on the floor recording their tracks. *Good thing I didn't take Tonya up on her offer.* Those heeled black boots she wore left unmistakable prints and his Eagles were getting sharper. "What's on your mind?"

"Kenn."

Adrian brushed at the layer of dust, then sat on a corner of the cluttered desk. "As in, how did he know?"

Neil was full of suspicion. "Exactly."

Adrian had already gone down this road with himself. The camp would believe Kenn had heard it on the radio and that was what mattered. They would never hear the honest answer. "How do you think he knew?"

Neil shrugged, restless hands twisting his hat. "I don't have a clue, and that bothers me. He saved our ass, that's for sure, and these people love him now, but..." Neil paused before pushing on carefully. "Something isn't right with him, Boss."

Adrian lit a smoke, waiting.

Neil stared at the man he respected more than anyone he'd ever known, hoping he wasn't about to make a big mistake. "I know he's your choice, and you have my complete support, but I plan to keep track of him. You should know that."

"Good."

Neil blinked. "What?"

Adrian snickered. "Didn't expect that, did you?"

The trooper's normally stern face was confused. "No. I thought I'd be in trouble."

Adrian's voice sharpened. "I want to be told about the smallest thing that catches your attention, Eagle. The smallest thing."

"You know it."

"He knows what?"

Neither man flinched, but both were caught off guard. They turned with identical frowns and thoughts. *What is it with women and lurking around doors?*

"You need something?!"

Cynthia's shrewd brown eyes lost some of their eagerness at Adrian's bark. "Yes. Sorry. The door was open."

Adrian flipped from pissed to bored in seconds. He stared at the Asian American reporter with a cool smile. "Yes, it was. What can I do for you, Ms. Quest?"

Cynthia thought better of asking Neil to get the hell out. "I have some questions."

"There's a surprise."

The dry tone made the normally unshakable reporter flush, then hesitate, unsure if she should go on. Adrian was a hard man to read.

"What, Cynthia? Tell me your deepest desires."

The words hung in the dusty room, and now she was the one caught off guard, unable to give him anything except the honesty his tone had insisted on. "You. What kind of monster were you before? What are you atoning for?"

Cynthia missed Adrian's flinch, horrified to hear the secret accusation spoken when she had no proof to back it up.

Neil noticed it. He felt the instant change in the man at his side. Neil scowled, automatically protecting his boss. "None of that old shit matters anymore, in case you haven't noticed. Only our survival does. You should wake up before you piss off the wrong person and find yourself on the outs. See ya later, Boss."

Cynthia retreated as the angry trooper stomped by her.

Adrian let her squirm for a long moment in the tense silence.

"You have questions?" he asked finally.

Glad he was willing to pretend she hadn't crossed the line when they both knew she had, Cynthia took a small step into the

dusty office. “Yes. I’d like to volunteer to teach a class when you get them going.”

Adrian’s cool eyes never left hers. She could feel his pull, woman’s body softening under his gaze. “Maybe a teacher’s aide or something?”

Adrian opened his notebook and wrote it down.

Cynthia stood there stiffly. She was hard too, an old dirt-digger, but she wasn’t immune to his spell any more than Kenn or Neil. Like them, she wanted to be by Adrian; she wanted to be useful to him.

“What class?”

“I’m quick at basic math. I have a Pulitzer Prize for my writing.” The reporter controlled herself, itching to ask, demand, trick, trap, or badger until he broke. She knew he wouldn’t. Even if she didn’t care about being banished, which she did, he wasn’t like the others. He wasn’t part of *before*, as far as she knew, so treating him as if he was wouldn’t work. “Those should be worth something, right? My contribution to your New America.”

Instead of correcting her wording as he might have done with anyone else, Adrian used the moment to pay back a little of what she’d just given him. “And what do you get out of it?”

She flushed. “The chance to teach a journalism class once we get settled somewhere.”

“You realize that’s a public vote because of the material?”

Cynthia shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket. “Why do you think I came to you? With your support, they’d agree to almost anything.”

He didn’t confirm or deny, but Adrian was pleased she knew that. Cynthia had been a Washington reporter before the war, a good one, and while she had only been in Safe Haven for a few weeks, she already understood how things worked. Then, there was Tonya. She’d been with him since Nevada, but still had no clue how to legally get what she wanted. “Deal. Maybe I’ll have more important things for you later. If you’re interested?”

Cynthia was instantly surprised, suspicious, and grateful. “I’d be happy to.”

He smiled at her, one of his genuinely beautiful moments that made her heart thump. Not a man in camp could compare.

“Anything else?”

She swallowed the drool, nodding. “Yes. I’d like to go to the mall across the street. I’m out of supplies.”

“Alone?”

Cynthia hesitated again, not wanting to tell him she hadn’t made any friends. She did have the interest of one of his Eagles, Jeremy, but he was on duty outside. He would never leave his post. “No one wants to walk in a blizzard for notebooks and pens.”

“It’s nasty out there. I might be able to find you an escort.” Adrian watched her hide the relief. He was glad to know the Ice Queen could feel fear. They had found her sleeping in a school bus, and she hadn’t hesitated to speak her mind even then, alone, with only one bullet left in the gun she hadn’t known how to use.

“That would be great. I’ll be ready when they are.”

He glanced at his wrist, wishing she wore less perfume. The office now reeked of flowers she’d probably never smelled in reality. “The truck leaves in ten minutes. Kenn and the Eagles are going out to collect our reserve. You’ll be expected to help. Do what you’re told.”

“No problem. Thank you.”

“Anything else?”

“No.” Cynthia left quickly, glad she’d heard good words about her future here, but also disappointed she hadn’t gotten anything new. She had no clue who he had been before and that mystery ate at her some nights. *If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll find out.*

Adrian made a mental note to reward Neil for the unknowing distraction, but Cynthia wasn’t going to give up because of a warning or even a mysterious possible offer somewhere down the line. Cynthia was going to keep digging; he would have to be careful, because that female *was* smart enough to figure out his puzzle if given enough pieces.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# Paradise

February 25th

Pitcairn Island

### 1

**K**endle's exile into the wilderness lasted for sixty days and sixty nights. Then, as suddenly as her nightmare had begun, it ended. The small, weathered speedboat washed up on a sandy shore while she slept. The painful twisting and cramping of her stomach woke her.

The adventurer crawled clumsily to the side of the boat with her eyes still shut and retched until her belly was empty and her throat burned. She didn't notice the lack of motion that was causing her misery as dipped her hand to splash her face, crying a little at the abrupt beginning to her day. Instead of debris-filled waves, there was only the warm wetness of her vomit and hard grit beneath it.

*Caw! Caw!*

Kendle's eyes flew open.

Thick green trees waving over a vast, sandy beach greeted her. Birds called above, flying into the thick palm trees with annoyed chirps, and she blinked, smelling fragrant flowers and earth. Her attention shifted to the steep green and orange cliffs, and hills of waving trees. *Land?*

Kendle stood up in a quick, jerky movement. Her stomach twisted again, knocking her off her feet and out of the boat.

Her hands and legs flailed, trying to keep her afloat, but she hit the sand with a hard thud that knocked out the instinctive breath she'd sucked in. She laid on the warm, dry beach, coughing and crying as she cradled her aching stomach.

*Land! I'm on land!*

Kendle forced her shaking knees together and stood on dirt for the first time in eight weeks, muscles protesting as they struggled to hold her up. Her entire body felt weak, wrong. She swiped distractedly at tears. She hadn't thought she would ever feel safe again, and her eyes repeatedly returned to the bright green treetops. *I'm on land! I can survive here.*

The model-turned-actress forced her new legs to carry her back into the hated floating coffin for her meager supplies, swearing it would be a long time before she ever got into one again. She had been afraid to fly before, but what was a quick, fiery crash in comparison to the hell she'd just survived?

It took Kendle a while to gather her things. She cringed each time the rough surf caressed the battered boat, terrified the waves would pull her back out.

She picked the middle of three paths into the dense jungle. Dragging the pillowcase, Kendle began to walk. Her tender feet protested the cool, sharp forest floor, but the pain sent joy rushing through her heart. She knew how to survive on this surface. *I'm safe!*

## 2

Luke Johnson gently set his pole into the small holder he'd dug in the lush paddle grass, absently aware of his line twitching as a fish toyed with his bait. On the beach nearby, bees and other fat insects buzzed and moved on, drawn to the garbage rushing ashore in the waves.

Luke leaned back, worried. The monthly supply plane hadn't come since December, and they hadn't been able to raise anyone on any of the CB channels or satellite phones. Now, Frank hadn't shown up for their annual week together. The two men had forged a strong bond in the jungles of Vietnam. The retired pilots, who'd both been shot down and lived through eighteen months in the same POW camp, never missed their week together. Not once, in thirty years.

The retired soldier stood up to stretch, wishing he had one of those internet hookups all the tourists had been so attached to last summer. A little black case opened up like a Battleship game! Sometimes technology was great, but out here, it was nearly nonexistent.

Pitcairn was about as cut off from civilization as anyone could get. The whole island had only one bay for ships. The rugged cliffs were foreboding, and there wasn't a single telephone line. The lack of communication to the outside world was frustrating. The island took as much as it gave, but for the most part, that was exactly why people came here and stayed.

"It makes us uneasy, though." Luke thought of the silent Coast Guard, who they could normally hear even during storms, and then of the ocean itself. There wasn't one cruise liner in the distance, and he was on the *traffic* side of the beach every day, fishing, reading, swimming, forgetting. There was nothing but static and debris. Pitcairn Island seemed to have been completely forgotten.

That wasn't a crisis here. The sixty-one people calling this tropical paradise home had learned to pull their needs gently from the land around them, but it was causing unrest and lowly spoken conversations in town. *What happened to our old lives? Blown away?* Luke was almost sure. He'd spent time in a war zone and could read the clues. No contact, strange sunsets, rough storms despite it not being the season, and of course, all the debris, were sure signs.

The water levels had also risen, bringing in load after load of garbage until they'd had to expand the town dump. Even now, Bounty Bay was alive with crawling crabs, booby birds, and broad-winged albatrosses pillaging the trash. *The explosions that left behind this much wreckage had certainly cost lives.* Luke packed his gear. *What the hell happened? Did America go to war and lose?*

Luke turned on his flashlight as he trekked to his one room cabin to brush his grill and hit the rack. He wanted to know for sure. He planned to be on the north beach at sunrise with the town's strongest CB. He suspected the entire world was AFU, and



while there hadn't been conclusive proof yet, he'd already begun to grieve for his country.

### 3

LJ found Kendle before he hit the beach. He recognized her immediately in spite of her rough condition. He had noticed tracks, followed them on a whim, and now stood quietly in front of her crude shelter.

It appeared sturdy and functional. Shoestrings around thick branches formed a frame; a green tarp covered with Johnson grass served as a roof, and palm leaves made the walls. She'd even dug a drainage ditch to keep dry. It was clever. This twenty-six-year-old female of mixed parentage was clearly no timid brunette, though right now, she didn't appear much like the outgoing, vivacious woman he'd viewed on TV either.

The thin, famous woman sleeping barefoot and restless inside the shelter would probably come to the chin of his six-foot one frame, and she appeared sick. Her short black curls were sun-streaked, as were her long, dark lashes, and her skin was an unnatural shade of red that made Luke uneasy. *Where did she come from?* He knew everyone in this community. The Survival Challenge star wasn't a resident.

Kendle woke slowly, mind and body protesting. Her inner alarm had jolted her, telling her she wasn't alone-something she had been for so long that there was no mistaking it. The man's lean shadow (and it was a man, she felt that clearly) was blocking the sun.

She groaned as she sat up, stomach rolling. *Did a boat find me? Am I rescued?*

Her attention locked onto the tall, leafy greenness behind him, where a teal fruit dove sat on a low branch, watching them anxiously. *Land!*

"You real?" she croaked, slowly climbing to her feet.

Luke nodded, noting the pulse in her neck was pounding rapidly. “As can be. Luke Johnson—LJ—at your service.”

Kendle stumbled forward on shaky legs and fell into his plaid-covered arms, sobbing.

Luke was unable to stop himself from being glad her smell wasn't strong despite her faded, mismatched clothes.

“So glad...to see you! Been alone soo...long!”

There was total horror in those last two words, the kind that drew him instantly. It said she, and she alone, might be able to understand him. He held her gently, forcing his mind to stay where it belonged—in the present. “Sshh. It's okay.”

Kendle trembled in his arms, tears falling hotly on his weathered skin. “I'm K-K-Kendle Roberts. Nice to meet you.”

Luke chuckled as her arms tightened around his waist. He slowly rotated them toward his cabin, her heat baking into him. “Likewise. You need a doctor, little girl. How's about we go to town and—”

She sagged against him.

Luke swung her into his arms. She was sick and might be contagious, but the thought didn't scare him. He'd faced worse.

Luke pointed his feet toward home, uneasy about not only her appearance and fever, but also at how weightless she felt. His mind had connected her to the tides and sunsets, already sure she was a survivor of whatever had happened... *A survivor who might have answers.*

A shudder wracked her thin body.

He increased his pace, not out of breath. She weighed almost nothing and he'd maintained a strict workout routine since exiling himself here.

“Ship's dead. All dead.”

Her hoarse words gave Luke a fresh chill. Her story would be no cakewalk, and as much as he needed to know, he was dreading it. “You okay, sweetheart?”

There was no response.

Luke put her in the empty bunk, stoked up the fire, then took his dirt bike into town.

The next few days were a blur for Kendle as the pneumonia raged and she fought for her life again. Her immune system had been weakened by radiation exposure. She had brief periods of alertness where she tried to tell him what happened, but Kendle wasn't sure if he understood.

It was a full week after washing up on the north beach before she came to feeling alert and aware of who and where she was.

Kendle knew she was alone with the gently snoring man in the recliner next to her. She stared at his face in wonder. *He's healthy!* The sickness hadn't come here?

She shut her eyes, head thumping. She was alone, but that death ship was still out there. Huge tears rolled down her cheeks.

The quiet sobs woke LJ from his unsettling dreams. He went to her, with his blanket. As he pulled it to her shoulders, her claw-like hand flew out and locked around his wrist with an iron grip.

“We're on land?”

Her pain rushed over him. He nodded, wishing he could erase her desperation. “In my cabin, on Pitcairn island.”

More tears rolled down her cheeks.

When the island outcast held his arms open, she accepted the comfort without hesitation, feeling the connection of survival with him.

“You're safe here, Ms. Roberts. I won't let anything happen to you.”

She mumbled against his shoulder.

Luke eased them down, holding her close. He hurt for her; he wanted to tell her it would fade in time, but he didn't. It hadn't for him, and it had been almost half a century.

After a while, her tears eased, and her even breathing told him that she had cried herself back to sleep. Her feverish body pressed tightly against his. Luke knew he should move, but he only pulled the blankets up. He let her warm nearness lull him into a slumber

that was, for once, without nightmares of being stalked by his mistakes.

Chapter Twenty-Three  
**Coming Together**

1

**T**he noise in the bowling alley was almost deafening, but beautiful to those making it. Pins fell, balls thumped and rolled, voices talked, laughed, argued. Arcades dinged wildly; music blared from the speakers. Snow fell in heavy sheets, blanketing everything. Other than the guards doing duty in snowy trucks, and the plastic hanging all over the inside of the alley, it looked like their old world. Adrian was pleased they had handled it so well.

Cris, Daryl, and Jeremy were on guard outside, all level two and uneasy. The noise was loud even through the muffling effect of the snowstorm; their lights glared in the darkness. If anyone was around here, they were hearing and seeing it. The Eagles kept a constant watch on the dark town and the bright bowling alley.

“Strike! Beat that, kid!” Adrian sat down to record his score as Charlie took his place on the sparkling, confetti covered lane. Zack had cut the canopies down before dinner. Adrian hadn’t wanted them trying to eat while the decorations hung over them like a neon sign that read *Your world is dead; you’ll never get this back*. The other paraphernalia had already been put in bags and tossed in the dumpster.

Adrian hid a wince as more pins fell. He had a terrible migraine. He longed to spend some quiet time in his silent semi, but it pleased him that everyone was happy. He wouldn’t tell them to tone it down for a while. They needed this, and right now, he was trying not to be skunked by a fourteen-year-old with the arm of a pro. The boy was better than Kenn.

Adrian frowned. *Where is Kenn?* He scanned the crowd, surprised when he didn’t see the Marine. Kenn liked to be the life of any party. When he wasn’t, he was working on things they

needed. *Did he go back to the basement?* Adrian stood, meaning to send someone for him.

Heavy footsteps echoed over the noise. A ripple of unease ran through the camp.

“Adrian! Headlights!”

Jeremy and Seth ran toward him.

People moved out of the way; everyone stopped bowling. Strikes and cups fell unnoticed.

Adrian found Neil and Kyle in the twitchy crowd. When he motioned, the men rushed toward the front doors. Both their teams fell in behind them without being called. This was their job.

Adrian pulled the plug on the music. The silence was almost a relief. “If you’ve passed the gun class, form a line inside the door. Do *not* draw your weapon. Everyone else, stay behind them.” Aware of Seth on his heels, Adrian pulled on his jacket, then opened the holsters of both guns. *Just in case*. He was hoping for survivors, but the odds were high that they’d drawn a threat.

## 2

Kenn walked through the basement, checking cords and connections. So far, none of it was overheating. He heard the music stop and assumed Adrian had tired of the noise. He also noticed the lack of balls and pins falling. *Boss called it a night earlier than I thought he would.*

“All by your lonesome?”

Kenn spun, gun coming out and up.

Tonya liked it that he was dangerous. “Easy there, big boy. It’s the one ya been watchin’ when ya thought no one was lookin’.”

Responding to the sexy accent, Kenn holstered his gun. His gaze crawled up slender ankles to creamy thighs. “The party’s upstairs. And I’m no boy.”

Tonya sauntered toward him. “I’ve noticed.”

Kenn huffed at her, senses straining to hear if they were really alone. “What do you want?”

“I never got to congratulate you on making XO.” She wiggled a finger, other hand sliding her short skirt up.

Kenn didn't hesitate.

Tonya melted against him, lips finding a sensitive spot on his neck. He lit up, arching against her.

Nose full of pot, whiskey, and woman, Kenn locked their mouths. He'd gone without for months.

Kenn's jeans fell to his ankles. He groaned as Tonya's soft hand closed over his hard flesh like a glove. His big hands tangled in her thick curls, pushing her to her knees.

### 3

“Where?” Adrian strode into the storm with Doug and Neil flanking, but he didn't need them to point out what could only be the headlights of a big truck moving through the heavy snow. Adrian signaled to Doug, storing the fact that Kenn was still nowhere to be found. “Tell the doctor he has patients. Put up tents in the lee of the alley. Get some heaters in them. Have the cook start a fresh batch of meals.”

Doug was still scribbling the information as he and Neil left, dividing the list.

The semi pulled into the lot, weaving around deep drifts that were as hard as concrete blocks. The inside light of the rig was on. Adrian counted four middle-aged males crammed in, their hands in view. “Lesson three, Eagles. Move.”

Nothing happened for a second, then Kyle reacted, drawing his Glock. “Weapons out. Don't shoot unless I do.”

The other eight men immediately dropped back to form a neat, wide V, aiming their guns at the windshield.

The driver reacted fearfully. Gears squealed in protest as he stopped the semi a good forty feet away, sliding a little in the thick slush.

Adrian said nothing, waiting.

Kyle motioned his team forward. “Secure and disarm. Go!”

They went in a hurry, like professionals from before the war. The truck was surrounded before Adrian finished grinding out his smoke.

#### 4

“Damn, that was good. I wanna do it again!”

Kenn kissed her neck as his body twitched inside hers. He moved out and let her slide down the wall, mouth running before enough blood had made it back to his brain. “Later. We got lucky no one came down.”

Tonya hadn’t expected to be claimed right away, but his quick reluctance hurt her. The pain drew claws hunting a taste of his blood. “They’re busy in the parking lot, talking to the new refugees. He’ll wonder where you were, but he’ll understand leadership comes with...perks.”

Kenn barely kept himself from hitting her.

Tonya sensed it. She ducked under his arm, moving away.

“If I lost ground with Adrian, I’ll claim you just to make you pay. Don’t ever come between us!”

Tonya gave him a seductive smile as she tossed his shirt back. “I won’t. You gonna cum to me tonight?” She leered at his chest as he pulled on the shirt.

Kenn jerked her against his hard body, grinding his mouth on hers.

Her arms curled around his neck. *He knows how I like it.*

Kenn shoved her away. “Yeah. Here, late. I’ll bring a blanket.”

#### 5

“Hi! I’m Chrys. This is Tim, Carter, and Paul. We live here.” The man paused, bright façade cracking for an instant. “Or at least we did. Now we hide here.”

Kyle held out a hand. “Give up that shotgun and you can talk to the boss.”



Chrys did without hesitation. He motioned the others to do the same. “Give ‘em up, boys.”

The other men were less trusting, but they obeyed. Without their guns, they all appeared scared, desperate. Tired eyes and thin bodies said they were.

Adrian greeted the men with friendly handshakes and smiles that hid disappointment. *Just survivors in this batch, no shepherds.* “I’m Adrian. Welcome to Safe Haven. You come in peace?”

All the thinly jacketed men nodded, but Chrys was in charge; they let him speak. “You bet your ass. Peace and hope.”

Adrian was aware of Seth’s matching disappointment as he waited by the front doors with the other men who weren’t Eagles yet. Whomever the undercover cop was searching for, he sensed they weren’t in this group. Adrian felt a bond with him. “Then you’re welcome here. What do you need?”

Relief fell over Chrys’s face. “Help, son. We need help.”

“We need food! We’re starving!” Paul blurted.

“I’ll beg if I have to.” Chrys’s voice broke. “We’re dying.”

Adrian shook his head. “Not another one of you, if I can help it. We offer sanctuary, as long as you follow the rules. We consider ourselves a Red Cross convoy. We gather survivors while we search for safety. We travel four days out of seven, sometimes more.”

All of them bobbed heads again, relaxing a little at his words. Adrian was glad they weren’t a problem, but it confirmed he wouldn’t find any of his own kind in this group. His kind would have already taken charge and begun helping themselves, even if it was to control.

Neil leaned in, whispering.

The four townspeople shifted nervously as Adrian scowled at them. “Who’s in the truck?”

“It’s just our families.” Chrys hurried to explain. “We couldn’t leave them alone while we came to see you. It’s not safe.”

“You should have mentioned them already.” Adrian gave Neil a gesture to watch the men as he moved to the rear of the long vehicle.

The locals followed at a distance, aware of guards who had yet to holster weapons.

“Eagles, what is part B, of lesson three?”

Kyle’s dismayed voice answered Adrian’s disappointed query. “Never assume cargo or storage areas are empty. Approach and handle as if they are harboring an enemy.” They hadn’t secured the entire threat.

“No harm this time, and while you’ve done okay, this won’t be considered a success.” Adrian put a hand on his gun. “Open these doors.”

*We just lost level three status. Fuck!* Kyle smothered his disappointment to unlock the heavy door and shoved it upward. He did a quick scan, then moved aside to allow Adrian access.

The reek of unwashed bodies hit him hard, but Adrian could tell the strangers had attempted to make themselves presentable. He studied their worried, hopeful faces, recognizing hunger but not starvation, need but not the desperation that had been alluded to. *Why the lie? Protection from raiders?* He could provide that. “Eagles, these are our newest camp members. We’re going to feed them, give them medical care, and protect them. In return, they’re going to follow our rules and help each other survive.”

The five women and three children were huddled on blankets on the truck’s dirty floor, with four elderly women sitting in blanket covered chairs. The oldest among them, her long hair almost silver, lifted a thin, arthritic arm. “Will you help an old woman up?”

Adrian and Kyle reacted at the same time, with Seth waiting on the foot rails to assist.

“Yes ma’am; so will any of us. Welcome to Safe Haven.”

## 6

When the truck was empty, Adrian joined Chrys, who was waiting by the tailgate. The other males had gone with their families. “You lose your boys to the draft?”

Chrys dropped his eyes to the left. “Yeah.”

Adrian frowned. *What else is he lying about?*

“Thank you for taking us in. I’ll make sure they behave.”

“No, you won’t. That’s my job now.”

Chrys gave in quickly. “And thank you for that too. I thought I wanted to be in charge, but I’m not strong enough.”

“It’s my honor.” Adrian moved toward the fullest tent, glad to see the doctor wasn’t being overwhelmed. “Come on.”

Kenn appeared at his hip.

Adrian didn’t mention his tardiness. “We have twelve new members. This is Chrys. Chrys, this is Kenn, our second in command. There’s little he can’t handle. If you need something, he’s the one to talk to about it. Kenn, we’ll need names, ages, and occupations. They’ll need the medications John prescribes, a copy of rules, clothing, and sleeping gear for tonight. Chrys will go along to help to get them settled. They’ll also need port-o-cans and kids to run errands for them—your boy too, if you’re okay with it.” Adrian paused to let him catch up. He saw the corner of Kenn’s shirt was untucked. *That’s why he was late.* If Kenn found a woman here, all the better. “We’ll sort out tent arrangements first. Double the sentries again, then tell everyone to go back to what they were doing. Lights out at 1am, XO.”

Kenn’s chin lifted. “You got it, Boss.”

Adrian’s other men, those who had been with him longer and wanted what was no longer available, would be forced to accept that he saw something in Kenn they didn’t—something they themselves were lacking. The desire for his approval and recognition would make them awkward with Kenn at times, but only Neil had spoken against it and not openly. Adrian had made his choice. Now, Kenn had to give him what the job demanded—everything.

The tired leader was back in the office hours later, writing in his journal. He paused at another creak of footsteps outside the

open door, where over a hundred people were finally calm enough to sleep.

“You busy?”

“Nope. What’s up?”

Charlie swept the dim hall, then entered. “I heard something while I was shoveling snow...about the new people.”

The question was in his tone. Adrian nodded. “Tell me.”

Charlie stood in front of the desk, not sitting because he hadn’t been told to or invited. “It wasn’t just the draft. Their boys left to find help.”

Adrian added up the clues. “The adults tried to stop them?”

Charlie nodded. “Some of them escaped and died. They chained the others.”

Angry, Adrian opened his mouth without knowing what was coming out. “Should they be allowed to stay?” Once it was out, he didn’t take it back.

Charlie shrugged, aware that it had become his choice. “They’re sorry. They hope some of the kids might come back. They left notes about us.”

Adrian considered. Sometimes guilt would make changes where little else could, and sometimes instinct was all you had. The boy thought they should be allowed to have a second chance. Charlie would feel guilty if his words got them thrown out. “Removing a threat isn’t wrong.”

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t want their blood on my hands.”

“So you can’t be unbiased about them.”

Charlie shook his head. “Not really.”

“It’s okay. I’ll make those choices. It’s my job.” Adrian enjoyed Charlie’s quick smile of relief. He locked eyes with the teenager. “Is there something else? You can talk to me about anything.” Adrian was taking a substantial risk by pushing, but he needed more help.

Charlie wanted to trust, but the fear of Kenn’s reaction made him turn away without offering.

Adrian sighed, returning to the office.

Charlie nodded to Kenn as they passed in the hall, heart thumping. If he'd given in, Kenn would have shown up right in time to hear everything. He headed to his bedroll, wishing his mom was here.

Kenn set the mousetrap in the corner. He had to hitch up his jeans as he stood. He spotted Doug and Neil moving toward the basement door to do a second security sweep. The huge, limping redhead in the green army jacket was shaking his head in response to the tall, thin trooper. Kenn caught Zack's attention.

Reading him easily—the career trucker now wore the clothes of a rookie Eagle trying to make level one—Zack trotted across the wide, dusty room. “Hey! Neil, wait up. I got a question about yesterday's lesson.”

Satisfied there would be no unauthorized plotting done with his rookie's attention on them, Kenn checked on Adrian, then returned to overseeing the new refugees. His mood remained good despite missing the rendezvous with Tonya. Kenn was confident his place here was sealed. Right-hand man belonged to him now—had all along according to Adrian, but the camp's approval could make you or break you, and now he had it.

*I also have a new secret to hide.* There was no defense for what he'd done. If Adrian discovered the truth, he would be banished.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

# Defense

Outside Versailles, Illinois

**March 5th**

### 1

**A**ngela watched as Marc slammed the hatch on his Blazer again. He was trying to get it closed over a full load of gear. “Can’t we do something else, even though it’s muddy? What can you teach me that won’t land me on my back?”

Marc swallowed his first thought. “How about a new weapon today, instead of hand-to-hand? We could try a knife or even a crossbow. I have one.”

“Okay. Knives are quiet.”

Before she could blink, he drew the blade from his boot and threw.

It landed deep in a nearby oak tree, handle vibrating. “They’re also deadly.” He pulled it out of the tree. “This is a K-BAR. Marine combat knife. You try.”

Angela took it and threw too quick. The knife bounced off the tree’s rough bark and skidded across the ground, landing in the dirt.

Bracing for a correction, she was relieved when Marc only got it for her and handed it back.

Angela slowed herself and tried to aim, but she was nervous with his big body standing behind her. The blade skidded into the dense undergrowth next to the bare squares where their tents had been set up along US 51.

“Sorry. I’ll get it.” She shifted out of his reach, wading through the sticker bushes.

Marc studied her, remembering a blizzard and their house of snow. That had really been the beginning of them, of stolen, stunning moments. He hadn't forgotten any of it. *Has she?*

*No.* Angela threw the knife harder than she meant to, wrist twisting. It bounced off the edge of a different tree and flew back. The sharp edge hit Marc's arm. Deflected again, it slid into the stickers as blood welled.

Angela gasped, retreating. "I-I'm so sorry! I'll get my bag."

She didn't seem to hear him say it was just a scratch. When she came back out, he saw her hesitate and knew she expected to be punished.

"Can you slide your arm out?" She knelt at his feet to dig in the bag, tense body waiting for the blows to begin.

Marc did it quickly, not in pain despite the increased bleeding from the movement. The air was thick with tension.

When Marc didn't get mad, it calmed her a bit. Angie let the doctor inside take charge. *If I do a good job, he might not hurt me.* "Bend here, please, and keep your arm up."

He did what she said, observing her face as she tied an elastic band around his upper arm. Blood dripped from his elbow in scarlet splatters while she opened the sterile packages with an ease that said she'd done it many times. *She's a nurse?*

Angela dumped water over the wound, then spent a moment examining the cut. She placed a large gauze pad over it, pressing hard. "Hold this while I thread a needle."

Angela made five neat, overlapping stitches. As she finished, she became aware of how close they were standing. Her hands shook as she put on the medicated bandage. "I'm sorry. I guess knives weren't a good idea."

"We'll keep working on it." Marc smiled, tossing his torn coat into the open window of his Blazer. "I've gotten worse from new recruits."

Angela stayed tense. *Kenny would start using his fists on me for drawing his blood, intentional or—*

"I'm not him."

Her eyes flew up.

Marc shrugged. “Sometimes, I can read it. I know what you’re expecting, but that’s not me, not ever, for any reason.”

Angela allowed herself to open up a little. “I used to know that, but I... I’m afraid.”

“I’m going to keep proving it to you.” Marc forced a snicker. “What were you aiming at? A rain drop?” He went to hunt for the knife, enjoying her laughter. It was good, genuine. “So, how much medical training do you have?”

“I’m an MD.” Angela couldn’t help the defensiveness that had crept into her voice.

“A doctor. I never would have guessed. Didn’t you want to be a writer?”

“Yeah, but I needed something dependable. Then I realized I could help people who couldn’t figure out what was wrong.” Angela handed him a pain pill.

Marc dry swallowed without asking what it was.

“How can you be a doctor and a battered woman at the same time?” The question came out of Marc’s mouth before he could stop it.

Angela flushed. “People become masters of disguise. To do anything else means bringing the wrath down. And I had a powerful reason to do what he said—my son.”

“Wasn’t it a challenge to his...authority, for you to be a doctor?”

“Not when he got to take credit for it.” Angela pushed aside her bitterness to give him more details. “Kenny would say it’s because of our deal, that I had no choice. That’s partly true, but mostly, it was the money. He hated my name on the check, but he didn’t mind spending it on war games or a new gun. He insisted I finish my medical training. He said any woman of his had to *contribute*.”

Marc heard no anger in her voice; he was offended for her. “So, keeping your career was part of the deal, but not marriage?” Marc wanted confirmation of his suspicion. He hadn’t heard her say husband even once.



Angela shuddered. “He wanted it to be, but even back then, I understood if I said yes, he really would own me.”

Marc was unprepared for the wall of guilt her answer caused. *I left her to handle the world alone, pregnant. I’m a piece of shit.*

Angela scanned their surroundings instead of his guilty face. *Corn all around us.* “You going to work out before we leave?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m ready to do it too.”

Marc said nothing when she began to set up the course, but his expression was full of questions.

Angela didn’t want to tell him *or anyone!* about her baby, but he would know soon. She wasn’t sure how well she was going to hold up under the routine he did every day, but they were about to find out.

Marc sensed her doubt. “Should you be doing this yet?”

She winced. “No, probably not.”

“Then why are you?” He frowned “You don’t think I can handle things?”

She scowled. “If I thought that, I wouldn’t have called. I have to get stronger and I can’t do that while I’m resting. Time is a luxury I can’t afford.”

Marc studied her, like he’d done with every man he’d trained, but inside, she continued to impress him. “Quit when you know you should. I do a hard run. You’ll need to build up to it.”

When she agreed absently, not listening, he waved a hand at the steady drizzle that had begun to fall. “After you.”

## 2

“You should go back now.”

The rain was coming down hard; the slick ground tossed up gooeey brown sprays as they traveled the course.

“Not...maxed out yet.”

“Fine.” Marc picked up the tempo as he always did for the last ten minutes of his workout. He was surprised when she managed to keep pace. The situps and pushups had been hard on her, as

were the meditation positions, but she hadn't complained once. He'd enjoyed her quiet company.

Angela winced as she stumbled against a muddy rock, catching herself awkwardly.

"You okay?"

She nodded, not using her breath for talking.

He frowned. "You're a very stubborn woman."

The respect that laced his tone gave Angela the last bit of determination she needed to hang the full hour. When pain radiated through her abdomen, she hid it.

Marc knew she was struggling as they went over the end of the obstacle course, but he didn't realize how badly until they hit the end and were done.

Angela shut her eyes, body cold, foreign. She swayed on her feet, hands going out to clutch at the nearest support.

Marc froze as her hand gripped his arm. He felt her legs fold...

Marc swung her into his arms, ignoring her feeble protests. *She's too light. I'll feed her more.* "Are you okay?"

She muttered something indecipherable against his shoulder.

"Angie?"

"...can walk."

He ignored her, only putting her down when he got to the car.

Her hand grabbed at the handle for support; she missed.

"Angie!"

Her lashes fluttered briefly, then she was falling and he was scrambling to catch her.

### 3

Marc's handsome face was the first thing Angela saw as she came to. His deep frown sent her to other waking moments of not knowing if the pain was over or the break had just ended. Fear flashed through her mind; her hand went for her gun.

Marc stayed still, waiting for her to wake enough to realize it was him and not her abuser.

Angela dropped her hand, controlling it. *Marc won't hurt me. I have to believe that.*

Marc kept waiting for the fog to clear. She appeared weak; the heavy bags under her eyes were purple and black, making his heart clench. One of the things that caused her symptoms was pregnancy. *If she's carrying her man's child, this has just gone from bad to unwinnable.*

"I'm not."

"Say it again and mean it." Instead of the anger he wanted, unfathomable grief oozed off her in waves. Marc knew before she said it. There had been another child.

"I lost a son during the war."

She'd been pregnant, but her man still hadn't come for her. "Miscarriage?"

She nodded. "It was a lot to handle. I wasn't strong...before."

Knowing how much she must ache and burn inside allowed him to put her need in front of his fury. "You were alone?"

"Before, during, and after."

Marc was sure she needed to talk about these things, and not just in her own mind. "You should have died too, right?"

Tears welled. Angela controlled herself, not telling him she sometimes wished she had. "I assisted in more than fifty births at the hospital. It saved me."

Marc gave a comforting smile. "I'm glad."

"Me too, sometimes." She smiled back, wondering who would die when they reached Kenny. He wouldn't miss the sparks. She stood up slowly.

"You should rest."

"I'm fine. I just pushed a little too hard. I'll ease into it from here." She smoothed her curls down. "This first time, I just..." She hesitated, not telling him the ache to hold her baby was almost as overpowering as her fear. The torment had to have an outlet that accomplished something.

Marc finished it for her. "...had to do it all, like me."

Angela tried to seal that gaping hole and failed. She was maintaining a kind of radio silence with her son now to keep

Kenny from knowing she was still alive. The lack of contact was awful. “I needed to prove that I could.”

Marc snorted. “Not to me, honey.”

“No. To me.”

#### 4

“I have to make a stop.”

“Copy, on your six.”

Marc wanted to tease her about the near perfect response, but he had car trouble.

They pulled into the deserted parking area of the Versailles, Illinois RV resort. Gravel crunched under the tires. The large lot was empty. Not a single camper sat on any of the concrete pads. Marc rolled to the main complex of shadowy cabins and sheds. He stopped near the largest building, recognizing an older spigot setup.

Marc got out and opened the hood, avoiding broken glass and piles of muddy rubble. Pockets of steam billowed from the hood of his Blazer.

Marc turned around to tell Angela to stand watch.

She was already doing it, with Dog pacing a wide perimeter around them both. Her face had better color, but her movements were still careful, as if she was hurting. He tried to hurry.

Angela ignored the rotting bodies—an old woman, young boy, and three adult males, all with bullet wounds—to sweep the traffic and trees, then the distant outline of yet another dead city. Nothing looked alive here, not even the bluestem prairie grass Illinois was famous for.

Marc broke the plastic end from his screwdriver and held the flat side against the top of the 6x3 water tank. Using two sure hits, he drove the metal shaft into the tank. Water came rushing out around the tool.

Marc got the jugs while Dog helped himself to a drink from the ground.

“Are those recent prints?”

Marc glanced away from the sign in the lot's main office that wished them a *erry mas & ne year*. He eyed the deep ruts. "Yeah. You can tell from the depth and clarity. Elements haven't changed them much. They're a day old at the most, probably only a few hours with the way this wind is blowing." He frowned, noticing more tire tracks nearby. "Movin' fast too or they'd have taken the water. Stay alert."

Angie did while helping him collect the valuable liquid.

Marc scanned for trouble, then gestured toward the lifted hood. "Fill me up, just like yesterday."

Angela was self-conscious, though proud she had learned something. As she finished adding the coolant, she wished it were more. They'd been together for weeks, but she had spent most of that time just regaining her strength and adjusting to his routines. A third of her journey was over, but she wasn't anywhere near ready to face Kenny. "Can we do some shooting? With real bullets this time?"

They'd had to spend five days at the cabin, waiting for the rain to melt the snowdrifts so they could drive. As a result, he had only gotten to show her basic gun care and hand positioning. "Okay."

Angela smiled.

Marc turned away. *Being a man of my word is hard.*

## 5

"Ready to shoot something?" With her help, it had only taken half an hour to set up a shooting range.

Angela gave him a rare, genuine grin, pointing at his bandaged arm.

He laughed. "I said shooting, not stabbing."

They chuckled as he set up the last dozen empty Coke cans on a long, muddy log.

"Is your weapon loaded?"

"Yes."

"Good. Check it again. Always look for problems. Try to expect them." Marc held up his weapon, demonstrating. "Curl

your finger a little more. Good. Hold it a bit higher. Now, see where you want it to go and put it there.”

Angela pretended not to be bothered by having him so close, but she couldn't help but think maybe Kenny was around the corner—

“Angie?”

She tensed. “Sorry. I'll pay attention.”

Marc tried a challenge. “Maybe you can't do this.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I can. I will.”

He shrugged as if he had little faith, tone patronizing. “Aiming makes all the difference. Go on.”

Angela's hands were shaking despite her efforts to be steady.

His sigh made her flush. Embarrassed, she pulled the trigger without aiming.

Marc moved behind her as the recoil rocked her back into his waiting arms.

The bullet slammed into the hood of his Blazer.

Marc dropped his cheek to her sweet-smelling shoulder. “The cans, honey. The cans!”

His breath on her neck gave her a chill. Angela eased out of his arms, waiting to be punished and still hating to be touched.

“Do it again.”

His tone was more amused than anything else. She moved back to him, not as afraid. If he hadn't hit her for drawing his blood, what was a bullet in his car?

This time, Angela expected the recoil. She managed to keep her feet on the ground. The slug dug into the log, rattling the cans.

“Better. Aim a little above your target until you don't jerk as much. Go on, empty it.”

Angela felt the zone this time, that moment when the gun was perfectly in tune with her hand. Cans flew off the log. “Yes! Third time's a charm.” She reloaded.

Marc swept the area, impressed by how fast she had settled in. He hadn't expected her to hit anything yet, though she had adjusted well to the size of the .357 during their dry fire sessions.

*Challenge is definitely the way to calm her down.* “That’s great. I’ll see if you put my Blazer out of its misery, and then we’ll go.”

She blushed.

Marc grinned at her. “Accidents happen, honey. Don’t worry. This woman I was sleeping with gave me a—” Marc stopped at her stunned, pain-filled expression.

Angela marched away before he could try to take it back.

Marc cursed his thoughtless tongue. None of those women had compared to Angie. Even after all these years, she still made him feel more with a single look than anyone else ever had. It hurt to think their chance had come and gone. *What a hard, lonely future waits.*

## 6

They traveled west, both seeing the wrecked limousine on the side of the road, its plates (*J. Lo U NO*) smeared in reddish mud. As they rolled through miles of empty farmland, Angela caught a chill that quickly grew into a bad feeling.

They had made almost ten miles today, despite flooding that had kept them detouring. She should be happy. The sky was calm, the temperature was in the forties, and she hadn’t seen much in the way of damage or mutations here. All of it was good. Versailles appeared clear on the other side, and that was good too, but the feeling of danger was strong. Angela was torn, doubting herself. She said nothing to Marc, not wanting to raise an alarm without having an obvious reason.

Just before dusk, Marc pulled them up to an Amish schoolhouse surrounded by barns, sheds, and empty, weed dotted soybean fields. Lofty willow trees in front of the school hung over the long, white fence, partially obscuring a rustic bell. There were no homes in sight, only the barely visible outline of the city they’d come through.

Marc drew his gun at a shadow. A white rabbit darted from under the stairs. He relaxed.

The rabbit dove under a broken board in the decrepit barn behind the school as they got out of their cars.

In the moldy shelter, the hare drew up too late and was caught. Large hands broke its neck with a brutal motion.

## 7

Marc secured the one-room school, then scanned their surroundings again. There was a barn almost half a mile behind them, but nothing else. *We're good.*

"I can take our stuff in, if you want to go check that coop we passed. I'm almost sure a couple of them survived."

Marc lit up at the thought of fried chicken. "Deal. I'll go after I set the disks."

Angela got busy, smiling as he carried the heavier items to the porch for her, then set the alarms. It worried her to think of how close they might be by April.

"Stay, Dog. Guard." Marc gave Angela a questioning glance, uneasy all of a sudden, but not sure why.

She waved. "I'll be fine. You'll pluck it, right?"

Marc slid behind the wheel. "That's woman's work!" He laughed at her mocking glower and was gone a few seconds later, leaving a trail of dust.

Angela looked around, suddenly scared. She shook it off and picked up a box to take in, telling herself she was jumpy, as usual. This time she was worried over nothing. *There are no open doors, no voices whispering. Everything is silent, dark. That means okay. ...right?*

A dirty man came from behind the barn, stalking with cool calculation. When he saw the man leave, he moved quick and quiet toward the woman. He held the dead rabbit in one large hand. As he entered the schoolyard, breaching alarms, he flung the meat by the wolf's nose.

The animal went for it.



The man ran across the porch before the wolf understood the trick.

Angela jumped at the sound of the front door slamming. Something heavy hit it hard and yelped.

“Was that Dog...?” Angela froze, heart squeezing as death bells echoed in her mind. She sent out a silent scream for help, retreating toward the gun she wished she hadn’t taken off. “What do you want?”

The filthy mixture of man and nightmare came closer, making her skin crawl. His dead eyes told her he’d been alone for a long time even before the war.

“Pretty, pretty...”

Icy terror overwhelmed her. Frozen, all Angela could do was scream for Marc as Dog hit the door again and again.

Marc dropped the pecking chicken and threw himself into the Blazer as Angela’s piercing screams echoed through his mind. *Think, Angie! You have to think!*

Dirt and gravel spewed from his tires as Marc hit the gas, but he already knew he would miss most of whatever was happening. *I’m coming!*

Angela lunged for the gun on the table as the stranger shoved her to the floor. His nails ripped her shirt off one shoulder and sank into her skin, drawing blood.

He fell on top of her, pinning one arm under her stomach. She tried to roll over, but he shoved against her, hands fumbling with her jeans.

“Get off me!”

He punched her in the cheek and back, curling her into a familiar ball. His rough hands pulled at her pants as he humped her from behind, biting her neck.

He yanked on her jeans, ripping the zipper.

Angela cried hot tears of hate and shame as his hardness touched her bare thigh.

*Distract him! Get the gun,* her witch ordered.

Angela continued to grapple with him; she couldn't reach it  
*It will come to you.*

The man thrust against her. When he shifted to get a better position, Angela locked her ankles and was able to lift him enough to roll over into his surprised arms.

The man ground his nasty mouth against hers, teeth scraping her tender lips as he shoved between her legs. His hands grabbed at her shirt, ripping it again.

*Now!*

Angela extended an arm toward the table above her head...and curled the other arm around her attacker's neck. She pulled hard, stealing his energy.

When the gun began to slide, they both heard it and glanced up—him in disbelief.

The man saw it falling and realized she would catch it, but first.

Angela's arm tightened like a band of iron around his neck as he tried to retreat. The witch's furious red orbs blended with hers as the gun fell into her hand. "Oh, no! You wanted me!" She shoved the barrel against his throat. "You got me." She pulled the trigger.

Warm wetness sprayed her.

The man collapsed. His blood ran over her neck.

Angela rolled him off, gagging.

Outside, tires slid to a stop; footsteps crunched.

Angela staggered to her feet, spitting, wiping at her bloody face.

"Angie!"

She wanted to answer but she was still gagging as she pulled up her ripped jeans. She stumbled to the door, jerking it open as Marc flew up the steps. She fell into his arms, coughing and crying as Dog streaked into the cabin.

"Angie!"

She clutched Marc's shoulder, smearing blood onto his shirt. "He tried to hurt me! I shot him!" Her mind spun from the beating she'd taken. *I'm a killer now.*

Her battered face told Marc it had been a fight for survival. He swung her into his arms, taking her to the passenger seat of his Blazer. His rage increased upon seeing all the bruises, scrapes, and cuts on her hands, arms, face. Her clothes were ripped, shirt nearly off, hair wild, jeans ripped and undone. *How far did he get? Was she raped?*

"No, but I feel like it. Give me a minute, huh?"

Marc ignored her sharp tone as he slid her onto the seat; he dug towels and water out of the duffle bag at her feet. "Up, Dog. Guard."

The wolf leapt to the hood, then to the roof as Marc locked and shut the door on her pale face.

He was only in the cabin for a minute to gather some of their things—the heater, the gun she had dropped. Marc was horrified at the death scene.

Marc came right back out and began hooking her Blazer to his. She didn't need to be alone right now.

Angela got out of the vehicle, moving like she was sleep walking. She hadn't cleaned up at all. Marc watched her take the one remaining gas can from the luggage rack. He was surprised by her strength as she dug a lighter out of her torn jeans and staggered back into the reeking cabin, tilting the gas can.

Bright flames shot up. Angela used the rest of the gas as she came back out, fire following. She tossed the empty can into the sweltering flames; she didn't flinch at the explosion of plastic, though she was showered by hot sparks.

Marc stared. *This hell isn't new to her.*

The heat where she was standing was beginning to scorch the ends of her wild hair when Marc finally took her by the arm and led her to the Blazer. He understood she'd needed to see it burn to have closure. "Come on, honey. Let's get out of here."

She didn't respond, but she also didn't flinch or resist when he put her in his passenger seat and shut the door.

A minute later, the cabin fell behind them. When she began to cry huge, silent tears, Marc shifted a roll of towels closer and left her alone. This was her first kill. He ached for her, remembering his own. He'd thrown up afterward until his stomach hurt.

“Stop!”

He hit the brakes.

Her door swung open in time to avoid the hot streams that flew from her mouth.

Marc put it in park, then got out to give her privacy while she emptied some of her pain. He watched the fog roll over a dark, foreign landscape where anything or anyone might lurk. *She was hurt on my watch. I'll never forgive myself.*

Angela sat with her knees to her chest, sipping water and pushing away flash after horrible flash. She was hurting, horrified, ashamed, guilty, and still full of furious rage. *I want to go back and shoot him again!*

Her years of abuse had filled her mind as she was attacked. It had been Kenny in her grip when she pulled the trigger, always Kenny. In that instant, she had seen the true feelings she now held for him. If he ever hurt her again, she would kill him.

Angela shuddered as her attacker's cold eyes slammed into her mind; she wished again that she could kill him twice.

Marc walked a wide perimeter. After a while, he heard sounds that told him she was changing, cleaning herself up. *Good.* She'd have to feel a little better with the man's stink off her skin.

“Will you help me with my hair?”

Her voice was shaky. Marc moved to the jugs at her feet. “Sure. Hold the door and tilt your head back.”

She did it with a large, white towel around her naked body. He was shocked by her trust in him as he lathered her hair, face, and neck. He avoided her bruised shoulders, not wanting to make her uncomfortable.

Red suds soaked into the towel; pink water pooled at her feet as he clipped her clean hair up. When she got another jug, letting the drenched towel fall to the ground, Marc spun around and

mentally recited the phonic alphabet. *Alfa. Bravo. Charlie. Delta. Echo.*

“Rinse, please.”

*Foxtrot. Golf. Hotel. India. Juliet...*

*Damn!* Marc poured the chilly water, her gasp pulling at his male side. He recited faster. *Kilo. Lima. Mike. November. Oscar. Papa. Quebec. Romeo...*

Marc saw her sexy outline under the water—pert nipples and creamy, water-flecked skin. He dropped the empty jug and the distraction attempt. She wasn't in danger from him, but he didn't need the severe case of blue balls that would come from stealing looks at her. There wasn't a worse time for it.

## 8

Angela smoked, drank, and chatted as the dark houses rolled by, but her tone wasn't normal. Everyone dealt with death in their own way. It was harder for someone who'd sworn an oath to protect life, but she hadn't had a choice. Marc hoped she would realize that and not let it eat her up inside. Killing wasn't easy, even for a Marine. He would help her if he could.

*Thank you for understanding, but I'll be all right. I just need some time.*

Marc sighed miserably. Even her voice in his head didn't sound right. “I'm sorry, Angie. I never should have left you alone.”

“It wasn't your fault. You're always telling me not to let my gun get out of reach. I should have listened.”

Marc said nothing, sure her weapon would never be forgotten again.

Angela put on a Pink Floyd CD and leaned back, eager to escape into sleep; she only got darkness for a brief half hour and none of it was comforting.

“Marc!” Angela jerked up, lids flying open. She stared around wildly, fingers dropping to the gun on her hip.

“It’s over, honey. He’s dead.”

She grimaced, wild feeling slowly fading. She lit a smoke with shaky hands. “I need to talk it out.” It was something Kenny couldn’t do for her.

Marc switched the music off. “You can tell me anything, Angie. You know that.”

She nodded. *I do*. “I thought it was you at first, when the door opened and then I froze, like I always do.”

The longer she talked, the guiltier and angrier Marc felt. He never should have left her alone. He should have swept the other buildings. *I should have been the one to pull the trigger!* All Marc could think of to say was the same thing his CO had told him after he’d finished throwing up. “He was the enemy. Don’t doubt that. This is war and he got what he deserved for his crimes. He should have made better choices.”

Angela let his words help her. When she shut her eyes this time, sleep came without dreams.

## 9

Around three in the morning, Marc pulled them into a far corner of Siloam Springs State Park, an isolated nature preserve. He wasn’t surprised when Angela woke the instant that he shut off the engine.

“Where are we?” She pulled her sweater on with slow movements.

“Couple miles from Stonington. I’ll set us up. Dog will stay here until I’m done.”

She leaned against the seat as he got out, hitting the door lock. Dog took his spot.

“Marc?”

He stopped. “Yeah?”

“I don’t want to be alone. Y’know?”

Marc hadn’t planned on separate tents or vehicles again until her voice and eyes were back to normal. “No problem.”

Marc used his key to get in and out of the rear. He set up the small tent, then put the blankets and heater inside.

When he stepped to her door, she opened it.

She didn't hesitate as she came out into the chilly fog and stiff breeze, but she stumbled and almost fell. Marc swung her into his arms. *Her face looks like the man used her for a punching bag.*

Marc took her into the tent, loving the curl of her arm around his neck.

Angela gasped in pain as images of holding her attacker this way flashed. *Holding him tight so I could—*

“Angie?” Marc had stopped. When she nodded against his shoulder, he got moving again.

For a brief minute, Angela was distracted from the pain in her mind by the man against her fingers, able to feel his strength as he ducked into the tent and laid her down.

He retreated too quickly.

She stopped the old Angela from asking if he still loved her. Her heart clenched as she covered herself up, shivering. She didn't have to ask. She already knew and it changed nothing.

*Clink!*

Her eyes flew to his in alarm.

Marc pushed the heater closer to her as drizzle began to fall. “It's just Dog, sniffing for his dinner. I'll be right outside.”

Angela shivered harder, feeling small and alone as he left.

Half an hour later, Marc had placed three rows of disks, secured the area more fully, and was sitting outside the tent flap, finishing a smoke while beating himself up. It would never happen again. *If there's danger from here on, I'll face it, not her!*

Marc sighed, knowing he couldn't make that promise, even to himself. This new world was a nightmare. He couldn't protect her from all angles.

“I can stop being stupid, though.”

His mutter caused the wolf to stare.

Marc snorted. She would insist on doing a workout tomorrow. He had no doubt about that. She was stronger than anyone he'd

ever known, and that included hardened Marines. *Because she's already lived through worse. Her man will pay!*

It was dark, cold, and silent when Marc finally crawled into the bedroll. The wolf was asleep just inside the doorway.

Marc took off his coat and crawled in next to Angela. His matching Colts went under his pillow.

When he curled his body around hers, Angela relaxed against him and fell into a deeper sleep. Her fear of Kenny was overpowered by the need for comfort that only Marc's arms could give her right now.

## 10

“Do we keep following?”

Dillan grunted, wrist aching with the rain. He was studying a wrinkled map while Dean fanned a fire to life. The cabin below smoldered hotly, so their smoke would appear to be part of it. They had been running a cold camp every night to avoid being spotted. Both men were ready for a hot meal and a strong cup of coffee. “They're moving northwest, like every time they head out. We'll be able to track them. He's not covering their trail at all.”

“Back to Cesar, then?”

Dillan nodded. They had been following the couple, waiting for the right moment, but it had never come. The witch and her soldier were too careful. The one time they might have ambushed them while traveling, the two Blazers had stopped for a moment, then took a different path—like they'd known trouble was waiting.

Tonight, the brothers had been nearby, set to try again after dark. When the hunter had distracted the wolf and snuck in, they'd gotten even closer. It had only taken a few seconds to feel the power in the air and realize the woman was the only one coming out of that encounter alive. Dean and Dillan might have gone in anyway, if not for the single gunshot, which either meant the woman was dead and they had no reason to, or the hunter had given his life and the witch would be ready for anything. She had



stumbled through the door looking like easy, terrified prey, but they knew she wasn't.

The twins needed help. It was something they'd rarely faced, even when only a cell had stopped them from doing whatever they wanted. Now, a mere woman had hurt them, had made them feel fear. They loathed her for it.

"Where do you think the deformed bastard is?"

Dillan's glassy stare went to the map, then checked his watch for the date, wincing. He had splinted his mangled wrist, and it was healing, but it would always be useless now. "He said every big town along 25. Maybe three days each, four on the bigger ones, skip every other, empty... He should be near Denver. We'll follow Interstate 80 until we pick them up on the CB."

"Or until we see smoke after a storm." Dean stood up. "'Cause where there's a storm, there's a Cesar."

## 11

*Crrraackkk!*

Thunder from the fading storm rattled the ground, shaking the tent.

Marc woke suddenly from his dream of thick smoke and desperate screams. *I'm alone.*

Surprised he hadn't woken when she got up, Marc stepped out into dawn's dimness, finding Angela by the open passenger door of her Blazer. Medical supplies were spread across the seat; she was using the mirror to clean the injuries on her face.

Dog was sitting nearby. He looked at Marc, expression concerned. *She's in pain. Can't you help her?*

Marc went to her, making sure she was aware of him. He took the alcohol pad from her trembling fingers, wincing when she winced, heart breaking at her pain. She didn't seem nervous about his larger body, but he was careful not to crowd her as he applied the gel she held out. "Good morning, Baby-cakes."

He saw her tears, felt the agony coming off her. When she tried to turn away, he wrapped his arms around her. "It'll get easier, in time."

Her tears fell thickly, but even in her misery, Angela noticed the body pressed against hers. Noticed it, and compared it to what she remembered. She retreated.

"You want to stay here a day or two?"

Angela sniffled, carefully wiping her bruised, swollen cheeks. "And do what?"

Not expecting the question, Marc pulled up a thoughtless answer. "I could teach you to hunt."

He heard the words and braced for anger or more tears.

Angela gave him a tiny, rueful smirk. "Might as well. I just passed the gun test."

They spent two full days at the preserve. Angela improved steadily, telling herself repeatedly that she'd had no choice. They passed the days working on defenses and then drilling on what she'd learned. Marc's arms during the nights kept her nightmares at bay and his heart frustrated by the walls keeping them apart.

They were back on the road soon after, and then back to separate tents without a word spoken about it, but things had changed between them again.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

# The Future

### 1

**T**housands of people were here. It was a joy to see.

They came to pay their respects to the man who had made their new lives possible. Groups were streaming in from all corners of the globe in an endless succession of happiness and grief. More were still on the way. The founder of Safe Haven was near the end of his time, but the vision he had created would live on through his people. The son of a traitor had given them peace, honor, and safety.

There were no jails, nor any need for them. There was no hunger, no pollution, no dying planet trying to kill them first. The methods he had used to achieve utopia were brutal, but forty-seven years after the war, America was flourishing again, and spreading back into the wilderness. Even the years they had spent in foreign lands had been ones of happiness and light—because of Adrian and his Eagles.

In the heart of Safe Haven City, surrounded by rolling farms and playing children, they gathered. Adrian would talk to them one last time, and they would listen well to his final words.

Weak, thin, and glowing with fulfillment, Adrian only spoke for a moment. A cheer echoed as he stepped proudly from their lives. It swelled from the arched walls around the stage and grew into a noise heard over more miles than anything since the Yellowstone eruption right after the war. It was a celebration of the hope that he had given them, the second chance to get it right. They would honor his memory by keeping America in their hearts. It was his last wish.

In the early morning hours, the happy dream faded, allowing restless minds to sleep easier.

Along Interstate 25, a man with hate in his heart snapped awake. His scream of rage brought men running to him.

“I will never let them rebuild! That bright future will never exist!” Cesar delivered a brutal kick to the girl chained at his feet.

*I will sacrifice every son and daughter I own to prevent it!*

He kicked his slave again. “Get up! There is work!”

A short time later, a plump Mexican woman rode out on one of the few horses. The cries of her two young children reassured Cesar that she would do what he wanted. She would be missed here for her cooking skills, but at Safe Haven, she would be an invaluable tool waiting for his use.

Cesar’s army was drunk on their successful invasion of America, but the guerrilla captain understood confidence and courage wouldn’t be enough to defeat the man from his dream. The blond had been hard. Cesar recognized the future battle. When it came, he would be ready.

There was a feeling of importance around the woman now disappearing into the fog. Cesar stared until she was out of sight. Maria might be the key to that battle.

Cesar summoned his slaves to care for the two young boys now weeping for their mother. When his sons were older, they would also be sacrifices for the cause, as his other children had been over the years. The evil slave trader let out a battle cry. “Muerte a Estados Unidos!”

It was immediately echoed by his men. “Muerte a Estados Unidos!”

*Death to America.*

Chapter Twenty-Six

# True Grit

Wyoming  
March 7th

1

**A**drian woke with the feeling that something valuable had been stolen from him. He listened for the sounds of his camp. Tents flapped, dogs yapped, footsteps crunched softly, voices murmured. The sounds were there, normal.

He sat up, reaching for his smoking box. Clad in boxers, Adrian lit a joint, not cold but aware of the chill in the tent. His watch said it was 5:33am. It was time to get his busy day going. The list was almost double what it usually was. Everyone would be busy right up to the contest after dinner.

Adrian hit the joint hard and rubbed the sleep from his face. *My goatee needs a trim.* He coughed at the lungful of potent smoke. Tonya knew how to grow it. Too bad pot wouldn't be allowed when they settled somewhere. If he let in one drug, the rest would follow. In the meantime, stashes and supplies would run out like everything else, forcing unhealthy habits to be broken without him having to be cruel.

Adrian inhaled harder, holding it until his lungs burned. He was tired and worried—his usual state since the war. It only took a few hits for him to feel the effects. He gathered himself, lower mind planning the day, fitting things together for convenience while his higher mind searched for those he had to believe were still on their way. *Maybe they're already here. Maybe I passed them by. I need others like me! I can't keep doing this alone!*

The leader let out a harsh sigh. He would keep trying until he was used up and beyond. He wouldn't give up like his father had. Guilt rolled over Adrian. Behind it came the overwhelming need

to right the wrongs that he could. Adrian got up, still listening to his people. They were the reason he worked so hard. He dressed fast, eager to be among them.

Pulling on his jacket against the chill, he stepped out into the strong wind. His attention went straight to the sky. Adrian frowned at the ugly look and feel of it. Something was racing their way. *Rain? Snow? Both?* He would have to use his gifts, something he only did here while the camp was sleeping.

Adrian did a sweep of the area. Only the guards were watching him right now. *Time to give them a little more trust.* He concentrated. *Show me!*

The wind gathered strength. A two-foot dust whirl rose off the dry ground, spinning toward him. It broke apart against his legs, covering his jeans in grit.

Adrian's heart thumped. *A sandstorm.*

Kenn joined Adrian. He opened his notebook without being told, erasing his neat mental chalkboard for the day. He wasn't sure what had just happened, but it gave him a flash of the determined woman on the way to her son. He kept his attention on the page so Adrian couldn't read his guilt.

"We'll have an hour. It's moving fast."

Kenn swept the area. The mountain view to the south was becoming obscured by a wall of sand racing toward them. Sandy wind was starting to beat on their tents, tarps, cars. The dogs were barking in an agitated manner; panicked sounds came from the livestock. Kenn's gut unclenched from the boring resignation that had woken him. This wouldn't be an average day. "I'll keep 'em rolling."

Adrian lit a smoke, sorting details.

Kenn gave a negative gesture to a level two Eagle from Neil's team who'd stopped nearby.

Jeremy kept walking at the denial, scowling.

"We have to roll in the camp by half a click. It's too big to protect." Adrian took the knife from his boot and knelt to draw in the dirt. He made deep marks to keep the wind from distorting it. "Put the mess in the center. Line seven rigs up on the redline in

front of it. Pack them in as close as you can. Make the wire tight, with a bathroom camper on each end. The weight of the water will hold them better than a semi. These two ends here have to be right up against the corners of the mess, then line the other vehicles up behind, sideways, big down to little. It'll create a dissipating barrier. Put tarps on the sides to wall it off. Tie 'em to the trucks, but be careful of gaps. If they billow in the wind, we'll be one big sail."

Both men looked up at an odd whine to the wind.

A tornado of dust as high as a car slammed into them. The dirt map disappeared.

Adrian wiped his face with a gritty hand and continued as if it was still there. "Put the ends under the tires and heavier stuff. Make sure it's well secured. Everything else has to be broken down and shoved into the outer trucks to add weight. Cover the livestock and the dogs. They go in the front."

Kenn copied orders and the map.

People going by stopped to watch as the wind increased. The sense of something big about to happen was spreading.

"The camp in the center trucks?"

Adrian's blade flashed through the dirt again, ringless fingers nicked, scarred. "Yes, here and here. Make the weight as even as possible. Do the best you can. One kit of possessions allowed. Put the stickup dome lights inside so we don't have fumes or flames. Gear: goggles, boots, ski masks, orange safety vests. All Eagles will be on duty."

Kenn finished writing. "What about the perimeter?"

The brown wall of sand was advancing noticeably. Excited voices echoed as people spotted what he and Kenn already had. Danger was coming.

"Only put guards in the front trucks. Anywhere else is voluntary. I don't recommend the rear. Even in cabs, there could be flying glass and debris. Make it clear anyone crazy enough to do that had better bring the right equipment."

Kenn wanted to volunteer for the credit, but he knew Adrian needed his help with the camp. Kenn hid a grin of excitement as

he waved Eagles over. *I thrive on this shit. I can't wait for it to start.*

## 2

The dust storm headed for Safe Haven like a missile racing to a target. The sky darkened as it came over the last ridge, sending out fierce winds that ripped tent pegs from the ground. The wind shrieked; buildings popped and groaned.

Adrian's stomach churned. He hated it that his people weren't safe, but he loved the fury of nature. Nothing else compared. "Here it comes." Adrian and three levels of Eagles stood in the much smaller mess. Thick telephone poles made great anchors for the tarps, blocking a lot of the grit. All the men wore the gear they'd been given, ready to assist wherever Adrian told them.

"Brace for impact!"

They moved to the center as the winds picked up, tarps slapping violently, and then the air came alive with tiny, stinging bits of sand that filled every inch of the rolled-in camp.

"Damn!"

"Look!" Kenn pointed to a faded red shed breaking apart as it rolled by in the thick grit. It barely missed the end truck.

The winds increased; dust burned its way through their masks. Men began to cough.

"Bandanas up! Use your shirts!" Adrian pulled his turtleneck over the bottom of his mask, struggling to stay on his feet as the storm engulfed them. The wind was awful, whipping, slapping, pulling violently. The air around the trucked-off camp exploded with flying debris of every shape and size.

*Crunch!*

"What the...?"

*Bang!*

The men by the mess truck stumbled at the impact as the rig was hit by the storm and pushed forward. The two trucks on the end kept it from going further. Dust flew up in monstrous clouds,



filling the area in a blinding whirl of dark sand the guards could hardly see through.

Adrian pointed. "Get those edges shut! It'll rip us apart!"

Men rushed to grab the ends of the snapping plastic, retying it to the poles. It became easier to breathe as the dust sank to their knees.

Adrian keyed his mike. "Check in. One, clear."

"Two, clear."

"Three, all good here."

"Four, no problems."

There were noises in the background of each truck that made Adrian unhappy. Crying kids, voices on the edge of panic, arguments. As soon as the last guard checked in, he hit the button again. "Turn your radios up, Eagles. Let them hear me." Adrian knew his people needed good words and calm tones. "We're ten feet from you, watching the storm. It's unbelievable, scary. We can't see anything outside the mess, but we're hearing it, same as you. A lot of stuff is flying around, hitting the trucks. That's the noise, but so far, everything's good here. I repeat: We are 5-by, and so are you."

A huge sheet of wood went tumbling around the edge of the far truck, just missing it. Adrian fought to keep that narrow escape out of his tone. "We'll do bathroom breaks in groups of four from each truck, women and kids first, as usual." He paused, growing hazy as he used his sleep charm. With adrenaline flowing so thick, it would only calm them. "I'll be by each truck in the next few minutes. I know I'll find card games going and people spending time together, not working themselves or others into a panic. This is nothing we can't handle." His voice deepened. "Nothing *I* can't handle."

As if to prove him wrong, wind whipped through the mess in a billowing gap, ripping the tarp free. They were covered in a vortex of spinning sand that tried to invade every inch of space available and space that wasn't.

"Grab it!"

“I’ve got it!” Kenn rushed to the flapping tarp and hauled it down against the wind trying to pull it back out of his grasp.

Kenn was smirking. Adrian could feel it under the mask. *Is he ready for leadership?* There was only one way to find out.

Adrian waved men over to help. Their seven rigs of people were protected from the storm, but still vulnerable because they had no one on duty in the rear where the sand was hitting the hardest. Anyone could sneak up on them by following the wake of the storm and they wouldn’t know until it was too late. Visibility was nil, and the tales from the refugees they’d been picking up were a warning Adrian wouldn’t ignore. The slavers liked to hit during severe weather; they were only two hundred miles away as of last week, which wasn’t far enough. Sooner or later, Safe Haven would attract their attention. The pictures Kenn and Kyle had brought back from Cheyenne Mountain last week had indeed been worse than the other places. They’d been keeping a weekly watch on the large group.

Adrian signaled a handful of Eagles to start the bathroom breaks, hating the thought of so many people using just two campers, but there was no other solution in this wind. It had been his experience that sandstorms took their time to pass through. He scanned Kenn, seeing the excitement held under perfect control, the leadership rolling off him in waves. Adrian gestured. “Eagle Two has point. I’ll be around.” Adrian stepped out into the storm, leaving surprise among his army.

“Boo’yah!” Kenn’s grin widened. It was official now. *I’m second in command.*

Pulling his shirt up over his mouth, Adrian ran to the camp trucks first, calming, assuring, jumping with them when debris slammed into the trucks. He didn’t hurry the stops, understanding they needed him, but he didn’t let them cling either. They had to learn to stand on their own.

The storm was still raging when Adrian stepped out of the last rig of calming people.

He went to the animal area they had covered with sheets of plastic, yanking his shirt up to muffle the dust. He was unhappy with the sloppy job Danny and Zack had done. Sand was coming under the edges in small waves. Animals were coughing, pacing, chuffing.

“On a dark, desert highway, cool wind in my...” Adrian sang as he weighted each side with the heavy cages, adjusting the edges until the dust began to settle and the animals started to relax. “Last thing I remember, I was runnin’ for the door...”

The sand he’d already been blasted with gave him a rough rasp. Adrian grinned in the dimness of the vibrating plastic dome. Kenn wasn’t the only one who felt alive when confronting danger.

Adrian marched to his semi, holding his breath. The winds here were so strong that he had to punch his way through with low, powerful steps. Doing what no one expected despite all he’d done for them in the beginning, Adrian stayed in his rig at the rear throughout the storm. He had secured the lives he needed to. The camp was in Kenn’s capable hands, allowing him to ride out the fury in his truck, marveling at the unchecked power.

Adrian concentrated, opening a mental door he hadn’t used in a very long time. His calls to bring people in had always been a part of his life, but this was a warning. Power blasted from his truck and spun through the area in a thick wave that lifted hair on necks and made stomachs churn. Anyone hit by it would know danger was coming even if they didn’t know exactly what it was.

Adrian was one of three men to take the drag position. Seth, who wasn’t an Eagle but wanted to be, and Kyle, were on either side of him. The cop and the mobster protected him while he guarded his camp. Neither of them talked about it later, not even to each other, but they both heard the warning he sent. It didn’t go over the radio but rushed out in powerful mental waves designed to get ahead of the storm. It rang through the air and into their heads until the urge to go to Adrian’s truck had them both fighting tight grips on door handles. There were times later when both men

doubted themselves, but at night, while watching their leader do rounds after a twenty-hour day, they would think about it and admit the truth to themselves. He had tried to save survivors in the storm's path; he cared enough to risk using his gifts to help survivors he didn't know! He wasn't like the leaders from their old world. Adrian was special.

The storm blew around Safe Haven for hours, forming tiny cities of sand that vanished as quickly as they appeared. The Eagles handled themselves well, rushing to anchor tarps, secure trucks, and comfort their people during the nonstop bathroom breaks. When the winds finally began to die down, everyone was glad—even those who loved the excitement.

It was almost lunch when Kenn decided it was all right for the camp to come out. The Eagles noticed Adrian let him make the call. Safe Haven had an XO.

Adrian took in the damage with worry in his heart. The landscape had been completely altered. Nothing was the same. Piles of brackish sand in feet-deep drifts covered ripped tents; thin grit blanketed everything, including his army. The damage was extensive, total. *How many more lives did we lose?* “Eagle Two will keep point. Everyone else, shift.”

Kenn nodded at him from across the camp, then motioned Seth to go with Adrian on his rounds. In time, Seth would be one of his too, Kenn hoped, like Zack. No one else knew Seth was Adrian's undercover guard. He was good, and someone had to do it. Adrian had to be protected.

Kenn knew what his boss wanted, and he knew how to get things done. Three hours after the storm was gone, Safe Haven looked like it hadn't been hit. It was a stark contrast to the destruction outside the perimeter. The camp was full size again, re-taped, clean, and running normally.

Adrian was pleased. *We're getting stronger.*

Kenn fell in with him.

“You look tired.”

“I’m good.” Kenn didn’t offer any details as he opened his book. He had dreamed Angie was here. After that, sleeping again had been impossible.

Adrian surveyed the three-foot piles of sand that were now their perimeter. The caution tape had ripped away during the night. “I need Seth and Mitch around nine thirty, but make sure he doesn’t leave the radio unattended again. I need ten minutes with the doctor at noon. Then we’ll do a lesson with the rookies. We’ll have a little surprise waiting for Kyle and his team right after that.”

Kenn nodded, copying notes. Adrian had sent Kyle out following the storm to do a recon southeast. Adrian wanted to know if the slavers were closer, and of course, to collect any survivors.

“We’ll keep it simple. Use the laser tag vests.” Adrian ignored the stomach wanting toast with heavy butter. His people ate before he did, and they were low on bread. They didn’t find much flour. “We’ll need crews to clean up after the contest and to help with the targets during. You’ll have to dig through the schedules that end today to see who already has their hours in or has a shift tonight. Set the contest up like last time, over in that softball field. Those not shooting will stay behind the gate.”

Adrian paused to sip his coffee, studying the line where Kenn’s boy was waiting. All his people appeared healthy, normal. They’d been lucky to have so few medical problems after spending so much time on sour ground. They had suffered a couple deaths in the last weeks, from heart failure. An EKG machine was another item on his growing list.

“That it?”

Adrian snorted, watching the lines grow as more hungry souls came to the mess; the noise levels increased. Coughs, moans, groans, laughs—to Adrian it was the beautiful sound of normal life continuing. “Here’s some FND work: a faster mess that has them in line for less than five minutes, for both food and drinks.”

Finished writing, Kenn picked up Adrian’s cup. “Refill?”

“You know it.”

When Kenn moved toward the line, Charlie slid by and put a small plate in front of Adrian. He kept moving toward the table he shared with Timmy and Mike, two of Zack’s teenage boys.

Adrian stopped him. “You busy later?”

Looking furtively at Kenn, the boy came back toward Adrian. “No. Do we get new schedules tomorrow?”

Appearing absorbed in taking the plastic from his toast with heavy butter, Adrian studied Charlie. He’d spent time thinking about their talk in the bowling alley and concluded this quiet boy held the magic, not Kenn. Kenn claiming it to protect the child was almost an acceptable lie. *Almost*. At least it explained why Kenn had flat out refused to use his gift again when Adrian mentioned it a few days after they left the bowling alley.

“Mug of coffee, fresh pack of smokes, a cardboard box this big.” Adrian demonstrated with his hands. “Bring those things to my tent around ten thirty. We’ll do rounds; you’ll get your schedule then.”

Charlie agreed eagerly, scuffed shoelaces dragging through the inch of sand covering the mess floor. He shifted from foot to foot. “You need anything else?”

Adrian studied him from under lowered lashes. “Yeah, a ton of food and water. You get an idea, make sure I’m told.”

“You know it.”

“He knows what?”

Charlie flinched.

Adrian waved him on as Kenn returned with two full cups and sat down. “Make-work. Kids need to be kept busy.”

“True dat.”

“We have to pick the next list of places to search. Bring the maps by after lunch.”

A short time later, Adrian sat in the lee of his tent at a folding table, with notebooks in front of him. He got started making schedules for the next week, glad he wouldn’t have to spend the extra hours trying to figure out who didn’t have all their shifts in

yet. As of midnight, everyone was back at zero. He worked on them in alphabetical order, trying to fit the person to the chore by their skills. He listened to people as they walked by, approving of the pants and long sleeves most of them were wearing. Both of John's suggestions had been accepted.

"Those eggs was nasty, but it's the best meal I've had since January."

"Glad we're back on full water rations."

"Um. Imagine a hot bubble bath."

"Girl, a hot shower would be heaven."

"Yeah, that'll happen. It uses too much water."

Adrian flipped to a rear page and scribbled a note, then resumed working on the schedules. What his people wanted, they got. It just wasn't always when they wanted it.

## 5

Mitch arrived ten minutes late to give the CB updates in person.

Adrian handed him a sheet of paper, still not sure he'd chosen the right person for this job. They had tested a dozen men, but only this sloppy drunkard hadn't flunked. "This is how I'd like the radio run from now on. What we put over the air matters."

The red-nosed man gave it a quick read. "Sure."

"Kenn will be installing a more powerful CB system in the next week. When he's ready, move to another truck until he's done."

"You got it, A-Man. I'll catch you later." The hungover man left, eager to use the bolder system.

Adrian was relieved when the ass kisser was gone. He hated dealing with someone like Mitch, but it couldn't be helped. He suspected Mitch was too good to waste. Adrian planned to leave him on the radio until he knew for sure.

When he was gone, Adrian gestured Seth over and began gathering his papers. "Long wait."

Seth gave a tight smile, taking off his cap as he sat down. “I don’t mind waiting. It’s better that we’re alone anyway.”

Adrian finished off his cold coffee with a grimace. “Because you want to know why I passed you up for rookie level again, but you don’t want anyone to know you’re questioning my judgment?”

Adrian’s words were brutally honest. Seth nodded, not sure if he was ready for the truth he’d come for, or if the things he needed to say to this man, who he respected above all others, would get him asked to leave.

“Because I’m not sure about you yet.”

The cop’s hurt eyes flew to his.

Adrian made a dismissive gesture, thinking of his surprise when it had been Seth who joined Kyle during the storm, not Neil. “Not like that. I’m not sure where I need you the most.”

“I know where I belong!” Seth clamped his mouth shut and waited to hear the conversation was over.

Adrian didn’t speak for a minute. Seth was a good man, but he had a short fuse, which was not a great trait for a guard. “Have you thought about something else? There’s a lot we need.”

“Yeah.”

Adrian examined the man. Seth was usually the first one at the tape to search through new refugees, never skipping it. His devotion had gotten attention. Adrian hadn’t been surprised to find out the undercover cop had been planning to apply to the Secret Service Academy. He’d wanted to protect the President. In time, Seth might still get that chance. “Why an Eagle, Seth? Why does it matter so much?”

Surprised at the easy opening, the thirty-year-old told the truth. “Because you need my help and I need to serve. Because there’s no one watching your six; I want the job.”

“You sure? That may be very dangerous in the future.”

Seth nodded. “More than anything. It’s what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Adrian studied him for another long moment before shrugging as if he wasn’t sure the cop could do it, though nothing could be



further from the truth. The skill was there. It was the man behind it that gave him a hinky feeling. "I'll change your schedule, but keep in mind it takes more than good aim and confidence."

"I belong there." Seth stood, holding out his hand. "Thank you."

Adrian shook with him. "I hope you find what you're hunting for."

Seth's expression darkened. "So do I."

As he left, Adrian noticed Charlie coming his way, right on time and hands full.

"What do you think about him?" Adrian indicated Seth.

Charlie shrugged. "Seth's okay. He just never found his little girl. He's still upset."

Adrian didn't comment. He had to be careful how he handled Charlie. As for Seth, he was another above average survivor trying to become a shepherd. Adrian would help him make that transition, but where were those who had been born to lead? "I'll put this stuff in my tent. Then you can go with me on rounds."

Charlie wasn't sure why the boss wanted his company, but he was eager to help if he could and be seen doing it—like everyone else here.

Adrian folded up the table, taking it and a chair to the flap.

Charlie carried the other chair, but didn't go inside because he hadn't been invited.

Adrian nodded his thanks. The boy was well trained, and it bothered him, a lot. "Grab that box and come on."

The first stop was the mess, where thirty people were in line or already sitting down to canned chili, crackers, and applesauce.

Adrian stopped near the flagpole. "Raise our colors."

Charlie and Adrian saluted, as did others.

Adrian searched for those who looked like they'd done it before. It might mean they had a military background. He spied two, maybe three, and added them to the list of interviews for the next set of Eagles. If they still had the desire to serve, he had work for them. He wouldn't respect them as much if they didn't. In the

Corps, in for life, but he understood. He wouldn't treat them differently.

Kenn fell in on Adrian's right as they moved on.

Adrian saw Charlie drop out of eye but not earshot. He pretended to be involved in kicking a path through the sand that had blown back in during the night.

"I have a great idea." Kenn handed Adrian a slip of paper. "That's our next supply run. It could be everything we need for a while, depending on how lucky we get."

Adrian clapped Kenn on the arm. *I should have already thought of this.* "Great, is an understatement. Kyle's men will be your escort. Leave tomorrow. I'll need a list of who and what supplies by morning."

"You know it." Kenn wrote it down.

Adrian saw satisfaction flash across Charlie's face. *Did the boy help Kenn?* It was a brilliant idea. Over half of America's goods had been transported by rail, and the massive boxcars would still be sitting there, just waiting to be emptied. Some, say half, would already be cleaned out or damaged, but the rest would be on the tracks where the EMPs or lack of fuel had shut them down. "What else?"

They moved to the parking area, Charlie trailing.

Kenn stored his notebook. "Last thing. I know you do fuel-ups by yourself on days when we're shorthanded, like at the end of the month. I thought maybe you could change things a little. Like for the Eagles to graduate to the next level, they have to put in hours on a teaching class. That would free up six or seven short shifts."

"We are always short ten men."

Kenn ran a beefy hand over his short black hair as the gritty wind ruffled it. "Give me one of the extras. That'll leave you two."

Adrian snorted. "Two, instead of ten. I won't know what to do with the extra time."

"Sleep."

They shared a grin of commiseration. Both of them averaged less than five hours a night.

"I've given your boy a fulltime job."

Kenn was okay with Charlie being distracted. The whining about his mother was relentless. Kenn had found himself spending as much time away from the sulky teenager as he could. “He’s a hard worker.”

“I’ve noticed. Hey, did you take the hand-to-hand test yet?”

“No.” Kenn didn’t remind him they’d both passed one in basic training. What had happened before the war was mostly that—before.

“Doug’s class should still be going. Tell him to give you a quick run. Watch for a bit first, so you know what you’re up against.”

Kenn snapped a quick salute and left.

Charlie moved to Adrian’s side. He felt sorry for whoever Kenn was cursing in his thoughts. When he did that, someone (*usually my mom*) ended up bleeding.

Adrian didn’t care about Kenn’s mood. Kenn couldn’t help him teach the guards unless he was willing to go through the same things they did. Kenn wouldn’t have his own team of Eagles. He would serve the boss instead, but he still had to do everything the teams did to help teach them. *A little less confidence for the match tonight won’t hurt either.* Kenn was sharp. He’d only lost last time because the wind had gusted at the wrong second and ruined his shot. “Come on. Bring that box.”

Charlie did, clamping down on the request for his schedule that wanted to fly out of his mouth. Adrian would give it to him. Unlike most adults, he never went back on what he said.

## 6

An hour later, Adrian was almost sure the railyard had been the smart, observant boy’s idea. The magic fate had hinted at was already here; it had been for a while. It was just too young, too raw, to be very useful yet.

Charlie frowned as they moved to the mess line for bowls of soup and fresh biscuits. “What’s this box for?”

Adrian grinned at him. "I thought you'd ask long before now. Line it with a garbage bag and put a note on it. *Food only!* Set it by the cans. It's for the pregnant dogs."

Charlie finished and joined Adrian at the table. The males ate in silence, subtly feeling each other out.

Excited voices echoed, causing people to gawk.

A small group of men came by, helping Doug toward the medical tent. His face and shirt were bloody.

Adrian snorted. *I underestimated Kenn. I won't do that again.*

A second group of noisemakers arrived a couple minutes later, Kenn in their midst.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw."

"Shoulda seen it!"

"Two hits! Just two hits!"

"Broke it. I heard it snap."

Kenn was grinning as they got in line.

Adrian glanced at Charlie, seeing how he'd tensed. "Ready?"

The boy immediately got up.

They slipped out of the mess before Kenn was halfway through the long, loud line.

Their next stop was the new livestock trailers, and the even newer veterinarian, Chris. The Utah man had been out of the QZ for a week, but he'd been hard at work most of that time—alone, because of his surly attitude and smart mouth. It made it easier to keep track of him, as far as Adrian was concerned. Having three men named Chris in the same camp was confusing at times.

"Anybody home?"

Movement echoed from inside, but not an answer.

Charlie lifted his hand to open the faded white door.

"Not a good idea, boy, but you do what you want."

Charlie dropped his hand. They turned to find the tall, thin veterinarian coming from a nearby tent. His neat white coat and handsome face didn't hide the frosty attitude of a loner.

"Star's in there giving birth. She's not in the mood for company."

Adrian stepped over to him. "You see the pups yet?"

Chris tossed a small, white package at Charlie. “One. It’s normal as far as I can tell. When she’s done, I’ll knock her out and run the blood work.”

“Good.” Adrian denied the offered envelope. “That’s Kenn’s job now. He’ll be by.” Adrian focused on Charlie. “What’s your job that matters?”

Charlie smiled. “I’m a dog handler. Or at least I will be.”

“And do you know why this is a job that matters?”

Charlie’s brow furrowed. “No, sir.”

Adrian was pleased. Charlie would end up being very helpful in the future. *He reminds me of...* Adrian stopped the thought. He wasn’t allowed to be distracted by it until they hit Arkansas, and that was still a lifetime away. “When you do, come talk to me. In the meantime, Chris is your boss, so pay attention.”

Charlie snapped off a salute. “You know it.” The smart teenager approached Chris with his hand out. “Hi. I’m Charlie, your new slave. What should I do first?”

Adrian chuckled.

Even the stern vet hid a smile. “That’s a real good start. Put on the clothes and come into the truck. I’ll have her chained up by then. Today, we help dogs repopulate the earth.”

“Cool!”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

# Cool Control

### 1

Adrian looked up at movement in the gritty sky. An eagle flew over the camp, swooping in odd circles as if it was lost. Adrian mourned the bird and the country it unknowingly represented. Like the eagle, America wasn't doing well.

Feeling weighed down by the burdens he was carrying, Adrian went to the medical area. He wasn't happy to discover all the seats empty. People were afraid to hear what might be wrong. Unless he thought of another way, he would have to enforce the testing law.

"Coming in." He ducked inside. Adrian chuckled at the uniformed doctor and nurse kissing in a dim corner.

They parted slowly.

Adrian smiled when Anne left to give them privacy without being asked. "Guess you've been a good boy."

John was grateful. "Me and you both. She's glad we came here. It does my heart good to see her happy."

Adrian perched on a stool, noting the slight shake of his hands as the stocky man sat across from him. "I'm glad too, John. We need you both. I guess by now you've pretty much got things figured out."

The doctor shrugged. "Enough to know we came to the right people, the right leadership."

"I appreciate that. There's a question I need to ask. Any idea?"

John agreed without hesitation, glad he could. "Yes, and you have it. We're with you. *I'm* with you."

Adrian handed him a glossy black notebook and an envelope from the unusually light inside pocket of his jacket. He was used to it being full of papers to decipher later. "These are some things

I need answers for. I'll get the equipment; just tell me exactly what you need. Most importantly, this stays between us."

John took it, slipping his glasses on to read. "These are smart questions. I have some ideas I've wanted to try that might help with this, especially treatments. I'll need specimens."

Adrian moved toward the flap. "I have a few coolers in the rear of my semi. I'll tell Kyle to give you access."

As he left, John hid the paperwork. Adrian was being careful. He knew how to sing to his herd and get things done. The doctor was sure their young leader bent out of shape would be a sight to see.

As Adrian left the medical tent, Kenn joined him. "Kyle is three hours out. Mitch just talked to them."

"Good. He say where they are?"

"No. Call them back?" Kenn made a note to never give the same answer again. From now on, he would gather all the information.

"No." Adrian climbed under the broken fence, moving through the sand he'd had two boys rake and clear of debris. The dust storm was a burial for those who wouldn't otherwise get one. "Game?"

Kenn shrugged, a bit disappointed that Adrian hadn't said anything about him beating Doug. "If you like."

Adrian dug through the dusty but otherwise untouched box of sport equipment they had put out this morning and came up with a football. "Go long."

Kenn took off running.

Adrian threw the ball high and hard, hoping to draw some interest from his people. These games were good for them, but hard to get going. Most of the refugees kept to themselves as they dealt with their grief, so he scheduled regular times for things like this. They needed it as part of their recovery.

Kenn hurled the ball with a hard spin that made Adrian pay attention. For the next few minutes, he left the heaviness of leadership on the sidelines and lost himself in fun. The passes were hard and long, the catches punishing. The echo of their laughter

and taunts drew people. A small crowd slowly gathered. When there was enough for teams, Adrian waved them in.

He and Kenn were the quarterbacks; it got rough from the start. Kenn, who still struggled to hide his true nature, slammed his way through three other players, knocking them aside to run by for a score.

“If you bleed, you’re out. Eagle Two’s team has six points.” Adrian smiled coolly. “Our turn.”

Adrian’s team let out a shout of approval.

The game became an outlet for them as they tripped, shoved, elbowed, and harassed each other.

It brought more people who were sensitive to loud noises now. When Adrian glanced up a short time later, nearly fifty camp members were watching, with about half waiting to play.

“Time out!” Adrian signaled Kenn over as he headed for the sidelines, stiff wind cooling his sweaty skin. “Pick your replacement. We have a level test to give.” Adrian threw the ball to Zack, knowing it would please Kenn. “Take my place, will ya? I’ve been knocked down enough.”

Everyone was laughing as the two men left. The leader had been tripped and hurried, but he hadn’t hit the ground even once due to great protection, deft footwork, and respect.

The game continued behind them.

Both men were pleased. Kenn, because his side had been up by twelve points when they stopped. Adrian because he had gotten his people to come out of their shells for a moment. “Gather the level ones. Seth, too. Send ‘em to that barn half a mile down the road; have them put on the vests. Neil is a supervisor, not their team leader. We’ll find out who that is today. Their mission begins with securing a 200’ perimeter and staying out of sight. If anyone sees them leave camp, they fail. You can meet me at the house next to that barn in half an hour.”

Kenn gave Adrian a paper as he left. It was his first attempt at tests like these, though he had worked with *the man* before the war. Nobody had been better than Marc Brady at high casualty ambushes.



Adrian gave it a quick read, then put it away, going to the guard on the parking area, Daryl. The level three Eagle wasn't out of camp with Kyle. "Anyone come in?"

The tall, thin football coach sighed. "No, it's all quiet."

Adrian grunted, not showing his disappointment. The magic he needed wasn't coming today. "Kenn will be by for the paperwork. That's his job now. When's Kyle due?"

Smothering a frown, Daryl checked his sheet. "Little over an hour."

"Great. Let's give them a call. Message is to put on the vests and pay attention. Mission objective, shake my hand to pass to level four status."

Daryl keyed his headset, one of a dozen that Kenn had upgraded this week. "Base to Eagle Four."

There was a few seconds of silence, then Kyle's calm voice echoed, "This is Four, base."

"I've been instructed to tell you to put on the noisemakers and look alive before you hit camp."

"Copy. What is the mission objective?"

"Physical contact with Eagle One."

"Copy. Four out."

Daryl did a quick scan of the dusty landscape before turning to Adrian. "Can I help?"

"Absolutely. You're the instructor, then the hostage. Location is the barn half a mile back. The rookies are going there now. Go and entertain them the way I did at your first test."

Daryl grinned at the memory and the responsibility he'd been given. "You got it."

Adrian slipped into his truck as the guard left. The leader changed clothes, made contact with the next shift coming on, then snuck away to play with his army.

Adrian and Kenn reached the dusty farmhouse at the same time, both easily avoiding the level one Eagles clustering behind

the sandy barn. Daryl was nowhere in sight as the small group of men talked for a minute, with Neil refusing leadership as instructed. When the rookies advanced, Adrian saw it was Seth who led them.

The small team swept the barn and shed but avoided the house, as Adrian had known they would. When they disappeared into the barn, he and Kenn moved to the long porch of the farmhouse to observe the show and watch their surroundings.

This was a draft area, with wrecked army trucks, uniformed dead already stripped of their weapons, and doors kicked in, but there were no longer dried bloodstains, and the charred frames in the distance were mostly covered in sand. Thanks to the slight sloping hill, the camp's view was blocked, but Adrian hated it even as he used it. To be out of sight was to feel out of control.

As he and Kenn watched, Daryl, with hardware on his back, slid behind a tree near the barn's blind side. He edged around the corner to the front doors and picked up a 2x4 from a tall stack along the faded cowshed. He slid it into the front door handles, blocking an easy escape without drawing attention. The men inside were peering through the single window of the second-floor loft, unable to see anything below the overhang. Without a guard posted outside, Daryl had full access to the building.

Daryl unslung and hefted the grenade launcher to his shoulder in one smooth movement, entering their line of sight as he aimed at the window.

Faces ducked; men yelled a late warning as he fired.

"Incoming!"

"Get down!"

Glass shattered. A loud hiss of smoke echoed as the canister exploded in a cloud of gas. Everyone bolted for the blocked doors, shoving and throwing themselves against wood that wasn't quite rotten enough to break.

Adrian and Kenn joined Daryl in front of the barn as thick, gray smoke rolled through the broken window and from under the molding door.

"Door's blocked!"

“Shoot us out!”

“Can’t see!”

“Someone light a flare; do it now! Everyone else, shut up!”

Immediate silence came, then that same assertive voice echoed. “There. Up and out the window. Move! Alex, Jack, you two go first to provide cover.”

Adrian identified Seth’s voice this time.

The men began climbing out, dropping from the loft’s overhang into the thick sand. Everyone had a laugh at the sight of Adrian holding up his watch.

“That beats the last team. New record! Gather around.” Adrian lit a cigarette, noting Seth was now in the center of his men. *Good.* “Eagle Four is due through here in thirty minutes. Your mission is to keep that team away from me. I’ll be somewhere in the house. Daryl is your hostage. He goes in the middle of the road. Set the rest of it up as you will. When the vest goes off, you’re out. Questions?”

There were none.

*That’s a mistake they won’t make next time.* Adrian turned to Neil. “Who took charge after the smoker?”

“Seth.”

“You’re the leader for this test. Seth is your second in command. Weapons go under the wheelbarrow. Move ‘em out.”

Neil gave Adrian a glance that said he had questions, but he knew this lesson was to instruct the other men, so he didn’t ask any of them. Neil was delighted at the unexpected thought of himself as a drill instructor in Adrian’s army. That was usually Kyle or Doug’s honor.

“Let’s go, in the barn.” Neil got things rolling. “Seth, make us a plan. Alex and Jack stay on guard. One on the roof, one in a tree. Move out.”

Adrian and Kenn watched from the dust covered porch of the farmhouse as the battle plan emerged. One Eagle took cover behind the huge concrete planters to the side of the loosely bound hostage in the road. Two men stayed inside the open barn doors. Two more ducked under the dusty bushes to the left of the big

shelter, with a final man lurking in the shadows of the wide, paint-chipped shed. They spread themselves into a wall of strength between the road and the gritty porch where Adrian and Kenn were standing.

“Who’ll make it through?”

“Kyle, for sure.”

“You want an extra body guard?”

“Of course. The last set of gear is for you.” Adrian handed it to him. “You’ll be in the house somewhere too, as a surprise.”

They watched the men fidget. When the faint sound of engines came, they both recognized the quiet Safe Haven setups. Adrian pointed. “I’ll be in the room above us. Have fun. And keep track of Seth. I want to know how he handles himself.”

### 3

From his second-floor vantage point, Adrian saw the lone shadow sneaking toward the house, and knew who would win.

Kyle’s invading men slid through the unharvested hayfield behind the dusty yard. They’d left the engines running for a distraction. Adrian wondered if Kenn had noticed a lone shadow coming in the rear door. Probably. Kenn didn’t miss much.

Kyle’s team eased closer. When they were in range, Billy gave a short whistle.

Daryl rolled the chair onto its side in the sand, clearing a line of fire for the level threes, who began to shoot. Vests flashed as the attack started. No one yelled or called out orders. They followed their training.

Kyle’s team mowed them all down and rescued the hostage in four minutes flat.

“Let’s go get that handshake.” Kyle led the way to the farmhouse.

Kenn opened fire from inside the front door as three of Kyle’s men approached; he got them all. He darted to another window and hit one of two men running by.

Kenn took up a defensive position a few feet from the stairs that led to Adrian; the annual paintball competition he'd won at Fort Defiance this year made his movements smooth.

Floorboards creaked to his right. Kenn shoved his gun around the corner, firing in a sweeping motion that sent blue lights flashing off gritty windows and faded gifts under a drooping tree. It lit up the house and allowed Kenn to see the shadow he'd missed. He had time to catch the deep satisfaction in Kyle's pale eyes, and then his vest began flashing too.

Out, Kenn flipped him the finger.

Kyle smirked, easing up the stairs.

The door at the end of the long hall was open. There was only one blurred set of prints on the dusty floor. Kyle relaxed at the sight of Adrian sitting on the edge of a cluttered, cobwebbed dresser.

"Congratulations on making it by Kenn."

"I lost half my team to do it." Kyle grinned, entering the small room. "We won?"

"As soon as we shake on it." Adrian held out his hand, body language full of warning.

Missing the clues, Kyle's arm moved...

He froze as the flashing blue lights of his vest began to bounce off the walls. *I've been shot!*

Kyle searched the shadows in disbelief for his assassin. The Genovese Captain had never been beaten with just surprise used, not even by Kenn. "Who is that?!"

Seth came out of the dusty darkness, trying not to gloat. He holstered and removed the black cap that had hidden his red hair from Kyle's sharp eyes. "The last man standing."

"Excellent." Adrian clapped as he stood. "Come on. Let's get back to camp."

Kyle turned to Adrian, gesturing wildly. "Was this your plan? Was he here the whole time?!"

"I came up two minutes before you did." Seth motioned to the Marine in the doorway behind Kyle. "Kenn was the only one who knew exactly where I'd be."

“But I saw you...”

They followed Adrian while they talked about it. When Kyle laughed at something Seth said, Adrian decided it had gone well. Both teams had learned lessons, especially Kyle’s, and they’d bonded a little. When the time came, they would have these exercises to guide them.

The men reentered camp the way they’d left, with Adrian and Kenn following more slowly.

“No one asked any questions. Big mistake. Seth’s team got lucky to win.”

“True.” Kenn was eager to help another of his picks. Zack was about to graduate to level one and he had Kenn to thank for his name being on the list. Now, all the truck driver had to do was live up to it. Slacking off wasn’t allowed. “Seth sure surprised ‘em all.”

Adrian lit a smoke. “Yes, he did. Give him a level test tonight. If he passes, bump him to level four and we’ll catch him up. I always thought that team should have been ten strong. I just didn’t know who went there. Do it after dinner.”

Kenn didn’t look up from writing, glad for Seth and hating the jealous part of himself that wanted to say he’d done well against Doug. *Where’s my reward?*

“Who’s the MC tonight?”

Kenn gave a tight smile. “Doug said he’d give the name to you at mess.”

Adrian met his eye, feeling his man’s need, meeting it. “That’s your job now. Once an evening you’ll do rounds and collect envelopes. Organize it into something I can read quickly.”

Kenn realized he was being rewarded; his heart eased. “Sure! That’s it for the list. See you at mess?”

“You know it.”

Their radios crackled to life. “Mitch to Eagle One. Just took a call, A-Man.”

Adrian’s heart thumped. He and Kenn exchanged a look. The tone wasn’t encouraging.

Adrian keyed his mike. “Still on the air?”

“No, low battery. Said they’d call back later.”

“Copy.”

Kenn stayed at Adrian’s side as they headed to the COM truck, where Kyle and his team were now on duty.

The truck cabin reeked of whiskey. Mitch rewound the tape without saying as much as usual, able to feel Adrian’s disapproval. “This one sounds legit to me, but I just roll your waves.”

Adrian had to force himself not to grimace. Mitch Hopkins was one hell of a radioman, but he was too often loud, crude, arrogant, or intoxicated—all things Adrian and the camp had little tolerance for because it reminded them of what had been wrong with the old world. “Play.”

The fat-faced man hit the button and smirked at all the people watching, seeing him be useful to the boss.

“This is Safe Haven. We are a convoy of American Red Cross survivors who will help if we can, no matter your age, race, location, or injuries. Does anyone copy?”

There was silence after Mitch’s loud voice. Adrian could feel the alcoholic fingering the button, wanting to be done with this round of calls. Then, there was a pause where Mitch had known instinctively an answer was coming and waited instead of garbling the transmission. *Definitely one of the best before, and despite his glaring flaws, probably is the best now.*

“SOS, Safe Haven! We need a military escort to the nearest compound! Will pay any price!”

The words were surprisingly clear considering the thick squelches of background noise and static.

“Americans help first and ask questions later. Stand by while I get the boss.”

“Can’t. Battery’s dyin’. There must be some place taking in refugees.”

“Yeah, us.”

“But if you’re Red Cross, who do you get your orders from? Where are they?”

“Those aren’t questions for me. I just work the radio. What’s your situation?”

“Bad. People are hurt, sick. Supplies are gone, food’s low. Where are you?”

“That’s another one I won’t answer on open waves. You need to talk to the boss. Call back and we’ll get him quick, but for now, what’s your message?”

There was another long pause, and then the tired stranger answered in a voice so full of despair it made Adrian’s heart hurt.

“I’m overloaded. I can’t describe it. We need protection, and a way out to someplace safe. Tell him we’re American citizens begging for his—”

The transmission ended suddenly. Mitch shut off the tape. “Figured their battery went dead.”

“You did an excellent job. Get me right away when he calls back.”

Mitch was all shit-eating grin. “You got it, A-Man. Catch you later?”

Adrian forced himself to agree; he was glad to leave the drunk’s company.

Kenn and Adrian went to his semi. The leader climbed behind the wheel, leaving the door open. Time was running out. He could feel it threatening all he held dear, but he couldn’t ignore the call. He motioned at the glove compartment. “Find out how far to Cheyenne, and what’s between here and there.”

Kenn got the maps out as Adrian picked up the mike.

Adrian keyed the truck radio without taking the mike from the holder. “Let’s do a count, Mitch. Eagle One, here and clear.”

The count off always took a while, due to people forgetting or going in the wrong order. Adrian usually straightened them out; today he let it go, waiting.

After a full minute of not getting by number thirteen, Mitch took control. “Okay, fourteen, we know you’re ready, but thirteen goes first. Thirteen, you ready?”

“Roger that.”

“Good. We know fourteen is ready, so let’s keep going.”

“Rogetssccccfourteenssch.”



“Fourteen!” Mitch’s voice boomed over the radio. “Put your mike down! Hang it up now!”

“Roger.”

The two men shared a grin as the check in continued. Everyone knew Mitch had little patience, but now, he also had Adrian’s blessing to keep people in line.

“Three hundred miles. Laramie and Casper are the big towns.” Kenn peered at the small writing. “Damn. Only a couple of reservoirs. Not a good excuse.”

Adrian scanned the dusty Wyoming land around them as Kenn got his notebook out, shaking his head at the radio.

“Come on, twenty! Why are you calling out of order?”

“Because I’ve got too many kids in my area!”

“Did you check the passenger list?” The radio went quiet for a moment as the guards straightened out the mix up.

“Your impression?”

Kenn’s voice was flat. “The caller said protection before food or water, like we might have to fight for them.”

“Are we able to?”

“Maybe we could be.” Kenn shrugged, sounding more confident than he felt. Marines, these people were not. Most were more like shower shoes—not even a boot graduate. “Kyle’s team might be now.”

Adrian gestured. “Draw up a simple plan, with a team of a dozen.”

“We’d need more men as Eagles, a long-range communication system, full time gun classes...” Kenn’s pen started moving, copying his own words as he settled into the groove and gave Adrian exactly what he needed at that moment—signs of progress. “Wish we could locate ammo for the rifles, but we’ll make do.”

Adrian waited, wanting to see if Kenn would get the most important part.

“Also need more practices for the camp, a drill of some kind.” Kenn glanced up suddenly. “Cheyenne is along the slavers’ path, on 25. Will the camp go?”

Adrian stared out the dirty window. He had been manipulating people all his life, but never on this scale or with these stakes. “The Eagles will. The camp would feel very unprotected while we’re gone.”

Kenn said nothing at the threat. Those words wouldn’t be used, but the message would be clear. Adrian was helping the strangers and those who were with him would agree. The rest would have to fend for themselves until—*if*—he came back for them. “When will they be told?”

“Right after the next call, but it’s best to start with little hints. Have people overhear the men say it’s our duty. If not for that, none of us would be safe right now. Remind them that Americans don’t refuse to do what’s right just because it’s hard.”

#### 4

“It’s chow time, Safe Haven.”

The purplish green sky was vivid, mesmerizing. Adrian spotted people taking long looks at the mysterious beauty as he headed to dinner. There was a large crowd in and around the mess, with most people talking of the shooting contest to come or discussing Kenn’s match against Doug.

Yells and groans came from the late running football game; garbage cans of trash burned at the corners of the camp. Two warmly dressed women played guitars at the large center bonfire. It felt like early October as Adrian got his tray and took it to his full table. The smell of salt came to him, bringing flashes of an angry sea. He wondered where and how many they would be come fall.

The rookie Eagles were at a double table nearby, congratulating and welcoming Seth. The level threes were on the other side of Adrian’s center table, looking glum as they listened to the other happy voices.

When Adrian pushed his mostly finished tray aside, the others did too. “Mini meeting now.”

Notebooks and pens came out.

Adrian got busy, not lowering his voice. It was crucial to his plans that the people here thought they knew how he ran things. “Sitrep on your run.”

Neil gestured. “We got everything on the lists, except gas. All the stations were dry or destroyed.”

“Alpine?”

“Just like all the rest. We took pictures.”

Adrian wrote it down. “Okay. That’s it. Who’s ready to shoot something?”

Men laughed; the boasting grew loud.

Doug handed Kenn his nightly envelope with apologetic words.

Adrian was glad when Kenn accepted it as if Doug hadn’t insulted him, when clearly, he had. Things were looking up.

## 5

“All right, let’s get to it.” Bonfire warming his legs, Adrian stood in front of two teams of men and lifted his bottle. They were in the training area behind the workout tents. “Rookies! Congratulations on passing!”

All the men cheered, but one group was louder than the others. They all drank together.

“You are now level one Eagles. You get to pick your leader tonight. I’ll need a name before this meeting is over.” He lifted his bottle again. “Level three Eagles, congratulations on passing!”

Surprised looks and cheers came at his announcement.

Adrian shrugged at Kyle. “You made it by Kenn, and while there were mistakes, you couldn’t have won. Seth was the wild card you can’t always be ready for. I consider it a success.”

Both groups cheered this time and drank.

Adrian held up a hand as the yells lingered. “We have one more challenge tonight, a personal level test.” He gestured. “Come up here, Seth.”

The cop left his beer and new friends, approaching Adrian with pride and confusion.

“You have demonstrated great thinking skills, excellent teamwork, and an above average slyness that Americans have used to protect this country for centuries. As a reward, Kenn will give you a test. If you pass, you’ll graduate straight to the top level and start working with Kyle and his team.”

The men all cheered, glad for him.

Seth lifted a brow. “When?”

Kenn stood.

Adrian tossed his dog tags at Kenn’s booted feet. The wind immediately began trying to cover the shiny metal with sand. “All you have to do is pick them up and hand them to me.”

“That’s it?”

The newly crowned level four men groaned and snorted at Seth’s question.

Kenn waved. “Just get by me.”

His look was menacing enough to make Seth realize this wouldn’t be a give-me. Kenn had beaten Doug.

Seth handed his gun to Adrian. The second he let go of it, he spun and dove for the tags.

Kenn kicked Seth’s shoulder with the flat of his boot at the last second, sending him rolling through the grit.

Seth got to his feet, eyes on the prize. He rushed Kenn again.

The Marine used Seth’s momentum to throw him across the ring of standing and shouting men.

Seth rolled as he landed, and gained his feet. The cop rushed a third time.

Kenn planted a hard fist in his ribs. “This is for real! If you don’t want it, quit now!” Kenn didn’t take it easy on Seth even though he hoped for an ally in him.

Seth shook his head, heart waking at the challenge. His body language became intent.

Each of the level men watching him remembered their own tests, and that one moment when they too had realized they wanted it almost more than anything—because of Adrian.

Seth advanced as he circled, no longer eyeing the metal under Kenn's feet, but keeping track of it. Seth rushed low and hard, making Kenn retreat as they shoved against each other.

Kenn delivered a vicious knee kick, then another to Seth's ankle.

Seth fell, grunting in pain.

"Just quit. Give up!"

Seth's face hardened.

Everyone knew he wouldn't. The feeling of failing Adrian would never go away, not in this new life.

Seth got to his feet a fourth time. Adrian observed with real interest as fire grew in the cop's eyes.

Seth stepped straight at Kenn, as if he meant to rush again, but instead swung a roundhouse that landed on Kenn's jaw. The other fist came around, slamming into Kenn's cheek.

Then, Kenn started hitting back. Seth fell to his knees in the sand while the Marine beat on his face.

Seth sank his head into Kenn's hard gut, shoving with his legs. As they rolled, his fingers clutched at the dusty ground.

His pinky snagged the chain... When he got to his feet, the dog tags were securely in his grip.

Seth flashed them at Kenn, who was still moving in his direction. "I got 'em! It's over." He ducked as Kenn swung. "But I'm done. I—"

No one spoke, waiting for him to figure it out.

Seth glared at Adrian's outstretched hand, then he moved—ducking, darting, shoving his way to the man whose life he dreamed of giving his own for.

Kenn spun him by the shoulder.

Seth punched him.

Kenn swung back, rocking the cop on his heels.

Pissed, Seth returned the hit, putting his weight into it.

Kenn did the same.

The Eagles were impressed when Seth stayed on his feet.

The two men kept swinging, trading blow for fast blow.

Adrian gave a subtle nod.

Kenn delivered a nasty hit to Seth's forehead that knocked him down in the dirt at the leader's feet.

When Seth's hand rose, Adrian bent and retrieved his property. "Pass. Effective immediately, you are a level four Eagle."

"No."

There was a shocked silence as Seth climbed to his feet, covered in sand and blood splatter.

"Because?"

"Because...they voted me team leader...earlier. Can't have...that as a level four."

Kenn slung an arm around the cop's tense, gritty shoulders. "If you knew you didn't want it, why did you go through with the test?"

Seth smirked at his fellow Eagle, but the expression on his bruising face said his words were meant for Adrian. "To prove...that I could."

## 6

The radio call came in while Adrian was grinding his hard body against a willing ass, breath coming in short rasps. He pressed a quick, apologetic kiss to her neck as he stepped back and zipped up. He left without a word, marching through the blowing grit to the communication truck. He slid into the sandy seat a minute later. As he keyed the mike, Adrian was aware of Kenn waiting nearby to help him. *Good*. The Marine would make it easier. "This is Eagle One. Go ahead with your message."

"We need help."

"Tell me what exactly."

"We need an armed escort. Things are rough here."

"How rough? Don't send me in blind, but be careful what you say."

"Slavers."

That one word brought mutters from the half a dozen men now standing around the radio truck. Adrian keyed the mike. "Do any of you know Morse Code?"

"No... Wait."

There was a few seconds of silence.

"We know it."

Adrian signaled to Kenn.

The Marine opened his notebook and slid into the other chair.

"Get ready for a message."

"Go ahead, Safe Haven."

Adrian gave Kenn the mike. "Say the number five."

Kenn tapped out Adrian's instructions. They waited.

"Five."

"Say the state Nevada."

*Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.*

"Nevada."

Kenn gave Adrian a nod and got ready to work.

"We will come get you, protect you, and feed you. In return, you'll be expected to follow the rules and work."

There was a lot of tapping and silence. Adrian waited impatiently for this part to be over so he could get to the information he needed.

"Agreed, but everyone goes."

Adrian's answer was quick. "We don't leave people behind. I have questions. Ready?"

"Roger, Safe Haven, thank you. You're the first people we've heard who aren't in the same boat as us."

Kenn took the mike and started tapping out Adrian's instructions.

"Tell me double the number of people you have. Include everyone."

"Seventy."

"How many fighters? Double it."

"Ten."

Both men winced. "Weapons?"

"Limited."

*Tap tap tap tap tap.*

“A few handguns. No ammo.”

“Have you seen the slavers?”

“Yes. Twice, from a distance.”

“How many are there? Double it and add a hundred.”

“Not exact, four hundred.”

Adrian’s frown was deep. “Where are they now?”

The taps went on for a long time, with Kenn’s hand flying. Then he circled an area on the map and held it up for the boss to see.

Adrian counted quickly.

*Tap tap tap tap tap...*

He looked over Kenn’s shoulder, reading out aloud: “Heard them this morning. They spend a few days each time they take a town. Most people here are from the places they invaded.”

Kenn counted. “Based on his calculations, they are four towns away from Cheyenne. Two and a half weeks.”

Adrian nodded, plan falling into place. He didn’t like it, but it was the only thing he could do. “Be ready from the twenty-first on. Radio silence until then, unless they see or hear of the slavers reaching Wellington. Switch to channel eighteen and say double the date I’ve given you.”

*Tap tap tap tap tap...*

“Forty-two.”

Adrian took the mike, hoping the slavers weren’t listening. There were hundreds of channels and both calls had lasted less than seven minutes total. Maybe they would get lucky. “Hang in there, Overloaded. Liberty and justice will prevail.”

“Roger, Safe Haven. Cheyenne, out.”

Adrian looked at his right-hand man. “It’s yours, Marine. Hope for the best; plan for the worst.”

Kenn was confident. “We’ll be eagles—there and gone before the snake knows what happened.”



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

# Close Call

March 10th

### 1

**S**till alone, and once again in danger, Samantha's heart pounded as she stood in the dank basement of a farmhouse on the outskirts of Boulder, Colorado.

She watched the drunken passage of a large group of armed men rolling down the street as if they owned it. She listened to shouts, glass breaking, and wild gunfire, praying none of them glanced her way. These stragglers were hurrying to catch up to the main group she had already watched go by. The sky behind them warned of another nasty storm coming. Samantha ignored the throbbing leg confirming that forecast. She spotted billowing, black smoke coming from their backtrail. *Did these people conquer NORAD?*

The small cellar room was cold and stank of mildew. The floor was covered in standing, stagnant water, but she only had eyes for the dangerous group moving through the devastated neighborhood bordering the dark city. Samantha didn't know who the men were, but it was clear they were trouble.

Not that she would have made contact even if they had appeared civilized. Samantha had been moving cautiously since surviving the battle with the wolves. She hoped to be left alone until she got to Cheyenne. It never crossed her mind this group might be going there too.

Samantha had found more bodies around this town than in other places. The dead had sores that gave her horrible flashes of the bunker where she had killed Pat. There had been a few live people too—brief, distant glimpses of her fellow survivors that made her drop out of sight as fast as she could.

Samantha was now armed, but shame and paranoia were still her constant companions. The pair had settled onto her shoulders, making her prefer lonely solitude to the conversations she would be forced to have. What would she say?

*Hi. I'm Samantha. I had a pass to the government bunker, but my chopper crashed. Now, I'm stuck out in this hell with you common folk.*

Not a wise idea.

She did want to be around other people again. She longed for some of her old life back, but she could only be with others like herself or she wouldn't be safe. She understood that now.

Samantha scanned the last of the vehicles driving through the dirty slush, lingering on the distant shadow of purple mountains with dull, white peaks. They would be full of lavender columbine by now, with gigantic ash trees and evergreens providing homes for the rabbits, cranes, and larks she hadn't seen down here. Up there, it was an entirely different world.

Her leg had healed slowly and painfully, forcing her to spend a week at a farmhouse south of the hunting lodge. She was glad the morphine had only held out for the first six days. Any more than that might have turned her into a junkie. *Almost did anyway*, she thought, still wanting a buzz even though normal Tylenol was controlling the pain. Traveling was hard, though. She had only been able to keep going because of the cart she'd found in a shed behind a vandalized golf course. She still wasn't sure if it had been hunger driving the wolves or something else. The way they'd tracked her, surrounded her, and waited for the storm cover, implied organization.

"Almost as if they planned it." Samantha pulled her trench coat shut as the last of the muddy jeeps fell out of a view distorted by rain on dirty glass and a tier of Hanukkah candles that would stay dark forever. "They were the hunted before. Now, they are the hunters."

Her words, spoken quietly, disturbed the occupants of the dank basement she hadn't noticed when she'd quickly limped down the steep wooden stairs. She had been seeking refuge from the large

group of dangerous men, but Sam suddenly realized her safe shelter wasn't. She froze.

Movement came from the corner.

A soft slither echoed around a cobweb covered ceiling beam.

Another ripple of movement came along the floor—a dark, weaving shadow under the inches of water... Sam's paralysis broke. She swung her sharpened walking stick in front of her as she limped to the stairs, able to feel snakes coming toward her from above. There was no hissing, no noises except hers. It was menacing.

Samantha took the steep stairs two at a time, seeing another, larger snake coming from behind the wooden steps. She lunged up the last three.

Unable to stifle a cry as she rolled, Sam lost her cane, bad leg taking the brunt of her weight.

The air shifted near her arm.

Sam rolled again, hitting the wall. On her feet a second later, she limped to the door, unable to see anything following but sure the angry reptiles were there.

The feeling was gone as soon as she made it through the heavily decorated front door, but she didn't slow as rain pelted her. The ghost town around her was silent, smoking in places. Sam wondered if the fallout that was changing nature's routines and habits was also affecting the people mentally. She had seen things since the war that made old horror stories feel tame, and it was everywhere. There were dead corpses full of bullet holes, female bodies still lying with their mouths open in midscream, a family dog impaled on a broken porch rail, blood smears in the shape of a small hand on the stone walk. Her attention landed on these things and flew away each time, but she knew she'd see them in perfect detail even after old age gave her memory loss.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

# Night Ride

March 11<sup>th</sup>

Pitcairn Island

1

**K**endle flinched as a brilliant bolt forked across the cloudy sky; her stomach churned as the storm roared toward them.

“Nice night for a ride!” Luke shouted over the thunder. “Come on.”

Kendle moved faster, fighting stiff wind and driving rain. She pulled the cabin door shut and shouldered the kit while darting for the idling bike.

The storm had been growing all day. When Luke had said to pack a kit, they were going to higher ground, she hadn’t argued despite not wanting to be soaked and get a chill from a midnight ride. She would face anything that kept her off the merciless ocean.

Kendle threw her leg over the seat and grabbed ahold of his belt buckle.

The bike jerked forward.

Luke grabbed for her blindly. He snagged her jacket and pulled her back on. He found her hand, wrapped it around his hips.

Kendle buried her head against his strong body, heart skipping in her chest.

The angry sky above them lit up again, flashing wildly.

Luke wanted to comfort her when she jumped, but he had his hands full keeping the Yamaha moving on the muddy path.

Kendle knew to mold her body to his so their matched movements would help keep them balanced. She held on tight, feeling his muscles flexing, controlling, his heart beating against

her ear. These things were a relief, in spite of the fear. Overall, she'd much rather take her chances on land, with Luke.

There wasn't a road or lights signaling other people, and she shuddered when the path they were on narrowed by more than half. They rolled under the protective canopy of a thick forest of tall, leafy trees. Sheltered from the worst of the weather pounding on the thick vegetation far above them, Luke took a moment to ask, "You okay?"

She pushed closer against him as lightning flashed again.

"Be there in half an hour."

Kendle nodded. She was physically terrified, but emotionally, she felt unbelievable grateful someone else was in charge of this crisis.

They traveled through the thick jungle for what seemed like hours to Kendle. Muddy, unseen, leafy plants and vines slapped at them from the dense darkness around their speck of a light.

The rain beat on them again when Luke turned onto another narrow path that veered out of the trees and down a steep hill. The fast-moving bike hit the bottom, and Kendle clung to LJ as they shot upward, close to tipping over.

They evened out onto a rocky path that led gradually up a tall hill dotted with heavily swaying banyan trees. Rain pelted their faces, wind stealing their breath in little, painful gusts each time he rounded a curve. Kendle held on tight, waiting for it to be over.

Blinding light flashed, traveling toward them at thousands of miles per hour. It slammed into the ground, exploding in a ball of vivid red and white. *Ccrraaacckkk!*

There was no way to avoid the flaming, bushy tree that crashed to the ground across their path. The bike tire hit the thick log at full speed, flipping them into the air.

Arm still deadlocked around his waist, Kendle screamed, and then the breath was knocked out of her as they hit the mud. They slid toward the edge of the steep hill, causing her to lose her grip on Luke. Kendle sucked in air to scream again, hands clawing for purchase as she felt herself going over. The small breath shot out in another piercing shout as she began to fall.

Luke snagged her slick wrist, pulling it out of its socket for a second of awful pain before hauling her up and into his arms. “You all right, darlin’?”

She burrowed into his chest.

Luke held her close as he got to his feet. Moving to the muddy path he had no trouble seeing in the dark, Luke had a brief, horribly real flash of trying to carry each villager out of ground zero and shook it away. *Now’s not the time.*

The rain fell harder, washing some of the mud from their hands and faces. Luke didn’t stop to examine the bike. He carried Kendle to a dark hillside and gently put her on her feet. “Hang on a minute, little girl, and we’ll be inside.”

Kendle spotted nothing resembling a shelter. She was impressed when he pulled aside a large patch of grass as if it was a carpet, revealing a wide, steel door set into the earth.

Kendle watched him twist the combination. When the door opened, and he disappeared inside, she followed with only a little hesitation. She had that unnerving sense of wrongness as she entered, but it wasn’t as bad as it had been previously. It was one of the few wounds that might heal completely with enough time. She had been on land for a little over three weeks, but a lot of the horror was still there, lurking under the surface of her polite smiles and casual words.

The storm sounds were muffled by the dirt. A light flared in the darkness, and then brightened, allowing her to look around. Kendle was glad to know they wouldn’t be laid up short. She stared in approval as Luke lit the rest of the lamps hanging in each corner of the long, wide room. Everything they needed was here. The walls were concrete; the floors, ceiling, chairs and small table were all made of plain yellow wood, as were the long rows of shelves running the length of the rear wall. On those shelves, were supplies. Serious survival supplies. Lamps, batteries, weapons, a gas stove hooked to a grill, many dusty boxes marked *fragile, handle with care*. It was all neatly arranged.

There were also personal touches here that were missing from his small cabin, like the pictures of a jungle behind soldiers holding rifles. *Are those the men he served with in 'Nam*

LJ hadn't said he'd been there, hadn't even told her he was a soldier, but she knew. He was much too tight-lipped and organized to be anything but military, and she'd figured the location by his age. He had told her he would be sixty-one on the sixth of July, but she was pretty sure that back in the day, Luke had been a badass. The young pilot in those pictures certainly looked the part. "This is amazing. You built it yourself?"

Luke unfolded a blue tarp behind the open door, subtly watching her get a towel out of the kit to wipe her face. "Dug it, mostly. Frank helped when I put in the walls and ceiling. We're only three miles from the cabin, but we're almost a hundred feet higher. Even a rogue wave won't reach here." He ducked out into the storm.

Kendle forced herself to wait, hating the awful loneliness that swept over her every time Luke got out of sight. She could follow. He'd made it clear he liked having her around. He hadn't even wanted to tell her the doctor had a room in town if she felt uncomfortable staying with him. She got the sense he was lonely too and his full days supported that. It spoke of someone wanting to be too tired to think or dream when he went to bed, and that, she understood completely.

Kendle covered her face with her wet sleeve as she sneezed. Wrist aching, swelling a little, she glanced around for a place to change. Seeing nothing private enough, she settled for peeling off her drenched shoes and socks and hanging her dripping jacket over a chair. Shivering as she listened to the rumble of the storm, the castaway waited nervously for her host to return.

Luke rolled the wrecked but fixable bike inside and leaned it against the wall so the mud would drip onto the tarp. He quickly glanced away from Kendle's transparent shirt and slacks.

He rinsed his hands and then retrieved a coil of rope and a blanket from a shelf, aware of how her eyes lingered on him while he attached the rope to the ceiling near the bunk beds.

Luke threw a long blanket over it to duplicate the area he had made for her at the cabin when she'd said she preferred to stay with him, if he didn't mind.

"I'll make some coffee while you change." He went to the tarp to take off his muddy boots.

Kendle ducked behind the blanket. She couldn't wait to be warm and dry again. Being wet reminded her too much of her nightmare on the ocean.

Luke tossed his soaked, mud-streaked coat over the other chair and couldn't stop himself from stealing peeks at the slender shadow on the wall while he wiped his face and then got the water heating on the stove. He was decades older, with blood on his hands that he could never atone for, but he couldn't deny the want. He'd been alone for a long time, and she was beautiful, young, brave...

He'd found himself hoping for signs of interest. She had told him her career had kept her busy, that there was no husband or even a boyfriend to mourn, and Luke had been able to read nothing else. She was nice, friendly to him and good company, but also careful and closed-off. She clearly had a fortress around her heart. Luke had decided he wouldn't even try to breach those walls without at least knowing whether she saw him as an eligible man or just an old man.

"How long did all this take?" Kendle asked from behind the blanket.

Luke forced his gaze away from her alluring shadow, thinking she had to be the strongest female he'd ever met. Even the resourceful island women would still be in tears over that narrow escape, but she sounded as if nothing had happened. "Over four years." He got two cups out, wiping dust from them, listening to her movements.

"Anyone else know it's here?"

"Probably. Everyone out here has a hole-up. It's the way you do things on Pitcairn."

"How long have you lived out here?" It was the first personal question she'd asked.



She was opening her mouth to tell him never mind when he finally answered.

“All my life, it seems like.”

Kendle tossed her dripping sweater over the rope, hiding her underclothes beneath her slacks, and came out from behind the blanket.

Luke felt his lungs tighten. Her vivid red skin was a sharp, sexy contrast to the simple white dress outlining a perfect young body. For an instant, Luke considered asking her outright to be his woman. Common sense returned quickly, with guilt on its heels.

He turned away, missing her look of relief.

Those were choices she wasn't ready to make yet. She was weak, vulnerable, still dealing with the grief of losing her sister. *Men and sex are the last things on my mind...right?* “How long do you think we'll be here?”

“Day or two. We'll be able to see the beach come dawn. If the crabs and sandpipers are out, I'll know for sure it's okay. Likely, I overreacted.”

Kendle pulled dry anklets over slender feet. “I'm okay with it.”

Luke ducked behind the blanket while Kendle wandered the far ends of the long room, impressed. She and her parents had each had a safety area in their homes, but his was the king of all shelters—medical supplies, survival books, a long box with a picture of a thermal tent on the side, a generator in the corner. All these things said Luke was a realistic, reliable person, but the creature comforts, like the cigars and chocolate bars, said life with him also wouldn't be cruel.

*Life with him?* Kendle asked herself sharply, hearing the clink of pants with a belt still in them hitting the floor. *Are you conceding your real life for this? Not even planning a single, foolish attempt to get back?*

No. Going on the water was unthinkable. Unless a plane came, she was here to stay.

*With Luke?*

Kendle wasn't sure yet; she wasn't sure how much she could give him. There were younger, more arrogant men here. She'd met them and been asked out by a couple, but she'd said no, even letting one think she and Luke had something going so he would take the hint and leave her alone. She felt safe with Luke. She knew instinctively that he was her own kind, and while she knew people who'd started relationships with less, she didn't think she was ready for all the complications that always came. She owed him a great deal, and he was definitely good people now, but his demeanor said he'd done terrible things in the past. She often wondered if his solitary life here was a self-imposed penance.

There was a choice coming, though. She felt it in his heated gaze when he thought she wasn't looking, felt it when they shared a meal over a flickering candle. It flattered her, but she didn't encourage him or lead him on. Luke was a full-grown man who could take what he wanted if provoked. That was nothing to play with when you were almost alone together on a deserted island paradise.

"Where did you get all this stuff?" She needed to fill the silence as he emerged from behind the blanket. His big, scarred hands were tucking in a plaid shirt around lean hips, and Kendle found herself thinking again he was in great shape for sixty.

"A plane used to come. Some of it's from crashes or what the tide brings in. A little came from people leaving and not wanting to take it to the mainland with them." He paused, looking at her with dark eyes lined by the coming of age. "Some from my time in the service."

Kendle recognized the first information he'd offered about his past. She stopped herself from asking anything, knowing he expected it but didn't really want to give it. Instead, she sat down, still shivering a little.

Luke took a long suede jacket from a wall peg and draped it over her shoulders, not letting his restless fingers make contact with her skin.

She pulled it close, smiling her thanks. She noticed the smell of whiskey before he retreated. Luke had been a complete

gentleman the entire time they'd been together. Weak most of the time, Kendle felt guilty and wanted to help with the chores, but the doctor had told him to make sure she took it easy, so he did. Luke cooked and cleaned, did the laundry, and sometimes let her dry dishes or set the table. As a result, she was regaining the weight she'd lost and was feeling better every day. Even the tears at night were coming less frequently. It had been almost a week now since her last nightmare. She was grateful to him for everything.

*Enough to give your body? When a man's been alone as long as he has, that's a powerful thing to use.*

No. Her virginity was worth more to her than the payment of a debt, or a bond to keep from being alone.

The storm outside their den grew stronger.

Luke flipped on the CD player. He surprised her with Aerosmith's greatest hits, and then left her alone, knowing she needed time to heal. She reminded him of how bad off he'd been when he first came here. He had on the verge of putting his gun in his mouth, but this simple life had healed him enough to go on and it would her as well, in time. He'd had Frank. Kendle would have him. It would be enough to keep either of them from ending it when the nightmares came back.

## 2

Hours later, Kendle jerked awake in the warm darkness, wild gaze flying to the shadow of the man standing over her. Her eyes locked with his, recognizing the terror that would never be spoken. Being here, around the mementoes of his past, had hurt him.

Responding to his desperate need, Kendle slowly pulled the blanket back, inviting him in. They'd passed many nights in each other's arms, usually when he couldn't stand the sound of her sobs anymore.

Luke curled away from her, embarrassed, but Kendle molded herself to his body. Feeling his rapid heartbeat, his quick rasps for air, she held him tighter, lending her comfort. Laying there,

listening to his struggle, she thought maybe together they might teach each other to live with all that had happened and go on, despite the scars they would always carry.

Earlier, she'd been sure she wasn't ready to handle any type of a relationship, but the feel of his pain made her accept that she was already in one. She cared for Luke. She wanted him to make peace with whatever demons were tormenting him and he wanted the same for her. It wasn't a traditional relationship, but it was comforting.

Luke's body shuddered as his control gave a little, and he began sobbing.

Kendle comforted him as best as she could, not quite daring to tug him into her full embrace. She wasn't ready for physical contact yet, but being alone, being away from Luke...just wasn't an option anymore.

Chapter Thirty  
**Hard Days, Warm Nights**  
Somewhere in Missouri  
**March 18th**

1

**T**hey were lost. The storm battered their vehicles, lashing out at them. The rain came in sporadic bursts; orange clouds rolled through the sky.

Marc and Angela had been making good time until they reached Kirksville, Missouri, but getting by the tangled piles of wreckage was impossible. Damage stretched as far as they could see. It was clear a massive flood had destroyed this town.

Boats were on front porches; heavy river barges were piled against a Don Pablo's restaurant like firewood. Homes and businesses were collapsed and scattered, ambulances and fire trucks crushed together. For the first time, Marc wished for a navigation system, forgetting for an instant that it wouldn't work without access to satellites. They'd doubled back, but the new route was closer to the North Fork Salt River. When the storm broke over them, the water rose, blocking their way. Marc had relocated them to higher ground, jumping from one unknown street to another to escape the water. Now, they were lost.

Marc surveyed the small town. He didn't want to stop now, despite all the debris flying through the storm. He hated how low this area was.

"Let's try that parking garage."

"It's kinda low."

"But sturdy." Angela let go of the mike and pulled around him to take the lead, trying not to react to the Santa hat that blew by her windshield as she searched for a name. The paint on the signs was too faded to read.

The four-story garage sloped upward in circles; they were surprised to discover only half a dozen cars in the place as they did a drive through check. The abandoned vehicles were dusty, with notes taped to the inside of the windows. A lot of garbage cluttered the lanes, including broken neon bulbs and a shredded exit sign on the first level. Otherwise, it was empty.

“Up here should be okay for tonight, right?” Angela backed in, worried when he didn’t answer. “Marc?”

Silence.

She saw him gesturing at his mike and then the ceiling. They had no radio in here.

Angela put her vehicle in park, but she didn’t switch it off as Marc backed in next to her. She’d put them in a far corner, like he would have, but the rain was dusting the hood and front windows, and the wind was rocking both Blazers. She waited to see if he approved.

Marc exited and disappeared, going to secure the perimeter with Dog.

Angela surveyed the darkness, gun in her tense hand. She knew the accessible area wasn’t to Marc’s liking as he came toward her. If he overrode her decision, she would go along with his choice. He’d been surviving out in the world a lot longer than she had.

*Whammmmm!*

They both ducked as something heavy slammed against an outside wall. When he opened her door, he was nodding. “This is probably the best place we can be, as long as nothing collapses. We can go up two more floors if we have to.”

Angela nodded, reaching in for her duffle bag.

The wind gusted against her door; Marc’s quick reflexes kept it from hitting her leg. “Damn. We need to get out of this wind. We’ll make camp by the elevators, in that hallway.” Marc grabbed each item as she took it from the Blazer.

When she shut the door, emptyhanded, he gestured toward the dark hallway he had already checked. “Light and gun. Let’s go.”

Angela started to tell him this wasn't an appropriate time for a lesson, then stopped, realizing this was perfect. "Okay."

Dog heeling at her side, Angela tried to concentrate like Marc had shown her, tuning out the distractions. She slipped through the loud darkness.

Marc watched their rear. And hers.

## 2

Angela unpacked what they needed, preparing to hunker down and wait out the storm while Marc went back for his gear. She wasn't as nervous as she had been nine days ago. Killing had changed her. She was suddenly a much harder person than she'd ever been before.

Angela set the heater against the wall, then made one large sleeping area between it and the cooler, creating a wall to block the wind. She started getting settled as Marc returned with his arms full and Dog at his heels.

"Great idea."

Angela took off her sweater, listening to the wind howl as he added items to the barricade.

"Hungry?"

She set up the stove. "Not really. You?"

Marc dropped his trench coat on top of a box and pretended not to notice how her gaze went to his chest, lingering there. "No, but we should eat."

She agreed, but only put on water for tea and coffee.

"I'm going to mark the water levels. Be right back."

Angela pushed off her shoes and sat against her pillows—journal, pen, and cup on one side, gun and ashtray on the other. She was calm. She had already foreseen them safe and sound in this spot as dawn broke. They had seemed to be in a bit of a hurry to leave, but she hadn't sensed real danger. Trusting the witch inside was easier since Versailles.

Marc wasn't as confident. He used waterproof chalk to mark where the water was, then marked every ten feet, all the way to their Blazers. A quick glance would tell him how fast it was rising.

Angela was lighting a joint when he returned.

Marc saw his own side of the big bed had been set up identical to hers. Even Dog's quilt was lined with a bowl of food and water. Neat, organized. *I like that. I like her.*

Marc put his gun next to the ashtray on his side of the makeshift bed. When she held the joint out, not looking up from her writing, their fingers brushed, sparked.

Angela dropped her hand without looking up, but Marc saw her nostrils flare. That didn't feel like fear to him, and if she wasn't scared anymore, then it was proof he had made progress by holding in all the things he still longed to say.

They were traveling well together. They started their days with a light meal and then a training session. First was hand-to-hand, and then weapons, which put them on the road around ten each morning. They traveled until it was too dark to keep going, then he picked a place if she told him the area was okay. Her power had been avoided before the attack, but her gifts were now being used whenever they made camp. He wasn't taking any more chances with her life.

"So, tell me about him."

Angela flinched before she realized who he meant. "Oh. Charlie's a great kid, warm, funny." Sadness came into her face. "Probably looks different now, older." She sighed, heart hurting. "He's smart. So much that it makes me ashamed I'm so dumb, and I'm a doctor. He's loyal, hardworking, and he cares about things, like saving the whales. It's agony for me to be away from him. Sometimes a boy needs his mom, and a mom always needs her boy." Not wanting to let emotions get the best of her, Angela dug through her bag and tossed a yellow packet onto the blanket by Marc's leg. "Those are from his first birthday. I love the clown outfit."

"He was born on Halloween?"

"Yes, on 10/31, at 10:31 in the morning."



Her voice was rough, sexy. Marc let his gaze roam her while she wrote in her journal. "Is he special too?"

She tensed before giving a quick nod. She could trust Marc. "Yes. He'll be stronger than me."

"Is it because of being born on Halloween?"

"I assume because he's male. Fate controls that, not the moon and stars." She inhaled again, closing her eyes against a sharp curl of smoke.

Marc thought about how erotic it would be to give her a shotgun. "You still believe in destiny and the great plan?"

Angela hesitated, not wanting to stir up old arguments. "Yes, and no. It's not a set plan. People miss their purpose in life and have to spend eternity repeating it, searching for that one moment they missed."

"And do they find it? Does fate give second chances?" The implication was clear.

Angela didn't want to encourage him, but she couldn't lie. "Yes, almost always. Fate wants the world to be perfect, and each correct or corrected life is a step on that road."

"You know that for sure?"

"No, but I examine the world around me and get my answers there. Everything on this planet dies, and usually violently. If not war, maybe it would have been the plague again or another asteroid. For some reason, it was all fated to die."

"But why everyone? Why not just the bad people?"

Angela shrugged again, tone resigned. "That is a question I can't answer."

Marc held up the pictures as she eased down. "You want these back?"

"No. I've got the memories." She rolled over and covered herself up to her neck. "Goodnight, Marc. See you in the morning."

"Yes, you will. Sweet dreams, honey."

*Not likely*, she thought. In her dreams, Kenny tried to kill her. Most nights, he succeeded.

Around 2am, Marc went to check the markers again. He was relieved to find the water going down.

Dog followed, eager to sniff the area again.

Angela snuggled deeper into the thick blankets, trying to ignore the heart crying for her to slide into his spot. She sighed sadly, feeling guilty that hairy legs and maybe bad breath were the only things stopping her from sleeping in Marc's big arms. Being attacked and surviving, but also killing the person responsible had unlocked the last of her chains. It had freed the young girl who feared nothing. Slowly, Kenny's timid mouse was disappearing.

How was she ever going to face him? Kenny would use her up in this new world. With Marc, the witch said there was still a chance for the future that had been stolen from them. Angela tried to imagine telling him how she was feeling. *I can't stop thinking about you, about us, and how good we were together, and... I may want another chance with you once I get my son back and find a way to ditch my other man.*

Never in a million years. Even if Kenny were out of the picture—and he wasn't, not by a long shot—there were other walls between them. Still, her thoughts were hard to ignore as sleep refused to come. They were a great match, and she still wanted him. Soon, Marc would figure that out and do something about it. *Then we'll all be doomed.*

Marc returned to his side of their bed. They were getting closer despite her trying not to let it happen. She was so strong! She not only recovered quickly, she grew more confident from each encounter. She wasn't afraid to meet his eyes anymore, or to walk close to him. He could feel her thinking about him and the past. She felt the... What? Love? Maybe. Lust?

*You bet that sweet ass,* he thought, slipping his belt buckle loose. He had never lit up around a woman the way he did with Angie. He had no doubts about his feelings; he had four weeks left to convince her that surrender wasn't her only choice.

Angela brushed at her arm as she sat up, waking with a feeling of revulsion. Her skin prickled with tiny irritations in the damp morning air; it seemed to be moving on its own.

“What the hell?”

Marc’s curse brought her fully awake. Angela couldn’t stop the yelp of disgust that echoed off the concrete.

“It’s spiders or crickets trying to get out of the water. I’m not sure which. Come over here and let me brush you off.” His tone was soothing.

Angela stood still while Marc rid her of the nickel-sized spiders with legs twice as long as their bodies.

She moaned, horrified. “They’re under my clothes!”

Marc grabbed the edges of her shirt and yanked it off. He shook it out and gave it back, watching Dog avoid the mutations instead of snapping at them as he normally did with insects. “Do under your pants. I’ll get our stuff loaded. The water’s low enough to roll through if we’re careful.”

Angela began removing her pants, scanning their things. All of it was moving. “It’ll have spiders in it.”

Marc listened to the storm rumbling, sure they should stay, but the water was rising again, and they couldn’t share their shelter. He needed to get her out of here. “Yeah. When you put those on, tuck the cuffs into your socks and gather what you want. We’ll leave the rest.”

As he stepped by her with the heater and their duffle bags, it occurred to Marc that she hadn’t jumped when he’d reached for her shirt.

His heart stirred.

#### 4

Angela listened to the voices as the wind pushed them through Matenea, Missouri. “I think we should take cover.” Little black balls of hail were pinged off their roofs and hoods.

“What’s...? Oh, shit! Stay on my ass!”

Angela spotted the funnel cloud by following his line of sight; for a second, she couldn't move. The twister wasn't wide, but it was closing in fast, as if it had sensed the presence of humans and dropped out of the sky just for them.

"Come on!"

Marc's shout startled her; Dog's piercing bark through the radio broke her daze. Angela hit the gas. *That's a real tornado!*

"I thought this only happened in the movies." She was scared as she caught up to Marc's bumper, but the raw fury of something they had no chance of controlling was beautiful too. Angela knew she would never forget it if they got away.

Marc turned them into a large, mostly empty parking lot, speeding up. When he sent his Blazer crashing through the front glass windows of the theater, plastic and glass flying, she followed.

Behind them, the tornado churned across the small city, smashing through anything in its way as it zeroed in on the enemy.

"Get as far in as you can!"

Angela swerved in next to him, lobby props tumbling. They both ducked as the tornado hit the theater.

The building shuddered. Both Blazers lunged forward in the wind, bashing into the high wall of the concession stand. Glass sprayed as the display shelves caved in. Large chunks of debris banged off them as the roar grew louder.

A blast of straight-line winds swept through the cinema, grabbing and spinning Angela's Blazer in dizzying circles before shoving it into a line of heavy arcade machines. Marc watched as the big games were sent flying into the air and each other from the hard impact. Glass and coins erupted like tiny, silver volcanoes. Her muddy Blazer slid the length of the lobby before coming to a tire-squealing halt just inches from his front bumper. A second later, it was over except for the rain.

Marc scrambled over wet debris to open her door and help her out. "Are you hurt? Are you all right?"

She shivered in Marc's arms. "I don't remember asking for the quick tour."

He chuckled. “Me either. You’re okay?”

Angela trembled, a bit shook up. She rested against his hard, comforting body and held on. “Yes.”

Marc rubbed her arms to warm her. The shock of being woken so abruptly and then being forced to deal with the fury of their environment before she’d even had a cup of coffee had shaken her, made her vulnerable. He refused to take advantage of her. “Dog, up. Shhh... It’s okay, honey.”

Angela kept her arms locked around his waist as the wolf leapt to the hood, then the roof. Marc held her, watching the drumming rain continue as his body tried hard to ignore hers. It was still a perfect fit.

“Are we safe here?”

Marc recognized the moment. *If she can ask me that and be prepared to believe it, things have changed.* “I think so. I just need to do a quick check.”

Angela shivered when he stepped back, cold as he disappeared into the dim shadows. The wind blew her hair around. This storm was traveling northwest, toward her son. She had to warn Kenny again. She gathered herself quickly, doing it before fear could make her change her mind.

Marc felt energy humming through the cinema as he returned. Without knowing he was going to try, Marc slid in front of her, concentrating. He was blocked by a wall of mental bricks. *Let me in.*

The wall crumbled.

Angela’s lashes fluttered, but she didn’t protest having Marc fully in her mind for the first time in fifteen years.

*Where are you?!*

The man’s voice was loud, intimidating, familiar somehow. Marc stored it to work on later.

*You have to take cover. Bad storms are coming your way.*

*One more time, bitch! Where are you?*

It was a struggle for Marc to remain silent.

At his side, Dog’s fur began to bush up as he caught the vibes.

*A lot closer. How’s Charlie?*

*Happy with me. How close?*

The barely controlled anger was clear. Angela forced herself to stand, emboldened by Marc's presence. *I'm coming for him as fast as I can.*

*You'll never get him unless you do what I say!*

Searing rage filled Marc, but it was nothing compared to the fury radiating off Angela. It came in clouds of heat he could actually feel.

*You won't keep me from my boy, Kenny! That was the old world. Things have changed, and you're the one who should be careful!*

She sucked in a breath as he screamed obscenities, then overpowered him with her anger. The words blasted out in a furious snarl. *If anything happens to my son, there won't be a place on this fucking planet where you can hide!* She slammed the door before he could respond in kind.

She flashed a weak smile at Marc. "He's in a good mood."

Marc was pissed. He now had the proof she wasn't lying, though he'd been sure for weeks. "I'll protect you both. My word on it."

Angela turned away. That was the first time in over a decade that she had stood up to Kenny. There would be a payment for it. "You can't promise that. You think you know what you're up against, but you don't. He's a violent, trained killer, and in the end, blood will spill."

Marc's tone deepened. "His, not yours."

Angela hated it that he was thinking of murder. "Please don't. It's on my hands if you kill him. It would destroy me as sure as losing Charlie would. My freedom is not worth a life. I need you to swear you won't."

Marc shook his head. "I can't. You don't deserve to be treated that way. I won't sit by and watch it."

"I'll figure something out." She looked around. "For now, do you think we can stay here until the storm is over?"

Marc sighed at her obvious distraction technique, running a hand over his neck length hair in frustration. *Am I getting to her at all?*

“Sometimes, too much.”

Marc flinched.

“Well?”

“I don’t know. Let’s have a look around, and we’ll decide.” Marc let it go, not saying he could make it appear like an accident and not feel any guilt. He was also a violent, trained killer.

“Dog, in.” Marc shut the Blazer door behind the big animal, not wanting him to get distracted by things blowing in the heavy wind. “Guns and light. Move out.” If he decided to handle her man, Angie would never know. He’d lock it up so tight that even he wouldn’t be able to access the memory. *I’ve done dirty work before.*

## 5

“Wanna watch a movie while we wait for the storm to pass?”

Angela smiled sadly. She hadn’t been to a movie since Charlie was a baby. She kept herself from saying it only by looking at the poster for *A Miracle on 34th Street*, trading one pain for another. “You know how?”

“Yes.” They were on the upper balcony of the theater. The ghostly smell of popcorn and butter that still haunted the stale air was almost covered by the fishy rot blowing in with the rain through the broken doors. Marc listened harder, fighting the urge to find a room with a window. “Just have to find the generators and add some gas.”

Angela read the fading posters, ignoring her unease. After the morning they’d had, that was to be expected.

“Okay. How about *The Shadows of Fate*? I loved *The Chronicles of Riddick*.”

Marc grinned, feeling unworthy of her with his long hair and unshaven face. “You just like Vin Diesel.”

Angela laughed at his joking accusation, admiring his sexy goatee. It added to his image of an old west gunfighter. *My own John Wayne.* “It was a good story.”

“It was crap with a lot of eye candy.”

She snickered.

Marc stilled suddenly, scanning the destroyed lobby and dark, shadowy hallways where he thought bodies should be but weren't. This would have made a good place to hole up, but until they'd hit it, literally, there hadn't been anyone here. “Did you hear that?”

Angela listened for a moment, hearing only the storm and things moving with the wind. “No. What?”

“I'm not sure. It sounded like someone clearing snow with a metal shovel.”

The image made her grimace. Angela pushed at the door in her mind as her stomach dropped. They had made over a hundred miles in the last week and she was tired. The door hadn't opened on its own. Something was happening. “Up, I think. We should go up.”

*BOHICA*, Marc thought. *Bend over. Here it comes again.* “But Dog and the Blaz—”

“No time.”

The noise came again. It was a headache-causing sound of metal and stone meeting, but instead of a distant echo, it was loud and close. Vibrations rattled the walls and pounded through the floor under them.

Angela ran for the employee door to the right of the upstairs concession area. “We have to—”

The grinding noise was suddenly deafening; Marc grabbed her arm. He shoved them both into the dark stairwell as the building around them shifted, knocked forward off of its foundation.

A twenty-foot wall of mud and debris slammed into the rear of the movie theater like a bomb, blowing out walls and windows. The sound of it was like a tanker truck jackknifing. The space immediately began filling with sliding ooze. The entire back wall of the cinema crumbled under the onslaught, filling the rows of seats with thick, dark mud. The side walls held. The mud was



slowed and then finally stopped by something bigger—the strip mall around the theater that was more than a mile wide.

Sludge continued to invade open spaces, flooding the theater and parking lot around it with feet of thick, lumpy glop. It gushed over counters and ticket booths, shoving the two vehicles against the glassless front doors and then out them.

Angela and Marc flipped on their penlights to view the dim stairwell and bowed-in door.

“Is that mud?”

Marc shined his light on the bottom of the door, where thick, blackish silt was pushing underneath.

“Yeah. A slide.” He motioned her upward. “That door’s not gonna ho—”

*Craack! Swwooosh!*

The door gave way, buckling under the weight of the sopping mud flowing into the hall.

Marc nudged her further up the steep, twisted stairs. “Keep going. It’ll take a full day to dig out that way.”

She turned reluctantly. They climbed to the roof’s exit door, both listening for Dog.

Marc pulled her back before she could go out. “Wait. Always check it out first.”

“Teach me how to do this.”

He nodded. She really would have made a good Marine, a strong fighter. “Stay no more than two feet away and put your feet where I do mine. If I fall, you should come back here and dig your way out with boards or whatever you can find.”

Angela kept her head down at the thought of losing him; her mind flew to her gifts. She’d do what she had to, no matter how forbidden it was.

“The whole hillside’s gone!”

They stood just outside the doorway. Most of the roof had cracked, crumbled, was missing in places. The Show Me state gave them an awful view of missing homes, businesses, and roads that had been between the hill and the theater. Even the reeking turkey farm and rye field beside them were now a ten-foot high

piles of uneven, treacherous mud and debris for miles to the east. Small puffs of smoke and dust rose eerily in the early morning chill.

“Look.” Angela pointed to a black corner, where thick, sloppy mud was still spilling around the front of the theater. “Is that your Blazer?”

Marc was relieved. “Mud must have pushed them out. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Angela smiled. “Think we already did. I hear Dog.”

“Come on. Let’s get down from here before the whole mall collapses.”

“We need rope.”

“It’s in the Blazer with my kit.”

Marc scolded himself for leaving his kit.

Angela gestured to dead telephone wires. “Can we use those?”

Marc considered. “Maybe. The poles and wires are sprayed with a flame retardant chemical that makes them slippery. We’ll have to braid a rope together.” He began fishing in his pockets. “We’ll hope the pole wasn’t loosened by the slide.”

He cut the phone, cable, and electric wires and quickly wove them together.

“Will this work?”

“We’re gonna find out. If it breaks, try to go limp.”

“Okay...”

Marc wrapped the braided cord around his fist and then his waist.

Angela scowled fearfully. “This is the best we—?”

“Hang on!”

A second later, she was tight against his body, feet in the air, and they were dropping off the side of the building.

“Semper Fi!”

His shout gave her the courage to wrap her legs around him and keep her head up as the ground flew closer.

Marc had swung them toward the pole, hoping to slow their descent. He put his feet straight out; his boots slammed into the

wood with a jerk that made their grips on each other tighten painfully.

Legs now holding them to the slippery pole, Marc picked out a shallow-looking patch of mud and swung them for it... The braided cord snapped under their weight.

They dropped to the ground with a hard, wet thud.

They landed with her on top, legs pinned around his waist. Angela winced as the layer of mud shifted beneath them, putting pressure on her knee. "You okay?"

His eyes were shut. She leaned in, muddy hands feeling for his pulse. "Marc?"

Dazed but aware that she was getting upset, Marc opened his eyes and said the first thing that came to mind. "Never have I seen anything so beautiful."

Angela blushed, fighting the urge to lean down and kiss his pouty lips in relief. "If you say so. How about getting off my leg?"

They were on their feet a second later. Marc reached for her. "Let me see."

Angela flinched away, slinging mud from her hands. "I'm fine. Let's check on Dog."

Marc followed her, frowning. Another side effect of her man or the life she'd led?

*Neither, his heart whispered. She feels the attraction too. She's not scared. She's interested and feeling guilty about it.*

That made sense. Angie and loyalty went hand in hand.

When Marc let the anxious wolf out, Dog eagerly rushed to check them both over. *Did you see that shit?! It was a wall of shit!*

Angela took that minute to scan what was left of the town for survivors. She still hoped they might be able to help if someone was stuck, or maybe leave food, but there was only silence. Kirksville was a ghost town. It made her think of the History Channel. Would archeologists discover all the bodies that must be buried under that mile-long stretch of thick mud hundreds of years from now and try to figure out what had happened?

"We got lucky."

Angela didn't say anything, sure it was more than luck. Fate had allowed both of them to survive repeatedly. Was it because it wanted something from them, something bigger than just their tiny lives?

The two Blazers were mud-splattered, the glass on Marc's side window cracked, but other than dents in the fender and bumper, both vehicles had held up despite being shoved through the windows by a wall of mud. They climbed into their seats with squelches, grimaces, and shared shrugs. They were alive. It had been a good day.

As they drove, Angela stewed on her reaction to Marc reaching for her. She had wanted to melt into his embrace! She was no longer able to ignore the intimacy that was growing.

"You okay back there?"

She flashed her light in response. She'd been a fool not to call him all those years ago.

"Ready to go till dark?"

She picked up the mike. "And then some. You lead, I'll follow."

"Copy that."

They had been traveling together for a month now; they'd come through five hundred miles of heartbreaking, gut wrenching, unbelievable horror. Missouri was no different from Indiana, Virginia, or Ohio except, the ground here felt and smelled worse. They had seen their first mutation yesterday. The single black ant had watched them alertly as they went by. It had drawn attention because it was too big and the shape was too odd. When Angela had stopped, Marc had waited while she squashed the freak under her tires. It had been a powerful moment for him, seeing Angie so appalled by something that she'd decided it didn't have the right to exist anymore. He had never felt closer to her than at that moment. It was how he had spent most of his adult life.

"Three o'clock, down low."

Angela scanned, then immediately hit the brakes, searching for a clear path to her target.

"Use your gun this time."

Angela didn't fight the urge to destroy.

"Slow down. Don't scare them off."

The small colony of mutated ants didn't stray from their slow, disorderly course through the dying switch grass. They didn't seem afraid of the tires that rolled closer, but the witch said they were aware. She could feel the scent of alarm coming from them.

Angela slid her window down.

"That's far enough."

The witch protested the distance, but Angela agreed. She could hit them from here if she tried and Marc knew it. He wanted her to use this as a lesson too.

*My how we've changed*, the witch commented as anger and revulsion took over Angela's trigger finger. *Not a killer, huh?*

Angela ignored the hurtful jab. These mutations couldn't be left free to turn America into a cheap horror film. Angela opened fire.

The ants tried to flee, panic-stricken. Angela took a savage, guilty pleasure in their destruction, getting the last one with her tire as it darted for cover under the Blazer.

Marc was impressed and aroused. He struggled to keep it from his voice as he keyed the mike. "Very good. Ready?"

"Yes. Let's roll."

They traveled until it was almost dark; the land around them was wet, deceitful-looking. By the time they hit higher, dryer ground, the mud had molded to them like a second skin.

Marc chose to make camp on a flat, almost deserted stretch of highway where the only cover was two moss-dotted dogwood trees, both without a single bloom.

Angela laughed as she got out. "You look like an abused dog."

Marc snickered and stomped to the rear of his Blazer, trying to dislodge some of the dried mud. "Feel like one."

"Let's make a shower."

He thought about it for a minute, then began to gather a mental list. "Got an empty gallon jug?"

“In the back, under the sleeping bag. I’ll get us something to eat. You make us a shower?”

Marc snapped off a salute. “You got it.”

## 6

“Where should we set it up at for the showers?” The wolf was out roaming the breezy darkness around them, and they had tested his crude invention on the dinner dishes. Now, he wanted to be clean.

Angela had already considered that. She tossed a blanket onto the roof of his Blazer and moved one of the jugs they had warmed to the hood. When she turned, his face was red. “What’s wrong?”

“Who’s gonna hold your towel?”

Angela hid her nervousness. “I’ll pull my Blazer alongside. Once we open the doors and hang a couple of sheets, it’ll be fine.”

“Cool.” Marc got busy, hoping this wasn’t hard on her. The sheets weren’t for him. He had showered with ten other naked men in the room nearly every day for years. His flush had come from the image of her naked and soapy that flooded his mind.

Angela parked her Blazer in the right place, then climbed onto the roof and held the sheets while Marc adjusted them around the doors.

“You first.” Angela began opening the supplies she’d already placed on the hood.

Marc took off his Colts and entered the cozy four-by-four area. As he began undressing, Angela lit a smoke, trying not to imagine his every action but failing as she kept watch on the dark Missouri landscape. Her sharp gaze picked out shadowy forms of mountains to the east that she assumed were the Ozarks. Everything appeared normal here, but she wasn’t fooled.

*Rap-rap-rap-rap!*

Angela fumbled for her gun. She felt Marc’s displeasure even though she couldn’t see it.

“It’s just a woodpecker.”

“This time of night?”

“Yep. Everything’s screwed up now for them, too.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Don’t be, just remember it. Once you familiarize yourself with the sounds of your surroundings, you’ll only react to what’s not normal for that environment. Your mind will sort it out for you.”

Angela smiled, grateful for him and all she was learning. Marc was the perfect teacher. He never made her feel stupid or acted like he was better.

Angela heard his dog tag clink. Her mouth went dry at the thought of his naked chest. His belt buckle was next, then a zipper and a rustle of jeans that made her heart pound.

“Hit me, woman.”

Angela slowly began pouring warm water into the shower. *I didn’t hear underwear...*

She sucked in a surprised breath when her body responded to that image.

“Soap, please.”

That brought a new set of images; she was careful not to touch his wet fingers as she handed him the blue cake.

“Washrag?”

She got it quickly.

When he finally called for a rinse, she was relieved. Too many feelings and memories were coming back to her, but it had to stop. A spark hadn’t been enough back then. It wouldn’t be now.

“I’m done. You can stop drooling.”

Angela flushed, stuttering in embarrassed denial.

Marc laughed, drying off. “Well, I thought it was funny.” He quickly pulled on his clean jeans and shirt, and stepped out in his bare feet. “Come on down. Your turn.”

He sat on the bumper to tug on his socks.

Angela moved slowly, fear growing at the thought of being defenseless with a man above her.

Marc felt it. Their eyes locked, spoke.

*I’m scared.*

*You can trust me.*

*...prove it?*

“Hang on.” He pulled on his boots and then dug out another blanket that he tossed over the top of the makeshift shower. He left a small opening for pouring water. “If it gets lighter, you’ll know I’m peeking.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Angie. You know that.”

Marc kept up a steady stream of chatter about their travel plans as she washed, not letting the vibes become sexual for even an instant. She’d asked for proof. He gave it to her.

Angela hurried, body tingling from her hands and thoughts. By the time she finished, she had relaxed more than either of them had thought she would.

Marc moved to the fire as she dressed, making a half pot of hot chocolate with their last pack of mix.

Angela joined him on the blanket he’d put out, taking a mug with a smile. Chocolate was always welcome. She sipped it as she dug her brush from her kit.

Marc got his kit out and started working on both his guns. Marc watched her while he cleaned the weapons, unwilling to look away from the flames dancing over her black curls and pale skin. “I can do that without ripping all your hair out. The birds could make a nest with what you’ve thrown into the fire every night.”

Angela’s first thought was *no*. “Deal. You battle the tangles, I’ll roll.”

His surprised, happy look kept her from withdrawing the offer. She surrendered the brush reluctantly when he held out a hand.

Marc shifted behind her and knelt down. He started with the damp ends, aware of how tense her posture was.

It was an uncertain moment for Angela. She listened with a thumping heart, hearing leaves rustling in the soft breeze, the gravel crunching under Dog’s paws as he returned, panting... She waited for footsteps and gunfire. Kenny could be here by now.

Dog sniffed their feet, their beds, and then curled up near the fire.



Angela told herself to relax. The wolf would hear anyone sneaking around, even a Marine. Besides, she wasn't doing anything wrong. She got her journal out to prove that.

By the time he had gotten a third of the way up her small waist, Angela had relaxed. Marc eased down, legs on either side of her. She tensed again as his big body surrounded hers, but when he only continued to work on her damp curls; she continued writing in her journal.

Marc wondered if she would note today's escape in her journal. She'd had him telling stories every night for the first few weeks, but she hadn't asked for one lately. He suddenly wondered why. Had his tale of betrayal and self-preservation during Katrina bothered her that much?

"Not so much your part. You followed orders." She closed her journal and dug a joint from her case. "It just makes me sad all those people were hurt."

Marc agreed. "I almost left the Marines over it. I mean, we could hear them screaming for help. How's a guy supposed to live with that?"

Angela wanted to comfort him, but she was afraid to say the wrong thing and break the peacefulness. She did the best she could. "They wouldn't let you help. You were knocked out when you tried to anyway. Nothing you could do."

*Pop!*

Angela jumped into his arms as the log in the fire exploded into a shower of sparks.

Marc was pleased when she laughed and didn't move away. He kept his hands working, almost holding her now.

When he finished, he put the brush down and rested his chin on her shoulder. "You got that lit yet?"

Angela's stomach tightened at the feel of his warm breath on her cheek, but she didn't pull away. "It'll burn, but it won't be pretty. Stale doesn't describe this shit."

He chuckled, fishing in his pockets for a lighter. When he leaned in to share the flame, their bodies made gentle contact for the first time in fifteen long years.

Angela's heart immediately settled into a rhythm of a peace that she hadn't felt in a long time.

"Look, honey. The moon."

She leaned back against Marc's hard chest to peer up. "It's a good sign." She still didn't move away. "We need more of those."

They smoked in silence; Angela let the warmth and comfort of Marc's body carry her away. She was safe, if only for this moment.

Her lashes fluttered when he slid an arm around her to pass the joint. Caught up in the good moment, Marc couldn't resist putting a soft kiss on her smooth cheek. "Never did I see such beauty, such courage, such passion, and such fear in her eyes. The lonely heart demands and the mind refuses, but the body, the core, pulses with need." He inhaled and passed, continuing to speak his poetry as they relaxed in clean jeans and matching Marine sweatshirts. "Never did I see such hair, dark as the night, and lips of love, red as a rose. A body that tempts me, begs me, and blue eyes that follow me into my dreams and beyond. Forgive me these careless slips of shameless flattery. I cannot explain, with mere words, what you mean to me. Hold to the truth, to your heart, to love... To us."

Angela rested her cheek against his chin, pushing away the voice now screaming of Kenn's anger. "It's beautiful."

"It's the way you make me feel, what you make me see. My life was so empty without you."

Hers, too. Other than her son, she'd had no one she could love or trust. When Marc wrapped his arms around her, she relaxed against him. The long day had worn her down.

*Don't lie to yourself*, her heart scolded.

Angela faced it this time. She was too aware of the man behind her to keep denying it. Marc was the only one who had ever understood her and what she needed. When he kissed her jaw again, she said nothing to make him stop.

"You smell good." He rubbed his cheek against hers, sweet vanilla assaulting his senses. The feel of his lips on her skin sent an unexpected shiver of pleasure into her stomach.

“Are you cold?” He tightened his arms around her.

Angela flushed, nodding so he would pull the blanket around them and make their innocent embrace more private.

Aware that things were going too fast, Marc wrapped the quilt around them anyway and pulled another cover over their legs. As he wrapped himself around her, she slipped her hand into his.

Marc sucked in a breath, heart skipping.

They sat together in silence, both very aware of the other, yet content to just be so close.

The day caught up to Angela quickly. When she was asleep in his arms, Marc gently laid them down and pulled the covers up. He cradled her, loving every second. As he buried his face in her hair, he placed a long, slow kiss to her neck that gave him chills and jerked her eyes open.

Marc forced himself to stop despite how hard it was. “Night, honey. See you in the morning.”

“Yes, you will,” she mumbled groggily, already falling back to sleep.

Marc joined her, the wolf at their feet.

Chapter Thirty-One

# The Devil And His Minions

March 19<sup>th</sup>

1

**D**illan and Dean made it to the filthy slaver camp at dawn, pulling three middle-aged women and a strikingly beautiful teenager on rawhide ropes. The females had all come from Kimball, Nebraska, where the brothers had waited out a dust storm.

Surrounded by a wall of mountains, the slaver camp was a sprawling, unorganized mess of mud-spattered, bullet-ridden vehicles and torn, dusty tents that stretched across Highway 287. They were out of sight and sound of the next town, with trees, charred frames of cars, and ranch homes as a border. One house had been reduced to a blackened frame with antireligious phrases sprayed on its sheds and outbuildings. It had been targeted due to being covered in Christmas decorations. The hundreds of statues and displays were riddled with bullet holes and melted by Molotov cocktails, but there was too much to destroy all of it. Now, it stood as a warning that the old world was gone.

Smoke swirled sharply from dying fires. Hordes of flies buzzed and landed, swarmed, and resettled over the garbage dump behind the camp. Corpses of all ages lay there.

The four females on ropes didn't react to these horrors as they stumbled by. They just concentrated on moving their feet so they could draw another breath. The rawhide was shrinking, rubbing away the skin on their necks until they were slowly choking all the time.

Dean and Dillan came into the camp openly, not expecting to see guards; they didn't. Word had spread. Many of the places ahead of the Mexicans had already emptied before they arrived.

That would work in the twins' favor. Empty towns meant no women and that might cost Cesar leadership if it continued long enough. The twins had an offer that would be to the man's advantage. Or so he would think if they did this right.

They had made over four hundred miles in two weeks. Alternating driving, they had stayed on the move until they stopped near the Nebraska-Colorado state line to pass the storm and ferret out a few females for Cesar. Despite owing Cesar their lives, Dean and Dillan felt no loyalty toward the mean little man. They did respect him for his quick, brutal methods of control, but if not for their failure with the witch, they would have never returned. It was one more thing they hated her for. They had been gone a long time. Cesar was unstable, making it hard to know how they would be received. He might order them killed before they had a chance to make the offer.

Few of the passed out and sleeping slavers noticed their arrival. Those who did acknowledged them while ignoring the bandages. They scanned the women, then averted their gazes. Word had also spread about the brothers. Despite their long absence, now was clearly a bad time to draw their attention. Even the camp mutts, starving, mean mixes of indecipherable origins, shied from them.

Dean and Dillan went to the rear of the dirty area, to the reeking, rusted semis. They shoved the cringing captives into an empty one, locking them in. These were holding pens for slaves. There were no guards here either. The already broken women had no courage left to run, but those who were fresh wouldn't make it far before every man in camp was on them. A loose slave was fair game.

With their noses full of holding cell decay and the harsh odor of gasoline, the twins went to the center of the muddy, stinking site, certain they would find the leader there. His tent would be surrounded by his men so if they were attacked, he wouldn't be hit first. Cesar was smart, ruthless—exactly what they needed.

The grungy green tent was indeed in the middle. It was one of only a few dozen vinyl shelters. Most of the men preferred to see

open sky above them after years of not seeing it at all from prison and detention centers. It was also a lot easier to just wrap up in a blanket and roll under a truck.

The twins could see the Loveland, Colorado skyline lit up in flames and lined in thick, black smoke. Their eyes were drawn to the charred frame of a jetliner resting in a thicket of piñon trees to the right of the burning town. Surrounded by a muddy, devastated landscape, and covered in red dust, the crushed plane was more unbelievable than the destroyed city behind it.

Loud snores echoed under dogs yelping, women crying and, the pop of neglected fires, but there was instant silence as the twins slid inside the center lean-to...and then a gun cocked.

“Who is there?”

The smells of sex, blood, and violence mixed badly with the cigar smoke in the dark tent. The cautious brothers stayed in the shadows, so there wasn't a clear shot.

“Dean, and my brother, Dillan.”

Their gazes lingered on the naked teenager chained to the center pole of Cesar's filthy tent like a dangerous dog. She was curled into a ball, showing a body they immediately wanted.

Jennifer felt it, tensing. Other than that, she didn't move. She knew better.

“We have an offer for you.”

“And, an untouched gift.”

Cesar grunted in recognition, putting his weapon under his pillow.

The twins grimaced as Cesar yawned and added bad breath to the other strong odors.

“So, you have returned. I did not think you would.”

A candle flared to life, giving them a better view of the Mexican and the bloody girl at his feet. Her swollen face and crusted thighs said she'd passed a rough night.

“What happened?” The slaver pulled up his cruddy jeans. The material was tacky with dried blood—the girl's. “Who attacked you?”

“A witch,” the bald brothers answered together.

The bearded slaver puffed on a cigar. Cesar had never been sure about these two; he studied them while pulling on muddy boots. If not for the good work they had done for him in the past, he would kill them here now. “A bruja?”

They nodded at the same time, tones full of hatred.

“Yes, magic.”

“Spells. A witch.”

Cesar tried to figure out what they could hope to gain from such a lie. When he found nothing, he let himself consider what it could do for him. He was no stranger to the occult and its mysteries. If the twins were telling the truth, if they had found what the old world hadn't, his plans to seed America with his bastards and control it through them would be unstoppable. “You have seen this?”

The twins told him everything that had happened. They offered no excuses for their failure, and they didn't talk up their actions. It convinced the Mexican. The mercenaries believed what they were saying. *Is it possible? A real witch?*

All three men looked over as the flap opened to reveal a stocky Mexican in crisscrossed gun belts. An ugly scar stretched across his cheek and ran up his nose, then over his brow. It cut his face in half and gave him the appearance of someone who liked to cause pain. “Everything is okay?”

Cesar waved him in with his deformed hand.

The twins ran scornful leers over the new man's broken, yellow teeth, baggy shirt, and torn, muddy pants, but they both recognized José for what he was—a possible threat to their plans. “No, but it cannot be helped. Get the men up and ready for tomorrow. Then give Richard the signal. Tres light red y uno green.” Cesar hated the sound of the broken English coming from his mouth. He hated anything American, but many of those here didn't know their native language. He had little choice if he wanted to be understood.

José swept the hermanos with clear dislike. He had been against Cesar letting these two live, though he had voted to spare Rick.

The mercenaries smirked back at him.

“We have esclavas in truck six.”

“See to them.”

José bared broken teeth at them before ducking back out into the heavy wind and mud. Men who were about to come toward him with questions changed their mind when they saw the fury on his face.

José was a cousin and not as deadly as Cesar, but he had earned a vicious reputation with his temper. He was left alone when he stomped to the trucks, worrying about the twins. They were hardasses. If they decided they wanted control of Cesar’s camp, there was a good chance they would get it. In Mexico, they had been the ones to call when no one else could get the job done.

Wind beat against the tent. In the thick silence after José ducked out, all three men could hear the girl’s nervous breathing.

Jennifer had been with him since the week of the war. Fear for her life was something that never left, even when she was alone.

Cesar stared at the brothers with a hard, calculating expression. “There is no way to explain these things?”

“No.”

“We followed her for almost a month. She was alone until she sent out the wave of power.”

“She conjured a protector.”

They appeared desperate to Cesar, certainly not the same men who had left him after they’d conquered NORAD together. “You know where she goes?”

“She’s traveling northwest, never deviates.”

Cesar scowled. “There is a group near Yellowstone that calls for survivors.”

“You hear them this far away?”

Cesar frowned deeper, pulling a beaten sombrero from the debris littered floor. He slapped it on over his tightly kinked black hair. “Sí. Your bruja is going to them?”

“Maybe. We think she’s hunting for family.”

Cesar’s displeasure grew, scanning the grimy bandana around Dillan’s bandaged wrist. The white of the gauze under it had long



since turned brown. “We must get to her before she reaches them. This group is big, organized. A witch would make them a threat to me.” Cesar’s mind raced. “You can take her?”

Dean shook his head, while Dillan shrugged.

Cesar felt a tremor of worry. He had never seen a time when the twins disagreed on anything. *The woman’s protector must truly be strong.*

Cesar saw Dillan grimace when he flapped his hand to deflect a determined fly. The injury to his arm was obviously bad. *It is her man they want, her soldier.* Surely he was the one responsible. Then why say a woman? That was worse. Either way, it came down to revenge. “So, this is why you’ve come back.” It wasn’t a question; he glared at them, thinking it wouldn’t hurt to agree for now. “Mine during the day, yours at night?”

They both nodded eagerly.

Cesar grinned, gold front tooth flashing. “It will be good. We will set a trap, kill her soldier, and have her.”

“That’s not enough!”

“She knows things!”

Cesar fingered the handle of his hoja, hating it that they were always so disrespectful.

The injured brothers waited for him to pull the knife and hand over his camp. Either way, they were determined to pit his men against the witch.

“You have a plan?” Anyone else, Cesar would have already challenged, but he wasn’t sure he could win against the two vicious assassins with just the gun under his pillow and a hangover.

Dean’s leer lingered on the chained girl, but he was aware that the Mexican was now an enemy instead of an ally. He would need to be handled as such. “We’ll follow her; figure out where she’s going. If it’s a good place, we can take shelter there for the winter.”

“You are estúpido to let her reach familia. Then you face dos brujas, yes?”

The twins were pissed at the insult. They had killed for less.

Cesar kept his hand on the knife. *I will at least take one of them with me to hell.*

“It’s better to control them both, than to have the missing one ambush us.” Dean didn’t want to kill Cesar and lose half the men outside in the fight for leadership that would ensue. “We can’t find the other one until she leads us to them.”

“How will you get to them once she reaches the safety of this Haven?”

“You’ll surround the group and demand they hand over both witches. We’ll pick off a few easy targets, use your inside traitor to cause chaos, and then make it clear we followed her. The other people there will hand her over to save themselves.”

The other brother picked up the explanation. “Once they do, we’ll make her use her power against any defenses the group has. You’ll be in control of a safe area, new supplies, a witch, and fresh slaves—all without having to lose men.”

Cesar needed proof to go through so much. Their word wasn’t enough. *This has to be a trick.* “The men will not believe.”

“They will later, but for now, it doesn’t matter. They don’t even have to know. Just keep going north and give them whores and whiskey.”

Dillan gestured. “Didn’t you tell us you wanted to take Cheyenne and Casper by May?”

Cesar’s face lit up greedily. “Sí, and my men know it.”

“Good. That will put us on an intercept course. Dean and I will track her; we’ll also find some bait to send in with Rick.”

Cesar considered it. He had used the traitor repeatedly. No one ever suspected him until it was too late because he was white. The Americanos should have remembered their own history. Whites were not more trustworthy than the Russians or even himself, for that matter. They were only a bit more careful to cover their asses.

“Less than a month from now, you’ll own Wyoming, and probably have a good start on Nebraska. We’ll be a day or two from the tank hidden near there. Best of all, you’ll rule the entire western half of this country, from the Nevada wastelands to the Midwest corn belt.”

Dean finished it off. “Plus, this group will know you’re coming and lose courage.”

“America is dead. I will show them!” Cesar clenched his fist, the missing fingers making it a grotesque motion. He didn’t see the looks the twins were giving his young slave. She was his private property; he didn’t share. He wanted to be sure the bastards he left were his and every man in his camp knew he would kill the girl and the man to be sure of it. “It shall be as you say. Drink, smoke, rest. Tomorrow, we take Windsor. Then you shall have the revenge you deserve.”

## 2

Cesar invaded the untouched town of Windsor under the cover of darkness and a violent thunderstorm; his men blocked escape routes at all four entrances to the city.

They split up, and began moving in at 4am. They gave no mercy to anyone, like they hadn’t in any of the other towns they’d taken along Interstate 25. Moving inward, the gang conquered Windsor over the next six hours, burning as they went through. The few who managed to escape would have nothing to return to.

Doors were kicked in and terrified females were dragged away, floors and bedclothes soaking up the blood of their husbands and fathers. Those found running the radio broadcasting American values were tortured, beheaded, and dismembered, then left with Mexican flags draped over their faces. The rest of the males were killed where they were found, babies were left to die alone, and female after female was raped, beaten, broken.

During the first hours of this hell, the twins were back in Cesar’s tent, taking what was his. They snuck back to join the slaughter after they filled Jennifer with seed.

Cesar never knew they hadn’t been with him the entire time. A few of his sharper men could have told him, but that might mean a confrontation between them. Cesar’s men weren’t sure he would come out on top. The twins were hard, but none of Cesar’s crew wanted them in control. The stocky Mexican was still followed

without hesitation when they got to Fort Collins and found it abandoned. Word had spread that the slavers were close.

Chapter Thirty-Two  
**Success And Failure**  
March 21st

1

*T*his has to be close enough. Adrian waited for Kenn to finish updating the Eagle who was about to take over his 8am-2pm shift. Jeremy was on Neil's team, level three. He'd only earned the right to have point last night.

Adrian sighed, tired and worried as he waited for his people to get ready for another day of traveling. They were on the edge of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands, off 387, and while he was glad to be east of 25, pictures had verified Casper and Buffalo were ghost towns.

It made his stomach burn. One was buried, the other submerged. His warning hadn't been heard, hadn't mattered. They hadn't picked up a single survivor since the dust storm, which made these people in Cheyenne all the more important.

Adrian swept the mountains surrounding them. Would the evergreens up there have mold like the fir and pine trees here did? Would it smell like smoke and unburied dead? Were there bodies of deer, moose, people? He was almost sure they would see for themselves at some point.

Adrian changed as Kenn came to his side, sharp tone of a drill instructor replacing the calm voice the camp usually heard. The slaver rampage had traveled up Interstate 25 faster than they had estimated. Cheyenne had called again. "You're *the Man* on this one, Marine. You ready?"

"Locked and loaded, sir. Kyle's team is stowing the beans, bags, and bullets."

"They're good to go, eager to prove themselves. What about you? How do you feel?"

Kenn's expression didn't change as he took in Adrian's dusty jeans and wrinkled camouflage shirt. The boss had been up all night again. "Good, ready."

"In and out, Marine, just like with the old lady. But if not, if something goes wrong and you have to fight?"

"Then we'll kill as many as we can."

It may have been wrong in the old world, but it was all that was left to them now. Adrian only ordered it whenever he thought the crime warranted it. This definitely did. The slavers were a growing threat he felt dutybound to eliminate. But he couldn't yet, not against one hundred fifty armed men who had become good at conquering survivors. The stories from refugees who had escaped said he needed to tread carefully.

Kenn seemed to feel it too, repeating himself to make sure his boss knew. "If any opportunity comes up to do damage, we'll take it. *I'll* take it."

Adrian clapped him on the arm, satisfied Kenn meant it. They had been falling behind and would arrive later than expected. That made the mission more dangerous, putting the Eagles and the slavers near Cheyenne at roughly the same time. "Watch your six. We need you."

"Semper Fi."

"Oorah!"

A deep frown planted itself across Adrian's face as Kenn and the Eagle support team left. He hated it that their first encounter with the dangerous men would happen without him there to judge the threat.

Adrian hit the button on the tape player in his pocket, listening intently. *Am I missing anything?*

*"SOS, Safe Haven! This is Cheyenne! SOS!"*

*"Go ahead, Overloaded."*

*"They've hit Wellington! We can see the smoke. People are coming here, but I can't care for them! We need help!"*

Adrian hit stop. The desperation made him consider changing places with Kenn, but he couldn't. The Marine wasn't ready for leadership of an entire camp yet. For this mission though, he was perfect. Kyle and his team were making steady progress every day, and though only ten men were getting into the armored vehicles, they would be lethal.

Fighting a migraine, Adrian went on his rounds. Another forty souls would bring their number up to one hundred seventy-seven. They were a week from Cheyenne, but there was no way the whole camp could go and get back out without being seen. Kenn and Kyle would do it in two or three days. Adrian knew he would worry the whole time.

The growing camp seemed almost empty once Kenn and the Eagles faded from view. Adrian didn't like the feeling of being incomplete, but never doubted that they were. He hated to have people out of Safe Haven. He only relaxed when the entire flock was under his watchful care. They'd been lucky so far that everyone who'd gone out had returned. He had increased their chance of success with the addition of armed escorts.

Adrian looked forward to a time when he could settle them down and show people how to provide for their needs, instead of scouring this broken land like scavengers. Now camped in the heart of the Thunder Basin National Grassland, they were fifteen miles from the South Dakota state line. The tall pines, blue grass, and forget-me-nots were comforting sights after all the horror along 387. If not for the heavy fog, they would already be back on the road now, tired faces gawking through the windows at a muddy landscape that included a crashed government chopper.

Adrian tensed, feeling the uneasy mix of power, of magic coming. The landscape wavered, changed. He saw a survivor of the crash, her outline tall, thin, tough.

He looked away from the vision. It had been so long since he'd had one that he'd forgotten how it made his heart clench.

Hoping she was one of his, Adrian got moving again, feeling a little bitter with fate. He had been promised magic, but so far,

he'd only gotten a gifted teenager who was too young to really help yet.

Adrian lit a smoke. *It doesn't matter.* When Charlie was needed, at least he would be here, already under the discreet eyes of the Eagles. They had been told to watch him right after the restless teenager had gotten his own tent—the result of a noisy fight where Charlie had almost hurt one of the boys he was bunking with. Kenn's cadet was a bit unstable.

*Unhappy*, Adrian corrected himself. Even the job with the veterinarian wouldn't be enough to hold him here. Something had Charlie's mind, pulling at him. When Kenn returned, Adrian hoped to ferret out whatever it was.

Today held a full shift of activities. The biggest was a towing contest. Their clearing times had improved because he'd made it into a race to see who could do it fastest without breaking any safety rules. Tonight, the first crew leader would be picked by whoever won. With Kenn gone, more people would be willing to try. There was little his right-hand man wasn't good at. It even sounded different without him here. The people were subdued somehow without his energetic, boisterous XO.

Once he got them a couple hundred miles further from 25 and the slavers, Adrian planned to travel southeast for a while, toward Georgia and the miles of caves waiting there. He hadn't thought of a better place yet. He dreaded having to confirm that going into the ground was the only way they would survive. His other option was too far away to consider without more help.

Comforted by the steady crunch of boots guarding their perimeter, Adrian moved by Kenn's improved mess—where coffee and food lines were open on both sides—and came to the traveling emergency class. Tents flapped in his ear; he paused to listen to part of a lesson, assaulted by the odors of cologne, sweat, and cigar smoke. He loved it. It was the smell of life. It beat the hell out of the other shit they were usually inhaling.

A small group was gathered around the rear of a big van, watching Peggy Ann Kelly, the single, 40-something mother of little Becky, change a flat tire. This class had solved the need for



one crew to do all the labor, all the time. This way, the entire camp did it.

The cute, reddish-blond woman was sweating and greasy. Most of the men watching would have done it for her to get her attention, but Adrian had made it clear women needed to be able to fend for themselves too. The males watching offered advice but no actual help.

Peggy struggled to break the last lug nut.

Adrian denied the bald professor who stepped forward to help. The portly man carried his profession proudly, from his thick glasses to his plaid patterned suit. Adrian didn't look away from the brooding glare the teacher sent his way. He also didn't keep his voice down. "She has to learn. What if she gets separated?"

The gusting wind carried his words further than the class.

The bald man frowned, aware of the thick, disapproving silence from the men surrounding him. "You sure it isn't because I'm black and she's white?"

Adrian stiffened. Joseph had been here long enough to know how things worked. *Is he holding onto that shit?* They didn't have many other races represented here yet, but that wasn't because Adrian didn't want them. The war had split more than families. The old segregation lines had slammed down, making most races search out their own kind. It was something he needed people like this bitter teacher to help him conquer. "You're from Salt Lake City. You were almost dead when we found you. A group of men had beaten you so bad we didn't think you'd live at first. There were only twenty of us then, and no one knew what to do with you."

"Because I'm a nigger."

The men around them muttered uneasily. No one used that word here, not even in joking. Adrian would throw them out.

Adrian's tone was sharp. "We had our basic laws, but race was something we hadn't even talked about. We saw you bleeding and we had to make a choice. Do we let you die or let you in and find a way to deal with all the problems mixing races inevitably brings?"

Adrian had the attention of everyone close enough to hear. He used it to bring them together and issue a warning. “We made the choice in about fifteen seconds, Joseph. You’re not black or white in this camp. You’re a survivor and that’s the only one that matters here. Leave the race war in the past, where it belongs, and things will continue to improve for *everyone*. Dredge it back up, and you’ll need to find somewhere else to get food and shelter.”

Joseph quickly nodded.

Adrian kept walking, but he knew Joseph would need a lot of work before he would accept that his race wouldn’t hold him back here—only that nasty attitude would. The same was true of anyone who came through his gates. *It’s my lane or find another highway.*

## 2

“All those jeeps worry me.” Kyle lowered the binoculars.

“We’ll have to draw them out.” Kenn kept watching the armed men patrol the top and four sides of the large school where the refugees had been hiding. Two on top, one each on the sides and rear, two more were on the front doors. Maybe four more were inside, but judging from all the jeeps parked along the exits, probably more like six or ten.

*We’re outnumbered, but not by much.* Kenn frowned as thick clouds rolled through the sky and colored lightning flashed in the distance. He scanned the area again, seeing old holiday decorations that had been used for target practice, but underneath, he was evaluating how to kill them all.

Kyle was impatient. “You and I covering the top?”

Kenn didn’t answer, still finishing the plan. They hadn’t found ammo for the M16s, so that meant getting into range for handguns. When it started, a few of the targets would come out, but most of them would take up positions around the hostages, forcing a standoff. For a while. Then reinforcements would come. This was only a scouting party that had already checked in and reported their victory. It bothered Kenn that neither he nor Adrian had

expected this level of organization. *We'll have to do it quietly. No telling how far out their main group is.*

It had taken Adrian's Eagles thirty hours to get here, driving straight through in five-hour shifts. The men who hadn't driven stood guard duty when they arrived to let the others get a short rest. They had snuck in as dusk faded.

The ten men on duty hated it here. It reeked of decay; even the constant gusts of salty, smoky wind couldn't knock it down. The awful odor came from all the bodies. Thousands of them, fresh and old, littered the city, along with burnt houses, cars, businesses. There were thick drag marks in the dust left by the storm, garbage, mud-covered streets, and little pillars of smoke that signaled the path the Mexicans had taken to get here. They were in a war zone.

"What do you want to do?"

Kenn had been waiting for that edge of frustration in Kyle's voice. He stood, always feeling the need to prove who was in charge when they were on missions together. To the listening men, he said the right thing. Only Kyle would sting afterward when he remembered almost losing his cool with only silence used against him. "We kill them all."

Kenn knelt, pulling his K-BAR to draw in the damp dirt behind the big storage sheds they were using for cover. He hadn't created this plan, but these men wouldn't know that. "We go with suppressors. Take out this side, and corner. As they come out, we pick them off. If the leader comes out too, it'll all be over."

"And if we don't spot the leader?" Kyle kept the bitterness out of his tone, but not his gestures. He hated the smug Marine leading his team today. He was hoping for someone to join Safe Haven that he could support against Kenn.

Kenn slid his knife back into his muddy boot. "We'll have taken out at least half the men, and that'll leave a lot of exits without coverage. We'll look in from those trees along the windows first, then slip in and nail 'em as we find 'em. Once inside, we go for the gym, because that's where they'll be with a group of captives that size. From there, we'll do what we do best."

"They might negotiate, surrender."

Kenn frowned at Kyle's comment, checking his gear and gun. "Adrian wouldn't give them mercy. We won't either."

The other Eagles followed his lead. They had been on a few missions where hostages were involved, but there had only been one shootout. The small gang of Aryan brothers hadn't wanted to give up their captives. They had given their lives instead, but the newness of doing battle hadn't worn off yet for the Eagles.

Kenn tapped his good luck charm, a Zippo lighter he kept in his pocket. "Top four shooters with me, the rest to the sides and meet up. I'm man in the middle. On my mark... Go!"

Kenn and Kyle fired as they ran.

The two Mexican lookouts jerked at the same time, and fell together. The other man on the roof darted toward his comrades, shouting. He arched, stopped, fell as the second rush of Eagles hit the building. They came to the wall in fast waves.

Kenn and Kyle stepped into view as the front doors opened and two men walked out.

Kyle whistled, then waved a middle finger at the shocked faces.

The two men drew their guns.

The Eagles ducked out of sight as the enemy gave chase.

"One...two...three. Now!"

Moving together, their guns took out both men before they could return fire.

The two Eagles dragged the heavy bodies around the corner as Cris pointed to the other row of trees. Cris was on Kyle's team, second in command. "The banners center there. That's probably the gym."

Eight men eased up the trees a minute later, using the thick branches for cover from the ground and windows.

"Bulletproof glass." Kenn's voice was barely audible.

Kyle snickered, but the amusement didn't reach his voice. "Not today. All the Eagles are packing armor piercing rounds. Your mags too."

Kenn's mind raced as he peered through the dirty glass, seeing five armed men around fifty civilians on the gymnasium floor. Which one was the leader?

A door opened on their side of the building. A tall, thin man emerged, face hidden by his bandana. He noticed the bodies right away.

“Dedro! Ahhh!”

Kenn's shot connected, but the guerrilla's yell ruined their element of surprise. Guards came to the windows; boots ran toward them.

Kenn aimed for the jeep in front of the glass doors, trying to time it as the next rush of men came out. An earlier shot to the gas tank was already allowing a long stream of the pungent liquid to escape.

Kyle and the Eagles stayed still, waiting for the distraction Kenn was about to provide.

*Woosshhh!*

His tossed flare sparked the puddle of gas. They watched bright, orange flames flash over the concrete and scorch their way up the fuel coming from the gas tank.

*KKkaaaablammm!*

The explosion shattered half of the windows along the front of the building, throwing the jeep through the doors as they opened. The slavers rushing out were consumed in a cloud of twisted metal and hot flames.

“Fire!”

“Get out!”

“Sit down!”

The refugees were in chaos, pushing for the doors. The slaver's orders were ignored in the panic, causing the guerrillas to raise their guns and take aim at retreating figures.

“Now, Eagles! Open fire!”

Their targets were moving, mixed into the small sea of terrified civilians; slugs found chests and backs amid total chaos. Despite all the people trying to get out of the chained doors, only slavers were hit.

“Damn!” Cris examined his arm as blood dripped down the thick tree trunk. “I’m trimmed—that’s it.”

Kenn and Kyle were both relieved. Neither man ever wanted to tell Adrian they’d gotten one of his army killed.

Seeing no more enemy movement, Kenn leaned inside the shattered window. He spotted shaggy, unkempt hair, cold sores. The smell of body odor made him grimace. *No threats to my place in this group.* “US Eagle Force! Safe Haven!”

The shout echoed in the concrete room, getting attention. They looked up warily, quieting.

“Someone here named Overloaded?” Kenn grinned. “Your taxi’s waiting.”

Kyle and his men lowered each other into the room, hurrying to grab fire extinguishers as the refugees cheered.

A tall, thin man with a long cane and a dirty bandage over his head tapped toward Kenn’s window position. “What’s the word?”

“Freedom.” Kenn scanned the bodies on the floor, then the door, where Kyle and Cris were getting the small fire under control. The other men were taking up guard posts by the exits. He keyed the mike on his belt. “Mission accomplished.”

It took a little under an hour to evacuate the filthy school. It would have been one hour exactly if Kenn had swept every room, but he didn’t bother with the basement, where the dead had been stored.

As the team pulled away, no one noticed a hysterical blonde woman running up the nearby road, arms waving frantically.

They never glanced back.

### 3

Kenn brought home forty-one survivors.

Adrian met them eagerly, Seth at his side, but both men were once again disappointed. They now had a hairdresser, yet another bank teller (it wasn’t surprising to Adrian how many of them had survived. They were used to having their lives threatened), and a lot of other careers they didn’t need yet, but none of them, not even

Greg, the blind radio man, had what he was searching for. There was no fire burning in these people, just bright fear and desperation.

Adrian didn't sleep that night, sure he had passed one of his own somewhere. He chose to linger in the area for a few days. It was dangerous, considering how close they were to the slavers, but he needed the help as much as the refugees needed rescue.

*I refuse to believe I'm the last free descendant in America. I'll keep calling until someone answers.*

Chapter Thirty-Three  
**Fame And Fortune**

March 22nd  
**Pitcairn Island**

1

“**I** can’t handle that. Server’s been gone for months.”

Kendle slid the credit card into her pocket and pulled out money, ignoring the dumpy island woman’s abrupt tone.

“Cash okay?” she asked evenly.

The middle-aged storekeeper frowned. She darted a tense glance toward Luke as he waited, lounging carelessly against the small shop’s front door.

Kendle gave a sharp look of warning, pulling the clerk’s attention away from LJ. “One of those caps too.”

It was up on a shelf that required the heavy woman to climb for it, and Kendle smiled sweetly when the pie-faced female glared at her in the almost stifling heat of the general store. “Love the Dodgers. Gotta have it.”

Storekeeper or not, the woman clearly wanted to tell her to go to hell, and Kendle flashed a warning that said, *Do it at your own risk*. The air in the musty little shop was cold despite all of them sweating.

Luke shoved his hands into his jean pockets, embarrassed and yet impressed with the way Kendle was handling things. Plump but scrappy, with the air of a snob, Mary Jo had been born on the Island and hated outsiders. The fact that Kendle’s show had been popular even here made the frumpy spinster more jealous.

Luke sighed. Mary Jo also hated him. That didn’t help.

The moment was long and tense, and it was the vivid skin of the movie star that convinced Mary Jo. Kendle was obviously



tough, and the island native chose to climb the ladder for the ball cap, muttering under her breath.

Satisfied, Kendle took a moment to look around as the sharp odor of cleaning products stung her nose and smothered the hint of Luke's sexy cologne. There were neatly stacked baskets and racks, tasteful signs and pictures, and not a speck of dust to be found. The front glass windows were spotless as well, white curtains shut to dim the bright noonday sun, and Kendle was suddenly sure the woman now jabbing at numbers on her tiny calculator hadn't been the one to clean any of it.

"A hundred even."

Kendle laid the cash on the spotless counter with a frown, but said nothing at the too high price, wanting only to go. Not for herself, but for Luke, whose embarrassment she could feel. They didn't like him here. Why? Did they know his secret? It explained his reluctance to come into town to replace the things they'd lost in the storm.

Kendle met his eye in the dimness of the store. When sparks flew between them, the storekeeper shoved the full bag at her.

Kendle spun around in time to catch it before it fell to the tiled floor. "Is there a problem?"

She observed Luke's wide shoulders tense, wondering if they were about to mix it up, and knew the clerk wondered that too.

When the woman's face changed from unfriendly to mean, Kendle held up a hand. "Of course, there is. Let's do it like this. I plan to be here a while. Should I spend my money with the crazy lady across the creek?"

The storekeeper seemed surprised she knew there were other options and shook her head, voice hateful.

"No. Come in anytime."

Kendle smirked as she turned away. "Not even if you bent over and kissed my red ass! Have a great day."

Luke held the door as she swept out, regal as any Hollywood actress he'd ever seen, and he laughed at the speechless clerk. "I'd pay to see that!"

He slipped out before she could respond and went to help Kendle store their things on the cart attached to the rear of his bike.

“She always like that?”

“Yes. Wanna go to Baxter’s? They have shoes.” Luke motioned at one of the four other shack-like, brown and green stores that made up town proper on this side.

“Same attitude, right?”

“Probably, yeah.” His voice was a low mutter.

Kendle grimaced, sweeping the tiny town again. There were patches of wild roses amid clumps of Miro trees that hung over every inch of the town, creating shaded canopies housing dozens of multi-colored parrots. There were no cars, only two dirt bikes parked by theirs, and she saw the outlines of neat, white-fenced shacks in the distance she assumed were the storekeeper’s homes. There were no mailboxes, no addresses on the doors, just gravel walkways and rocking chairs on the porches. The striped barber pole on the last shop made her stomach clench with longing. She missed her home, her country.

“How about we go fishing instead?”

Luke’s face lit up, and Kendle felt her first response to him, to his happiness. There *was* something there.

“Sounds like a plan. Now?”

She chuckled, feeling soft and attractive for a change, instead of just being grateful to be alive.

Another spark flew between them that anyone lingering in shop windows felt.

“Yes, the sooner the better,” Kendle answered.

Eager to be in the cool, quiet jungle, she swung her leg over the bike, staying back to leave him room. Kendle blushed at the thought of holding tight to Luke while they were flying along. They were getting more familiar now, and it surprised her. She never would have seen herself being attracted to a calloused, big handed, suspenders and plaid-wearing war veteran.

It was a beautiful day. Sunny and warm with a cloudless blue sky above and a saltwater breeze that made her shiver. She couldn’t–

“Leaving so soon?”

Kendle saw Luke tense at the male voice and immediately knew he not only disliked the owner of it, he hated him. When she viewed the stranger, it was easy to understand why. The man was everything Luke wasn't.

Pretentious shoes, expensive slacks and Polo top, deep scorn in the thirty-something island god's green eyes. Great body and teeth, deeply tanned, manicured hands, a watch on his wrist that had probably cost more than she had made on her last show. Instead of being impressed, Kendle only wondered vaguely if the watch still worked. She had no interest in a trust fund baby.

“Introduce us,” the man ordered.

Kendle stood up when she witnessed the muscle in Luke's stubble-covered jaw start twitching.

“Be careful, pasta boy, or—”

Kendle stepped between them before Luke could finish the threat, holding her hand out. The menace in Luke's body language was a surprise to Kendle and a whiff of cooking meat to the lonely woman inside.

“Roberts, Kendle. And you are?”

“In awe of your beauty,” oozed the tall playboy as he gently kissed her hand. Keeping ahold of her, he introduced himself, flashing expensive veneers. “I'm Ethan Kraft, oh goddess of survival. I own this island.”

“Just the town, fader,” Luke corrected.

Kendle pulled her hand away with a warning look that said not to get too friendly.

Ethan frowned at the nice term for someone who can't follow through and pretended not to see the red-skinned movie star wipe her hand down the side of her jeans, as if he might have contaminated her. Luke obviously saw it though, because his grin widened.

“Give me time,” Ethan boasted arrogantly, flashing beautiful dimples at Kendle.

She grimaced at the unspoken implication he would have her too. *Not in a million years.*

“You ready?” Luke interrupted, indicating the bike.

“Yes.”

Ethan stepped forward, meaning to take her hand again.

Luke, unsure of his intentions, slapped both palms against the playboy’s hard chest and shoved him, forcing Ethan to retreat to avoid falling.

“Don’t ever touch her unless she says you can! You got it?”

Ethan bristled, but wasn’t sure about crossing Luke physically, despite being younger. “Sure.”

His face was hard as he watched them ride off together. Maybe she didn’t know what kind of man Luke was. Ethan strode to the store he had spotted her leaving. Maybe he would make it his job to see that she found out.

## 2

Later, with the sun fading behind a layer of ugly clouds rolling in from the southeast, Kendle watched Luke cast out over the calm water of the second fishing hole they’d tried. The first had been full of debris.

“You never talk about yourself. You know everything about me.”

Luke wondered how he had fared in her comparison to Ethan. “Does it matter?”

Kendle scanned her twitching line, vaguely listening to frogs and gulls calling to each other. “Sometimes.”

She heard him sink the pole into the ground next to his chair and then there was silence, but she knew he was nervously waiting for her questions to begin. So she didn’t ask. Not only was she living on his dime out here, he had been good to her, understanding, and she wouldn’t push. If he wanted to tell her, he would do it on his own.

Kendle dug her bare feet and hands into the bur grass around them, still in love with the land. She could hear the rustle of a small animal in the underbrush, dragonflies zipping over the surface of the water. She thought she could even hear the ants and beetles

crawling over the salty soil, and she held in the tears only by willpower. She was alive!

Luke outwardly relaxed when she didn't speak, went back to enjoying the beautiful day, but inside, he was worrying over what to say. He had a horrible secret, and while she hadn't found out today, eventually, she would. He needed to be the one to tell her.

"You want to go to town for lunch? Stacey's Place has good chicken sandwiches."

Kendle jerked her line hard, felt the fish get hooked.

"Not really. This is fine," she lied, thinking if she never ate another piece of any kind of seafood, it would be too soon.

Luke got the net for her as she reeled in her catch. He was aware of her as a woman, of how tiny she was compared to him, and he swept her curves as she fought with their dinner.

A lot more comfortable with each other now, the strength of his attention had grown since that wet ride in the dark. Slow and easy was the ticket to win her over. He could probably try now, but he hesitated to get closer to her than he already was. She was pure, he was tainted, and when she found out, their time together would be over.

The end of her time with Luke was something Kendle had found herself thinking about more and more. It wasn't right for her to stay with him. It didn't look good to the townspeople, but the thought of not being around him made her hurt. Soon, she would have to leave or flout convention to stay.

Her health had dramatically improved, red skin finally fading to brown, and she was better emotionally too, unless a smell or sound hit her the wrong way, flashed her to the ocean and its relentless grip. When that happened, she sought Luke's comfort, instinctively knowing he understood what she was going through. Some nights she crawled into his bed and huddled against his warm body, shivering, sweating. He never mentioned it in the morning, just gently shifted her off his big chest so he could get up. He was easygoing, didn't expect much, and the only time she'd seen him even close to upset was today. With Ethan Kraft.

"You don't like the people here much, do you?"

Luke dropped the small grouper into their catch holder. “No. We don’t care about the same things.”

Kendle understood. The people here were rich, ostracized from civilization for one reason or another, while Luke was...what? A hermit? Definitely. A criminal? Maybe. Either way, he’d been nothing but great to her, and she would respect his privacy and not ask what his crime had been. It would eventually come out, and she would face it straight on, but for now, he was a comfort she wasn’t ready to give up. Kendle knew there were choices coming, hard ones that would take strength she wasn’t sure she had, but for now, it was just the two of them in paradise.

Luke’s thoughts were again in line with hers, eager to put it off. It was a sin he could never atone for.

*Cawwww!*

They both stared as a scattered flock of dingy cranes headed for the ocean. The couple doubted the birds would reach land again, their movements implying sickness. Neither of them mentioned it. It wasn’t an uncommon sight anymore and served to remind them both of the homeland they’d left behind.

“How did he know who I was?”

“Same way I did, I guess. TV reception out here was good for a while. Easy for him *this* time.”

His tone implied the playboy hadn’t had such an easy time finding out who he was, and Kendle chuckled, thinking Luke’s cologne was so much better than Ethan’s heavy Polo. “Took him a while to figure out who you were, huh?”

“Yeah. He finally had to go through my garbage to get my fingerprints for Daddy Kraft to run.”

Kendle was horrified for him, at the invasion of his privacy. “What an asshole!”

Luke threw her a grin. “He got a mud bath for it. I ruined his four hundred-dollar shoes.”

She grinned back, almost stealing his breath at her innocent beauty. It was a good moment for him, and he memorized it studiously, from the muddy tennis shoes sitting by her bare feet

and the face that was great without makeup, to the sound of water lapping and a rock falling somewhere nearby.

“Did he cry?”

“No, but it was close. One of the best days I’ve had here.” Luke looked away. “Until you came.”

Her mouth opened, and he tensed for questions he knew he would at least try to answer.

“It’s bad, right?”

“Yes.”

Kendle studied the man who waited, expecting no mercy.

When she spoke, Luke felt her words reach that cold, barren part of his heart he had been carrying for most of his adult life.

“That was the old world, and it’s gone. The people here may not believe it, but I do. You’re no longer that man.”

Chapter Thirty-Four  
**Broken Bridges**  
Western Missouri

1

“**T**his is Safe Haven... Red Cross convoy... survivors. Coming through...”

Angela froze at the staticky transmission.

Marc came to the open passenger door. “Everything okay?”

“That’s them. That’s who we’re searching for.”

Marc knew the group had to be within a few hundred miles for them to hear the transmission. He fished in his pockets for a smoke. That only gave him another three weeks alone with her.

Angela got out and shut the door, ignoring the gray and black wolf on the roof edging over for her attention. “I’ll help.”

Marc understood her need to hurry, but he wanted to linger over the radio for a location. In this big empty, it would be easy to miss them.

“We won’t. *I* won’t.”

Marc lit a smoke, watching her take care of their lunch mess. She wiped her hands down her jeans as she finished. It was something she wouldn’t have felt relaxed enough to do during their first weeks together. She was growing, learning, changing, and on some things, she was as good as he was.

“They’re near Gillette, Wyoming. We’ll catch up in South Dakota, I think, around Interstate 90.”

Marc recalculated, not doubting her. They would be facing her man...by the end of next week. *Ten days*. His heart twisted.

“Come on. I’ll back it up; you can do the chains.”

Marc swallowed his unhappiness and cracked an imaginary whip, making her snicker. They’d chosen to tow one of the Blazers



to save fuel since they were low again. “You drive. I’ll check the maps for what’s between us and them.”

Angela nodded, glad he’d interrupted her thoughts. Instead of relief that she was about to be with her son, all she could feel was fear. Time to pay was close now, and she wasn’t sure if she was strong enough to do it.

The mood was somber as they left Corning, Missouri. This was tornado country, part of the alley. It was eerie to discover one block normal—if you could call looted, burned businesses normal—and the next street had only piles of debris standing. It was also farm country, crops of tobacco and river oats were everywhere, surrounded by Indian grass and milkweed. There was no traffic in sight; there hadn’t been for the last day. Angela knew why. Few people had made it out of or through the last town.

Pattonsburg, fully decorated, had bodies in every Christmas scene. Each corpse had been painstakingly put in the place of the person they most resembled. Mary, Santa, Wise Men, and even the baby Jesus were represented. She and Marc had gone around; the feeling of evil was too strong to ignore. They had detoured an extra day, sure each of the *actors* had been survivors of the war, not victims. They were too fresh. Pattonsburg had become, or maybe always had been, home to a serial killer.

She had marked it in her journal, then tried to forget about it, but she’d kept stewing. Marc had offered to go back and challenge the mad man to ease her mind. She’d denied him, but when the witch had asked the same question, she’d said yes with a heavy heart. After her own encounter with evil, Angela now understood some people had earned death. The nut job in Pattonsburg was one of those; she had sent the witch out to hunt while she slept. The fact that it hadn’t been by her direct hand helped, but death was something she couldn’t handle. If she ever had to kill again, she might—

“Angie.”

She glanced up to find Marc staring at her.

“Try to let it go.”

Angela breathed deeply. Knowing she had saved future travelers mattered. “I will. What did you say?”

“We’ll have to cross the Missouri to get into Nebraska, unless you want to parallel it until we get below Kansas City. Flatter land might mean a better chance of finding a shallow place to cross.”

She was already shaking her head, lifting her sunglasses. “That’s another week. Let’s try to find a dam or a bridge around here that’s okay.”

Marc stared, stomach uneasy.

Angela gave him a quick look that revealed a desperate need. “I feel it too, but I can’t waste another week. I can’t.”

“I won’t ask you to unless we can’t find a shallow place or a dam, like we did when we came over the Mississippi.”

Angela studied the empty lanes of Interstate 29. The cracked pavement was full of potholes and mud. She wasn’t sure what was wrong, but she knew something was. “What do you—”

The ground under them began to shake. Angela slammed on the brakes, jerking them to a stop. She started to get out as the vibrations increased.

Marc put a gentle hand on her wrist. “Wait. If it gets worse, we’ll get out. Watch the ground for cracks.”

His touch was soothing, exciting.

He let go slowly, responding to her interest.

The ground under them rumbled and swayed, shifting debris piles. The distinctive sound of buildings collapsing echoed in the distance.

The shaking eased gradually, quieting over a minute before going still. Angela looked over at Marc, who had gone back to studying the map as if nothing had happened. “Should we go on?”

“Yeah, just stop if it starts again. Always stay clear of anything that can fall on you, and watch for cracks. They open up fast.”

*Don’t I know it.* Angela eased on the pedal, surprised to discover there was a fault line under St. Louis, and it was active. They had felt other tremors, but not while driving and not this strong. In the Midwest, the big one hadn’t come yet, but it felt like things were warming up.

They listened to Pink Floyd as Angela drove over weedy, debris littered streets, rolling around abandoned cars with indecipherable notes mildewed to dashboards. The conversation was about anything other than the destruction around them. Nature was the cause here.

Marc was aching. Time looked short for them, and though he could say they were almost friends, he wasn't sure if there was more. She'd been keeping space between them. Marc stole another look at her profile as she drove. She was so far out of reach that he didn't think he would ever have a real chance with her again, but it didn't stop the desire.

Angela felt his hot looks, but she was blocking so she didn't catch the exact thoughts unless he sent them. She tried not to fidget. She loved having him so close, but she also hated it. Her body was too aware of him. She was reminded of a time when the mere thought of sex didn't make her cringe. She had loved to touch him, to kiss him, to run her fingers through his feathered black hair. They had stolen dark, shadowy moments of heaven. The voices whispered he could conquer her fear and make her feel that way again.

“You have to trust me.”

Angela threw him a startled look. “What?”

“You have to turn by that tree.”

Her eyes darted away, cheeks reddening as she realized she'd misheard.

Marc wondered if she'd been thinking about their sparks, but he didn't push. *I know better. She taught me that lesson years ago.*

## 2

They made it to the Nebraska-Missouri state line before dusk and stopped to inspect the area. Marc wasn't encouraged. The bridge they'd hoped to cross was almost submerged. The river was well over its banks, covering the roads leading to the blue structure, but the water was dammed up on one side. The south end was so low they couldn't see it from where they were. As a

result, the ground between them and the bridge was covered in nasty, stagnant, reeking liquid; the edges of it were pushing up onto the road they were sitting on.

After a long study, Marc handed her the binoculars. “No way we could cross, even if we found a way in.”

Angela knew he was right as soon as she looked. “Damn. I’m surprised the bridge hasn’t fallen yet. Is that a bulldozer jammed up against the railroad trestle?”

“What’s left of one. The water backing up behind the bridge might mean there’s a shallow spot a bit downstream. Go slow.”

The Blazers rolled as Marc searched, picking out places that appeared solid so he could guide her around the quicksand mud that would suck them down.

Half a mile from the doomed bridge, Marc had her stop so he could get out for a better view.

Angela waited, stomach full of spiders. She grimaced at that thought and hid it as he came back to her window.

“It’s steep, but maybe we can make it. Tracks say someone else did recently. If I had to guess, I’d say they did it in a small, light car. Look at it while I unhook my Blazer and then we’ll try. You’ll go first.”

Angela did as he said, hating the way the damp ground gave under her weight and tried to steal the boots from her feet. She felt a little better when she saw it wasn’t a straight drop into the riverbed, but it still looked rough. She could see the tire ruts that someone else had left further down, just above the shallow water rushing by with bits of bobbing debris.

Not feeling the sun anymore, Angela tightened her seatbelt and drove toward the muddy bank, heart thumping. This wasn’t going to go well.

*Better tell him,* the witch warned.

Angela shook her head. It was too late to go back now. *Nothing will keep me from my son!*

The radio crackled. “Nice and slow until you hit the flatter part before the water, then pick up speed.”

Angela rode the brakes as she started down; the vehicle bounced over the big rocks, jarring her.

“A little faster, honey.”

She eased off the brake, letting it coast as the water rushed by. It was deeper than she'd first thought, and moving fast. Angela eased on the gas too late; sprays of water flew up from her submerged tires, creating small rapids that surged outward.

Her tires slipped near the middle of the wide riverbed, going sideways in the water, and then she was back in control and shooting across, heart pounding.

Marc came down the incline behind her.

Angela felt the tires slip again as she hit the muddy embankment on the other side. Pedal going to the floor, her tires dug into the wet ground. The Blazer came to a stop and snapped her seatbelt against her chest.

Angie let off the gas and hit reverse, but the tires sank further into the thick slop. She got no response from the four-wheel mode either. Angela was overwhelmed by the feeling of danger. The Blazer fishtailed as the ground began to shake again.

*Out! We have to get out!* Angela mashed the pedal, spinning the tires. White smoke billowed up.

Marc didn't warn her as the rumbling increased. He hit the gas and slammed into the rear of her smoking, sliding Blazer, knocking it up and out of the thick mud with little visible damage.

The sound of the bridge's final collapse was loud. Angela didn't notice as she was hit hard and moving again. She cleared the edge and she picked up her mike, stopping to look back. “Damn that was... Marc! Get out!”

Marc knew the wall of water was surging toward him. *I've been here before.* When his tires bogged down where hers had, Marc shoved himself out the window and climbed onto the hood, glad Dog was with Angie this time, out of reach.

“The tree! Grab the tree!” Angela's scream was frantic.

Marc darted across the protesting hood, jumping just as the water slammed into the Blazer. It was snatched by the current and rolled. The thick swells carried it under.

“Marc!” Angela jumped out with the rope from her kit in hand; she ran to the embankment and leaned over the edge. “Marc!”

“Here!”

She spotted him in the center of the churning, rising water. She threw the long cord as hard as she could.

It landed on his outstretched fingers. She saw him double it around his wrist.

She tied the other end to the hitch of her Blazer and ran for the driver seat, not thinking, just doing what instinct told her to.

Marc held the rope and then his breath as the water closed over his face.

The rope tightened, jerking his shoulder brutally, and then he was out like a fish caught by a boater, gasping for air. He coughed violently, feet and hands digging into the mud, clawing for purchase as she hauled him up.

The water roared in protest.

Angela saw him collapse in her mirror. She had her medical bag in hand as she rushed to him. “Marc! Are you hurt?”

Marc pushed onto his knees as he coughed out mouthfuls of diseased river water. He hadn’t been able to hold his breath long enough this time.

She ignored his protests, running her hands over him to check for injuries.

“...finger, or should I give you something?”

Marc was confused, trying to get his air back. “What?”

She gestured at the rising water. “Some of that’s inside you now. We have to get it out before it can settle in and do damage. I have something that’ll bring it up.” She set a small vial on the ground by his feet. “I’ll get camp set.”

Marc blew out a sigh, pushing up onto shaky legs. “Fucking quake. Some great joke.”

“...swallow it all and then take a deep smell of the bottle. Are we okay here?”

Marc blurrily scanned the muddy ground. There was a park about two hundred yards away. It appeared normal. “Over...there.

This should be part of the Brownville...State Rec area. Leave my duffle bag, couple of jugs of water. No fire. Stove's okay."

Angela left him alone, glad the sound of the water crushing anything and everything would mute his misery and provide privacy.

Angela scanned for problems, pushing her gift out a full mile to be sure no one else was around. She was relieved to find it empty. Angela turned to check on Marc and saw his torn shirt hit the ground, exposing a wide chest she was drawn to over the distance. When his hand dropped to his belt buckle, she spun around, clumsy fingers getting the Coleman stove lit. *I almost lost him.* Her impatience had almost killed them both.

Angela found Marc's naked body across the distance again; she couldn't look away. He poured the clean water over himself. She felt a stronger chill of desire. He was a beautiful man, and they would be sharing a bed tonight to stay warm. She should have been afraid of getting that intimate, but things had changed for her. She wasn't afraid of him as a man anymore. It was a welcome change from the paralyzing fear she had lived with for so long. Their bond of trust was one of those blind comforts that might mask the truths she wasn't ready to face. It would be too easy to fall into a submissive role under Marc and forget her own needs just to make him happy. However, knowing she could feel a normal attraction again gave her hope that Kenn hadn't damaged her beyond repair when it came to things like love...and sex.

Marc could feel her staring. His body swelled to thickness in seconds. He took his time rinsing, drying, dressing, brushing his teeth. He was alive. *So, let her stare all she wants. Maybe she'll see something she likes and take it.*

Angela snickered, picking up the thought. The wall between them had crumbled when the water reached out for him like alien hands.

Marc walked slowly, shirt open, duffle bag over his uninjured shoulder. Their eyes locked over the distance, speaking louder than the water rushing by.

Angela scowled at all the scrapes, cuts, and bruises on his arms, chest, neck, face. *I almost got you killed.*

Marc shook his head, full of fierce gratitude that he would never be able to express. *You saved my life!*

*I'm sorry.*

“Don’t be.” Marc pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. “No way to know the smartass upstairs was going to pick those ninety seconds to shake the ground again. Your quick actions saved me. You deserve a promotion.”

Angela waved a hand at the tailgate. “Have a seat. I’ll patch you up while you tell me about this raise.”

He took the Irish coffee she pushed into his clammy hands.

The wolf sat on the ground at his feet.

“All right. In the Corps, you’d start out a Private, but you would have been a Private First Class after Versailles.” Marc watched for signs it was bothering her, but he spotted nothing as she lifted a brow.

“And now?” Angela opened packages from her bag as the sun sank, leaving a pale orange and purple sky. Angela felt him fishing, but that bait had already been stripped by her own guilt.

“Now, I’d say...a Lance Corporal.”

She laughed, hiding her wince. Kenny was a Lance Corporal, though he also would have been ranked higher if he could have followed orders. “Better get a good raise with that. What about you?”

Marc shrugged, concentrating on the red of her lips instead of the stinging from the alcohol pad. “I’m happy where I am.”

Angela heard it all in his voice: the need, the respect, the fierce joy to be alive. She slid his dog tag aside to smear gel over his scrapes. It was heaven and hell to touch him. She barely kept the old Angela from doing something they might regret...like letting her hands wander over his hot skin.

Angela’s pulse was pounding when she stepped back. “Ready for—”

The ground under them lit up again, rattling the Blazer and everything inside it.



“Just a tremor. We’re all right.”

“Okay.” The ground shifted under their feet. Angela stumbled. Marc caught her.

Angela sucked in a breath, tight against his bare chest. Instead of pulling away when the ground stilled under them, she enjoyed his embrace. His heart was pounding as hard as hers was. She saw his nostrils flare, as if he was scenting her. She blushed. *I want him. What a wonderful feeling!*

Marc let her have the lead, patiently waiting, hoping desire would have its way. He was dying to kiss her. He craved it. *I have to have at least one kiss to take back out into the wilderness with me.*

A wave of sadness fell over him when she pulled away; he let her go, trying to keep it from his face. Who was he kidding? He would never take it, and she would never offer.

Angela pushed a bowl of hot soup into his hands. “Any other cuts?”

“No.” He stirred the noodles absently. “I didn’t even tear my jeans. Lot of bruises, though.”

She handed him pills and a cup of water. “Painkillers.”

Marc smiled. His body was sore all over, but his shoulder hurt the worst. Throbbing sharply, it was continuing to swell. He was surprised it hadn’t been dislocated, but he didn’t complain or even mention it. There had been little time for anything else.

“We’ll stay here tonight.”

Marc agreed, watching her set up a lawn chair next to the stove. She waved a hand.

He went where she wanted him.

Angela dropped a blanket over his legs and held up another. “Lean forward a little bit.” When he sat back, she pulled it around his wide shoulders, not flinching when their fingers brushed.

Marc couldn’t stop a small moan of pain when her hands settled onto his shoulder. Then she began rubbing, soothing, pushing, manipulating it back into position. Her fingers were fire one minute and ice the next as she healed him.

Drained, Angela stepped back. "I'm going to put the discs out. Twenty feet?"

He nodded, smothering a yawn as he handed her the wristband controller. "Two rows. One at twenty and one at thirty."

She did it as he had shown her.

Marc watched for a minute, before rising to his feet. "You want a cup?"

The wind gusted as he scanned the distant but clearer shapes of the mountains to their south, bringing the stench of rotting fish. He kept from gagging by sheer will. His body felt foreign, clammy.

"I'll get it. Sit down, will ya? That was enough dope to knock you out."

When he only put a hand on the hatch for support, she came over and slipped an arm around his lean hips. "Come on, Grunt. Time to hit the rack."

"Been waitin' weeks to hear that."

She surprised him by laughing. "Well, wait a while longer, Romeo. Come on now, slide in."

Marc eased onto the stiff bed.

She tossed the two top blankets over him. When he looked at her, his face was full of fear instead of the male pride she had been expecting.

"I'll get sick now, right?"

She didn't lie to him as she brushed dust from her jeans, then leaned inside to pull his blankets up further. "Maybe."

"Will I die?"

"God, no!" She slid in next to him. "At the worst, you'll be tired, have diarrhea, and throw up, but it'll only last a couple weeks because you're in great shape."

"So, I'll feel like I died."

She grinned, running her hand over his brow to smooth his hair back. She loved the feel of it against her fingers. "That's the worst. We handled it quickly. You might just be a little queasy for a couple days, but probably not even that. You'll be fine."

Marc sighed, relieved. He stared at her until he wasn't able to stay awake any longer.

The chill in the wind made Angela shiver as she stepped outside to repack everything. She loaded it quickly so Marc wouldn't get a draft. All the propane cylinders for the heater were gone, and they couldn't waste the quarter tank of gas they had left to run the engine while they slept. Body heat would do.

Finished, Angela ignored her racing pulse as she shut herself inside the tepid Blazer with Marc and laid down, leaving Dog outside. She slid against his back, covering up as the horror of the day washed over her.

That constant voice of fear whispered she would pay for breaking Kenny's rules, that it wasn't just her life in danger. She wasn't allowed to talk to another man, let alone crawl into bed with one. The past rose up to assault her weary mind; thoughts of being separated from her children crept in. She let herself cry a little against his warm comfort. *What am I going to do?* She was chained to one man, but she loved another.

Marc had woken the second she left the Blazer, listening while she secured their belongings and then crawled back inside. Her pain was something he couldn't ignore. He rolled over and wrapped his arms around her. "It'll be okay."

Angela didn't respond. She could only hope he was right.

"I am."

She stared at him.

Marc brushed away her tears. "We're connected. Always were. No one can stop that." He kissed her cheek, felt her shiver. "We belong together, Angie, and right or wrong, I still love you. I always have."

"I love you too." Her tears fell harder. "There's no future for us. He'll never let me go."

Marc's heart thumped. *She loves me!* "We'll find a way."

"And if we can't?"

Marc didn't hesitate. "We'll grab Charlie and run, together this time."



Chapter Thirty-Five  
**Time To Go**  
South Dakota state line  
**March 26th**

1

*D*anger to the herd!

Adrian woke to the ground beneath his tent grumbling and groaning. He grabbed for his boots as the tremor strengthened. Things fell, broke; people ran, engines started, radios crackled. The silent roar of the quake distorted the sounds, making their ears vibrate.

Adrian pulled his jacket over his bare chest and ducked outside as he zipped it up, scanning the nervous guards. They'd survived tremors, but not as strong. He keyed his mike. "Hold your posts, Eagles."

Adrian motioned Neil and Kenn over. The two men were roughly the same height.

They came to him quickly, dodging members in robes and slippers who were fleeing—most toward the parking area. He hit his radio again. "Empty a mag, Doug. Turn 'em around!"

The towering, red vested giant didn't question. He fired into the air above the small mob of thirty.

The gunfire got immediate attention. The panicked people pulled up short and stopped, faces wild with fear.

Doug's bearded face was full of disapproval as he waved a beefy hand to where Adrian stood.

The crowd turned, distracted at the sight of Kenn and Neil hunkered down to let Adrian stand on their shoulders. The earthquake had stopped, and it was such an unexpected thing that it captured the twitching crowd. Doug assumed Adrian had a plan.

Seth, a quiet shadow ready to protect the boss, had the same thought. He shared an admiring glance with the Eagles.

Everyone was watching Adrian now; the crowd grew as more people came out of their tents.

Adrian tapped the hats below him. "Up."

The Eagles moved slowly, but with little teamwork. Adrian swayed dangerously, amusingly. His wild arm gestures drew titters from the calming group. Most of those who'd broken quarantine were new refugees from Cheyenne.

Adrian waved as they finally got him up all the way.

The watching people gave a small, uneasy cheer in return.

"We had a tremor. This is how it feels." Adrian lowered his voice. "Walk, guys, and do it together or I'll break my friggin' neck!" He lifted his voice again. "We survived it." Adrian swayed, almost falling. The tall men grabbed at his legs, pulling more laughter from the people.

"Damn it!" Adrian hauled himself up by sheer will, and struggled to stay there. Hearing calm in the crowd reactions, he gave up the fight, wobbling.

"He's going to fall!"

"Grab him!"

"Down, guys!" Adrian rolled forward as Neil and Kenn bent, ended up on his feet in front of the crowd that let out a cheer and clapped.

As Adrian waded into the people, they quieted, most realizing they had overreacted and were due a scolding.

Adrian's men watched, thinking they were lucky Adrian had known how to handle the crisis. Nothing broke panic like laughter.

Nose full of sulfur and smoke, Adrian felt the air shift. He knew by their guilty demeanors they understood. He said nothing, letting the silence stretch out.

When many of them were about to offer apologies, Adrian stopped it with a curt gesture. "During a quake, you get away from anything that can fall on you, then stop. Wait for cracks to open." He pointed to the jagged, gaping hole in front of Doug that a lot of them would have fallen into. "Like that one. Panic makes us do

stupid things. I understand, but sometimes, it also costs your life. I can't give that back."

Neil watched in approval with the other Eagles, hands on his narrow hips. Adrian was giving them what Kyle liked to call the lay or how things stood.

"All of you have broken quarantine. You'll have extra time in it, along with all the members I'm looking at." Adrian paused to mark them with this sharp gaze. "It's over now. I want this camp back the way it was, and everyone accounted for." Adrian let them understand how displeased he actually was by jerking his hand. "Now."

The commanding tone had them all rushing off.

He gestured to Kenn and Neil as they went by. "Sitrep in five. Check in of the guards first. Gather your team, Neil, and go round up our strays. Kenn, get Mitch on the radio. Have Zack and his guys oversee the cleanup. I heard engines. Try to call them on the radio. Have Doug handle the count, then tell the cook to start chow. It's almost dawn anyway. Kyle keeps Point. I'll be around."

Neil saw Seth's shadow follow Adrian and was pleased. He and Seth had hit it off. He knew the redhead would cover Adrian's overloaded back.

Adrian joined people in the mess. The camp was a flurry of activity in the foggy morning. They'd had no serious damage, no injuries.

Adrian finished his cold coffee with a grimace as the stench of rot wafted through the loud, crowded mess. A large herd of bison had died about three miles southwest of their location. John was testing the bodies since there wasn't an obvious cause of death. The big ants Adrian sometimes thought might be following them were also here, along with a burgeoning population of field mice. This area was all nature as far as they could see, with no signs that humanity had ever been here. Adrian dreaded dropping south into the Badlands, but he would if John said fallout had killed the bison. That strange, eerie landscape would be better than sickness, but it didn't have anything they needed. They wouldn't stay long—only a week instead of the three they usually spent in each state.

There wouldn't be tours of Mount Rushmore or the Wild West sites that had featured Annie Oakley and Wild Bill Hickok shows. That world was gone.

## 2

“Is everyone accounted for?”

Neil opened his book as he joined Adrian. “Almost. We had five cars leave. All but one is on the way back. We contacted the supply team. Cris said he hasn't been able to reach the fifth car yet.”

“They were together?”

Neil nodded, continued his report. “One of the guards swears there were two people in her convertible. They'll probably show up at dawn.”

Adrian glanced at his XO.

Kenn waved a hand for Kyle to join them from his post on the mess. He'd been expecting it. “Get your team and do a recon for Tonya and the reporter. Half hour check ins.”

Kyle swallowed his dislike. The orders actually came from Adrian. Kenn didn't like Cynthia. Few of them did, and though he was screwing Tonya, Kyle didn't think he cared for her either. *Women are just possessions to Kenn*, Kyle thought, calling in his relief early. He pitied the female who had shared Kenn's bed before the war, when there had been no Adrian to keep him in line.

Kenn waited until Kyle was out of earshot, noting the body language indicating the mobster's displeasure, but even that didn't ease the thumping of his heart as he spoke to Adrian. “Mitch took a call. I may have missed someone in Cheyenne.”

Adrian had recognized the edge of fear in Kenn's tone. “Could you have?”

Kenn was miserable. “Yes.”

Adrian knew more was coming. He waited unhappily when Kenn scanned the black hills surrounding their camp instead of maintaining eye contact.



“I need to leave for a while. I’m feeling...smothered.” Kenn shrugged at Adrian’s lifting brow, but didn’t offer more details. “Charlie’s stayin’ here. I’ll recheck Cheyenne first and bring the woman back if she’s there.”

His tone implied he doubted she would be. Adrian hid his grimace as his heart skipped, sending pain into his arm. He couldn’t keep it from his eyes.

Kenn mistook it. “I’ll be back. *Soon.*”

Chest easing, Adrian gave him a hard stare, mind and body already dreading the Marine’s absence. Kenn had been more help than he knew. Fresh out of the quarantine zone, he had only been back from Cheyenne for half a day. “When?”

Kenn still didn’t look at him. “Now.”

Adrian sighed, hoping it really was restless urges and not devious tactics taking the Marine out of camp. “I told you everyone here is free to go any time they please. If you have something to do, somewhere to go, come home when you’re ready. Just don’t forget about us, and watch your six. We need you.”

Kenn nodded, beard covering his guilty flush in the windy darkness. “I hear that.”

Adrian frowned. It had been his experience that when someone said that, the opposite was true.

“I’m comin’ back.” Kenn addressed the uniformed shadow who had given himself away by a quick breath at the news. “Hold my place.”

Adrian forced a chuckle. “You know it.”

Kenn hadn’t been sure how to bring up the subject. He didn’t want to give details, but in his heart, he was sure the lone female had been Angela. Static had kept Mitch from hearing the name clearly. *It’s time to go set her straight.*

### 3

As dawn broke, Tonya and Cynthia rolled in, flanked by Kyle’s team.

Kenn waited nearby, lingering in dawn's last shadows.

A few minutes later, Tonya's tent flap opened, revealing a dim, smoky interior. A small red glow winked on and off.

Kenn went to her openly. If she and Adrian had been an item, that was over now. Kenn entered the pungent tent, inhaling from the thick joint she slid between his lips.

The flap shut them in darkness as her hands opened his jeans.

Tonya had figured out something was happening with Adrian's right-hand man. She'd seen Kenn's loaded Bronco. She wanted to be sure her place with him was secure before he left. Kenn was her only ticket to power here. Tonya gave him an amazing effort, trying to dig her hooks in deeper.

For a little while, the future was forgotten by them both.

Chapter Thirty-Six  
**Old Wounds**  
March 28<sup>th</sup>  
**Pitcairn Island**

1

“**W**ant to sleep with me?”

Face sweaty and flushed, Luke stopped in the middle of a sit-up, shocked. He quickly replayed what she’d said, what his male mind had heard. “Want some company?”

Luke quickly glanced away. These awkward moments were happening more and more as she recovered.

“I can dig up other books if you’re bored,” he offered, finishing number eighteen.

He’d already done the forty push-ups while Kendle forced herself to pretend to be reading, but her eyes had stayed mostly on him. She wondered if he knew. “I’d rather get back in shape, and that looks like it works.”

Luke grinned at the compliment, and she blushed. “I mean it. I get out of breath just carrying our basket to the fishing hole. I used to be...” she trailed off, wistful as memories swirled over her.

It was something Luke understood all too well. “In the morning?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

She dropped her attention to *The Stand*, the last book on his shelves she hadn’t read yet, but her mind was on leaving...on going home. She dreamed of it most nights the ocean didn’t claim her. It made her stomach clench painfully and her spine hunt for a place to hide, but so help her, she was now considering the attempt.

Kendle wasn’t pushing herself much yet, and Luke wasn’t pushing her at all, but she wasn’t going to be content here for long.

She was weak, tired, and it would still be a month or two, on top of the seven weeks she had already spent here, but she planned to find a way back to America that didn't involve those awful waves that called to her, mocked her.

“Lotta hard words?”

Kendle looked down into his understanding face, thinking she might not go if Luke wouldn't come with her. Being alone was something she didn't ever want to face again. “I'm sorry?”

“You haven't flipped a page in a while. I thought maybe you were stuck.”

She gently closed the book of death and destruction with reddish-brown hands her gaze lingered on. “It's too depressing.”

Luke wiped his face with the towel from the pocket in his cutoff jeans and then slid it back. “Great writing, though.” He fell silent, thinking America was now experiencing it firsthand and knew Kendle was too.

“All right, enough of this,” Luke said, “Let's go do something.” He began pulling on his shoes, trying not to stare at the long legs that her dark shorts allowed him to view. “I'll skip the run, and we can play some cards or something.”

He paused, scanning the neat cabin. No carpet on the wooden floor, two recliners, a table, two beds, two doors, four walls, white curtains she'd sewn, a three-drawer stand he'd made for her things, all of it dusted, washed, and made up. They were inside too much. She needed to get out there again if she was going to recover. What had helped him when he'd first come here?

“Hey. We could work on my garden.”

That got Kendle's attention, and she smiled, forgetting how loud the ocean was outside the safety of his small cabin. The only time she was alone was to get a shower or relieve herself, and she liked it that the small generator would come on anytime they used water in the M\*A\*S\*H-style shower setup. It drowned out the noise that tormented her.

“Now?”

Warm breeze blowing on his skin, Luke shrugged. He tried to remember the last time he'd broken his exercise routine but was

unable to. Making Kendle happy here was important, and sometimes, like when they were sitting in his leather recliners, reading and listening to his records, it was hard to remember how quiet (lonely) his life had been before she came.

“After lunch. We’ll have grilled salmon hoagies and then play in the dirt.”

Kendle’s spirits picked up a bit, adventurous soul long since bored. She was looking forward to having work to do, instead of staring at Luke when he wasn’t looking her way and studying the walls when he was.

## 2

Hearing albatrosses and seagulls fighting over a beach full of small, red crab hatchlings and the dull roar of an upset, unhealthy ocean, Kendle examined the terribly tangled vines and sticker bushes warily. They were at least five feet high and so thick, she was unable to determine where the brambles ended, and the jungle began or how big the area behind the cabin was.

“When’s the last time you came out here?”

“Couple years. Planted a big garden, spent a lot of time letting the earth soak into me. It seemed to help.” Luke let out a sigh. “Then the ocean took it.”

Kendle heard the haunted tone and understood more than anyone else could have, but she said nothing as she dug through the box of tools that he had pulled from a small attic space.

“Clippers?” she asked, holding them up.

“No. They’ll never chop through this tangle.”

Clearly, he was struggling with something, a deep frown planting itself on his face. When he strode toward the cabin without saying anything, she wondered again, what crime had made him choose the painfulness of solitude over the quick end of a suicide. He wasn’t a coward, but he was doing penance; she was sure of it. Luke had been hurting himself for a long time, and Kendle wanted it to stop. He’d done so much for her! She almost

felt like a normal person again. There had to be something she could do for him in return, some way to ease his pain.

The jungle was alive around her, monkeys and squirrels chattering from vine-covered banyan trees and leafy palms that waved in the warm, dry wind. The sun was shining comfortably, the breeze light, and sometimes, like now, it felt as if they were the only ones on this nearly deserted southern island. If not for the heavy, hurting heart that needed to know, she thought she could be happy here.

Luke came out carrying a long, black sword case decorated with patches, an American flag, and the initials L.L.J. His expression was dazed, far away, and Kendle watched curiously as he unzipped the bag, removing a worn machete. Shiny and no doubt deadly, the machete gleamed in the sun as he dropped the empty sheath into the thick paddle grass by her feet, mind clearly not in the present. She left him alone, eager to inspect the markings on the case.

The past instantly came alive for Luke as he held the machete. The memories ran up the blade and dug into his rotting soul. He hadn't touched it in years, not since clearing the land where his cabin sat. After, he had locked it up with the rest of his old life.

The first swipe was sweet, powerful, and Luke was jerked through time, suddenly facing his greatest joy and his biggest *bête noir*.

The other men in his platoon had hated cutting a path through the dense jungles of Cambodia, griped constantly about the backbreaking, mind-numbing work, but not Luke. He understood clearing their own road meant they were there before the enemy, before the mines and homemade traps meant to blow their legs a mile away. He'd been known as Whacker then, had used that excuse to explain always volunteering for point, but more than safety, hacking his own path gave him a feeling of power and control the sixteen-year-old runaway had fallen in love with.

Sweat rolled into face, and Luke automatically pulled off his white tank top and wiped his face, keeping the deadly weapon in hand. He pushed the shirt into his pocket and went back to work,

enjoying the only good thing that had come from his time in the service.

*Frank*, his mind insisted. *Frank had been good*. The POW hadn't been from Luke's platoon, but he had been another soldier (teenager much too young to be killing people), and they had formed a bond was stronger than what they had with the other prisoners. They'd been hostages together, tortured together for their friendship, and when they'd gotten the chance, they had escaped together, taking nine other survivors along.

It had earned them both medals and citations, but there was no erasing what had happened during the escape. An award couldn't return all those lives.

Regret rolled over Luke in waves, and he stopped swinging, breathing harshly. That world was decades gone, but it always seemed so much closer.

Attention drawn repeatedly to Luke, Kendle was surprised by her reaction. She hadn't expected the hard, sexy muscles to capture her attention so completely. Then, he'd started swinging again, tan, naked back flexing gracefully, and her mouth went dry.

Luke turned in time to catch her staring, and there was no way he could mistake the desire as a breeze blew deliciously over his sweaty skin. The male inside him demanded he grab her, kiss her...*claim her*.

Sun beating on his gritty neck, Luke took a single step before stopping. He turned away instead, putting his shirt on. Would she have denied or welcomed him?

Kendle's face was red, but with his sweaty, sexy skin covered, her mind seemed to wake from the sexual daze that had swallowed her.

She noticed the machete hadn't left his hand once. *Must be special to him*, she thought, and she was surprised when he came over and gently pushed the handle into her grip.

"You can do the rest."

She hesitated. "I don't have a clue."

Luke threw her a challenge in response, aware of the salty air and the thick green jungle around them. It felt as if he was caught between the past and the present. "I'll show you. Unless you don't think you can?"

Kendle carefully took hold of the sharp weapon's worn handle. She strode to the area that was almost a third cleared and raised a brow at him expectantly.

Not quite smiling, Luke answered by sliding behind her and tugging her gently into his big arms. Barely suppressing a groan of pleasure, he wrapped himself around her and guided them, mouth near her ear, giving instructions.

It was awkward at first, Kendle too aware of the hard, male body molded to hers to work with him, and the images of his naked skin flashed through her mind as they bent and swung, dipped and cut.

"Close your eyes."

She did it reluctantly, hating to give up control, but almost immediately, the feeling hit her. Total power, it was undeniable and consuming. She giggled against his jaw, as he led.

They settled into a rhythm that made her stomach jump as primitive and sexual instincts converged stunningly with each carefully controlled and yet harshly violent swing.

For Kendle, it was the release she needed and the attraction she had lost hope of finding. She wanted the real love her parents had shared, the kind that set off bells and whistles in her heart, and while this wasn't that, it was definitely lust. She let her body melt against his as they ducked and swung, bent and rubbed.

The area was cleared too quickly for both of them, and they stopped reluctantly, neither of them moving away as sparks flew.

Kendle was lost. Even the sand in her shoes felt right. When he placed a kiss on her jaw, she shifted toward him, eyes still shut.

Moving slowly, the lonely pilot slid his lips to the corner of her mouth for a chaste but erotic kiss that gave her chills of want and drew a moan of frustration when he started to pull away.

Luke felt the denial, her need, and tilted her head up, sealing their lips.



It was the sweetest kiss he'd ever had, one to remember a lifetime later, and he leaned back to stare at her, thinking it shouldn't go any further. Liquid pools of desire stared at him, and Luke forced himself away from her, putting the machete in its case. Would she want that room in town now? A line had definitely been crossed.

Kendle could still feel his lips against hers, his hardness behind her as they worked together, and she went to the box of tools with an expression of pleasant discovery. It was what she'd been hoping for since high school, and she was a bit stunned she had found it here and now, and without even searching.

She glanced up to discover Luke watching her warily, and she blushed. "Sorry. Guess I got carried away."

"Me too, darlin'. You're safe here with me. It won't happen again."

Luke snickered at the protest in her eyes and saw her clamp down on her first response, giving him another smile instead.

"I know. If I have to be stranded in paradise, I couldn't have better company."

They let it go, got back to the gardening, but it stayed on their minds.

Luke became acutely aware of how often her gaze came to him after that. She was young, innocent (despite being a star from California), and he would try to give her time to adjust to the new feelings before taking advantage of her...but time was running out. He could feel it pulling them along, and he wanted to tell her what was in his heart but didn't, still not sure of what response he might get.

### 3

Not one to wait, fate stepped in. A few hours after their first embrace, they were forced to confront their future directly.

"Is Miss...Roberts about? I thought I'd take her on a tour of my estate."

Luke clamped his jaw shut against his first thought—*No, Jackass, not if she has any taste*—and used a polite response instead.

“Hang on, damn it.”

Spinning away, he slammed the door in the surprised son of a millionaire’s face, hard enough to rattle the frame. Luke longed to order the playboy off his property but knew he couldn’t. All the island males had come sniffing around (Ethan Kraft the most determined), and though it was her decision to make, Luke couldn’t help the jealousy that filled his heart. *Mine! She’s mine!*

“Kendle! Company!” he shouted out the rear door.

Her soft response made him like her even more.

“I’m not here.”

Luke didn’t bother to lower his voice. “Too late. Come say hi to Ethan.”

“Shit.”

Luke laughed as she came to the door, muttering about people with more money than brains. He settled in his chair with a drink and a cigar, shamelessly flipping off the record player to listen.

Kendle yanked the front door open and held it, not inviting Ethan in and not going out. This was the fifth time the snake charmer had dropped by in the last two weeks, becoming increasingly frustrated none of his power and money mattered to her. He’d finally reached annoying.

“Hello, Ethan.”

He blinked at her unfriendly tone and flashed a brilliant smile meant to blind her so that she wouldn’t see the way his eyes crawled up her jeans, scanned her chest, and finally made it to her face.

“How lovely you are today, Ms. Roberts. I’ve come to sweep you away for that tour I’ve been promising.”

She held up dusty, gloved hands. “I’m gardening. It’s slow work.”

She hoped he would take the hint, and she frowned when the tall, curly blond, daddy’s-boy leaned in, almost leering.

“I could help.”

“Do what? You ain’t no farmer,” Luke grunted from his chair in the corner.

Kendle flushed, hoping the snobbish fop hadn’t heard. “Thanks, but I already ran Luke off. It’s very relaxing.”

Kendle swept the tropical jungle that was alive with life, bushy leaves waving in the soft, warm breeze, and tried not to respond to Ethan’s smug, patronizing tone.

“You should be resting. Let me take you to my estate on the bay. I’ll pamper you...show you what the red carpet treatment is.”

“And probably every venereal disease known to mankind,” Luke muttered.

Kendle couldn’t stop the snicker that mistakenly encouraged Ethan to begin telling her what he would “introduce” her to, like she were some backwards bush-baby he had to tame.

After a full minute, Kendle found herself getting angry. Didn’t he know who she was?

“I’ve also got a rock wall I’ll show you how to climb. It’s the biggest one the company ever made,” Ethan stated arrogantly.

Luke’s scornful voice echoed loud and clear, “Yeah, forty grand for a wall when he could have climbed these hills for free. Bet Daddy’s real proud.”

Ethan’s handsome face disappeared behind his scowl and Kendle flushed beet red, embarrassed but struggling not to laugh.

“You said you’re busy. I’ll come back another day.”

“Ethan, wait.” She stepped out but left the door open. “I’m sorry. I know you want to be my...friend, but really, I need more time to myself.”

He answered, “I should think you would be eager to be with your own kind.”

Frowning at him, Kendle crossed her arms over her chest. “What’s that mean?”

The dandy’s expression was eager now, mean, and Kendle suddenly wished she had let him go away mad.

“It means normal people, Miss Roberts, not an old man who hid here from crimes he was never punished for. Be careful. You could be in danger.”

He left before she could think of a response.

As she came in and shut the door, Luke said, “He’s right. Not about you being in danger, but about my past. I did something awful that cost innocent lives, and I was never charged. I was barely even investigated because of the scandal it would have caused. It was swept under the rug, and I was sent to a new unit in a different part of the world.”

His voice was careful, expecting the worst, and Kendle listened calmly, hating the Kraft heir a little for Luke’s pain. There was no comparison between the two men, and she liked the fact that Ethan had backed down. It said she was safe with Luke; he could handle things.

“I knew it was something like that. How terrible to have carried it for so long. Alone.”

Surprised by her reaction, or lack of, Luke repeated his words. “He’s right. You should be with your own kind.”

Kendle sighed, pulling off the dirty gloves. “You are my kind. He can’t understand how it is with us. He only wants me because I say no.”

Tension invaded the room.

“How is it with us, Kendle? Tell me, so we’ll both know.”

Face red and heart thumping, Kendle stared at the floor. “I don’t think we should do this yet.”

“Too soon?” he asked, trying to steel himself for her words of rejection, despite the kiss he couldn’t stop thinking about.

“Too awkward. It...may not be what you’re hoping for, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’d be surprised by how little I’d settle for.”

His voice was incredibly sad, and it stunned her for a moment.

Luke let out a gentle sigh filled with resignation, as if he knew he wasn’t worthy, and it broke her heart to see the hurt lurking in his face.

“I understand. I’m content with our friendship.”

“Really?”

He bent down to place a soft kiss on her cheek that sent chills into her belly. “Yes. Anything more is up to you.”

Unsure where the future would take them, Kendle followed her heart. They would take what fate gave them. “I know I don’t want any strings. I haven’t made plans for the future.”

“And you don’t have to. We’ll keep things like they are.”

“I’d like to try a little more.”

Luke’s breath caught at her words. “What do you mean by a little, darlin’?”

“I want you to follow your feelings and stop holding yourself back from me. I can handle it.”

“I hold back out of respect for you and your reputation,” he hedged. It was really the stain on his soul and the feeling of worthlessness he wore like a cloak.

“People will think it’s wrong. I’m old enough to be your grandfather.”

Kendle’s mind flashed to their embrace in the garden, and she shook her head, unknowingly telling him what the male inside had been longing to hear.

“I don’t care what they think. I don’t see you that way.”

“How do you see me?”

Kendle’s face reddened further. “I see an attractive, resourceful man I’d like to know more...intimately. If you’re interested?”

Luke pulled her into his arms and this time, when their lips met, he let the man in him have control. He held her with a hand tangled in her short, dark curls and the other on her slender hip as his tongue tasted her.

He broke the kiss reluctantly, and her lashes fluttered open, gaze full of hazy desire that made him grin. “I’m interested.”

He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, and she peered up sexily. “How about another?”

Luke chuckled, body under tight control. “I’ll need an ice shower.”

Kendle slid her arms around his neck and pressed her soft woman’s curves against him. “No need. I’m not a tease.”

She kissed his lips softly, gasping softly against his mouth when he slid a hand down her hip to her cheek. As he deepened

the kiss, Kendle was swept away, tightening her grip around his neck.

The wind gusted against his hot skin, and Luke held himself in check as he swelled, wanting to push against her like a horny teenager. He made himself leave her hot embrace.

“We hafta slow down, darlin’,” he said and put a little more distance between them. “This is one of those moments you can’t get back. You should be sure.”

“I am,” she protested.

Luke forced himself to do the right thing. He lied. “I’m not.”

Kendle’s desire fell under an immediate swell of self-doubt. What was she doing? Acting like a whore came to mind, and she spun away. “Yeah, okay.”

Embarrassed by her actions, she was gone a second later, and Luke watched with regret, sorry he’d hurt her but sure it was happening too fast. He wouldn’t be able to stand it if they made love and she was sorry when it was over.

Kendle was horrified by the way she’d thrown herself at him and she couldn’t stop the hot tears. She told herself she had been treated worse by people she was related to, but the rejection was heavy in her gut as she went to the garden.

“Stupid,” she muttered, wiping at her face. “Red skin, no hair. No wonder he didn’t want me.”

“That’s not even close to true.”

Kendle jumped. “Don’t lie.”

“I’m not.”

She wiped at her face with the sleeve of her shirt, “Doesn’t matter. My fault for thinking I could have what I want and not consider how you feel. I put you on the spot, and I apologize. I used to have better manners.”

“Don’t do that to yourself!” Luke stated sharply, moving toward her. “You did nothing wrong.”

Her pretty eyes streamed with tears that the sun lit up like sparkling jewels as they rolled down her cheeks. He hated himself for hurting her and for being aroused by her youth.

“Then why don’t you want—”

“What? You think I don’t want to make love to you?”

Flushing scarlet, she didn’t answer.

When she started to twist away, Luke pulled her around and forced her to listen.

“I want you so much I dream about it,” he whispered, leaning in to slide his lips along her jaw. “I want to be with you more than any woman I’ve ever known, and the next time you invite me, I’ll do my best to love you the way you deserve.”

Luke kissed her damp cheek and then returned to the living room, afraid he’d fallen in love with someone who would never be able to return the feeling.

*It’ll be enough*, his heart answered. He would love Kendle a lifetime’s worth in the weeks or months fate let them have. Her fears of the future were groundless. Death was in the air. His...and the only time he wasn’t scared was when he was close to her.

Chapter Thirty-Seven  
**Wrong Place, Wrong Time**  
March 29th

1

“**Y**ou forget who I am!” José snarled, hand dipping toward his belt. “Never talk to me that way!”

Dean peered up from the muddy ground. A thin layer of grit was blocking most of the sun; without that glare, Dean had a perfect shot. “Whoever did this might still be around. Listen to my brother, *Josey*, and shut up, or maybe your body will join the one by the burnt jeep. It is one of your *hombres*, yes?”

The school had blackened jeeps, fly-ridden corpses, puddles of drying blood, and the front of the brick building appeared as though a bomb had gone off.

José picked it out through his binoculars, storing the insults. One day, he would be in charge, and these *hermanos* would be *muerto*.

Dean sensed the thought. He snorted. “You’d better bring help, *Josey*.” Dean mounted his solid black horse awkwardly; he silently cursed the wound that had healed but left nerve damage and prevented the smooth control he used to have.

At the second intentional slur of his name, José considered pushing things now.

Dean was ready. “Don’t miss.”

The long moment lingered between them.

Dillan distracted his brother. They needed Cesar. Killing his reckless cousin wouldn’t help. He stood up from his perusal of the hard ground. “Fresh tracks. Not ours.”

José pretended to watch mutated ants climb out of a high hill of dirt, but both brothers knew he was a coiled snake, waiting for the right moment to strike. If he could conquer his carelessness,



José might gain the deadly air Cesar carried, but for now, they weren't impressed.

“Our men were overpowered?” José lit a thick cigar with hands that didn't shake. He wanted to fight; he adored fighting.

Dean realized his brother had been right to stop him. *José might be harder than I estimated.* “They had help. Casings are from 9mms.”

“Safe Haven.”

Dean slid his coat aside to finger the rifle on his pommel. “It has to be them.”

“They're the only group we know of that are organized enough to do this. Go tell Cesar to make camp here.” Dillan pointed. “Last call said he was three hours out.” The slavers were finishing up in Wellington. A dozen refugees had barricaded themselves in a basement. Rick had been sent in to open the door.

The twins rode off in a cloud of dust purposely kicked up to insult him further.

José spun away to do as ordered, hand holding his sombrero as the wind gusted. *When I'm in charge, those two are dead and I'll do it myself!*

## 2

“Who has done this?!”

The dozen men in the gymnasium stared at the filthy, bloody floor and the bodies of their men instead of Cesar's red face.

They were glad when José hurried in. José was Cesar's right hand man. The scarred guerrilla had been the only one to speak his mind when choosing time had come, but all the men knew the Kelly twins, when they were here, were really second. Everyone else was behind them.

“It was Safe Haven. The twins are tracking. I will get us ready to attack.”

“I want them dead!” Cesar stomped down a long, dim hall that should be full of bound slaves, but held only cobwebs.

José hurried to catch up, staring at the gold handled pistols in his cousin's crisscrossed gun belts. *Is this the moment?*

"No."

"But now, while they don't—"

"No." Cesar lowered his voice. "They have a powerful weapon. We will send in el traidor to take care of it."

"What kind of—"

Cesar scowled, shaking his kinked curls. *Will the young never learn?* "Not here!" He used his deformed hand to open an office door

The two men stopped, coming face to face with a tall, blonde woman wearing a long, unbuttoned trench coat. They saw stunning blue eyes full of hatred, and then she darted between them. Even limping, she was halfway down the hall before they reacted.

The two men gave chase, words a mix of English and Spanish.

"Apurarse! Stop her!"

"Grab that puta!"

Samantha made it out through a side door.

A sea of male faces spun her way at the echo. A loose slave was fair game.

Terror ran through Sam, making her shiver. She dropped to her knees, heart thudding in her chest as they all rushed toward her. She was in deep shit, even worse than when the chopper had gone down, worse than when the wolves attacked. *Help me, please!*

The door opened behind her a second later.

Sam cried out as she was jerked backward by her thick braid, landing on her ass in the dirt.

Cesar gave José a nod.

The evil man swung a knee over each shoulder, pinning her arms as he opened his filthy pants.

Cesar knelt beside them, puffing on a fat cigar to get it red-hot. Then he moved it toward the bare skin now showing from her struggles.

Sam had time to notice the man was missing two fingers on his left hand...then he ground the cigar against her hip.

José thrust into her screaming mouth, gagging her as he pushed in as far as he could. With a hand on Cesar's stocky knee as his brace, his free paw roamed her body. "Bite me, you die!"

"I have questions." Cesar stated as José thrust in and out of her mouth, forcing her to breathe through her nose. "You will answer."

José stiffened, hips bucking forward.

Cesar's face filled with delight as he slammed his deformed hand over her nose and watched her choke.

José pulled out, feverish at her purple face. *Maybe I'll do it again and not stop.*

Sam rolled over, gasping, straining for even a thread of air as tears streamed over her cheeks.

"Each of my men waits for a turn; they will get it if you tell a single lie." Cesar's eyes narrowed as she continued to cough and gag. "Why were you left behind? You have disease?"

"Not left! I got here...too late. Saw...them leaving." She stayed on the ground, coughing it up. She cringed when the short, stocky leader jerked her to her feet.

"Tell me!"

"Two...jeeps, three vans? Like SWAT, solid black."

"How many men?"

Sam shook her head, trembling. "They were leaving when I...came up 210. I only saw them go."

"She lies!" José exclaimed, advancing toward her with an expression that said her mouth hadn't been enough.

"They left her because she is diseased! I claim her."

Cesar hated how fast fire blazed in her eyes.

"They did not leave me! They would have loved to have me, but the dumbass driver never looked back!"

Cesar jerked her arm. "Why, puta? What makes you so especial?"

Sam stepped through destiny's open door. "I'm a storm tracker. Who doesn't need that now?"

Cesar hid his pleasure. He gave José a nod as he shoved her, tripping her so she hit the dirt. “My tent first. Show her what I expect tonight. Mañana, she does rounds of el los soldados.”

Samantha’s heart clenched with fear like she’d never known, unable to believe he found no value in her. *Escape!*

Sam began to plan, ignoring the hand crawling inside her torn shirt. She had gotten out a call and been answered, but the radio had gone dead before she could ask if they would come get her. She couldn’t count on it. She had to save herself, again. She hadn’t wanted to wait in the middle of a battle scene, but the rest of this neighborhood had looked just as bad or worse. Now, she wished she’d taken shelter anywhere but here.

Samantha looked around, searching for anything that could help. Crooked tents with Mexican flags and slogans were going up; the smoky breeze carried odors of feces, rot, blood, and death. Screams echoed from the other side of the big camp... It only took a moment to understand these men were evil.

A piercing scream echoed, making her jump.

Samantha stopped struggling as the man led her through one side of the unorganized camp. Sam replayed the evil leader’s words: “*Show her what I expect tonight.*”

Fear filled her body from the feet up. Melvin and Henry had been bad. This was going to make her want them back.

Her captor shoved her into a large, lopsided tent. He followed her in, closing the flap.

### 3

The second she was able to move, Samantha forced herself to her feet and began searching for a weapon, ignoring the blood dripping from her mouth, her nose, down her thighs. *There has to be something!*

Her attacker had chained her ankle to the tent pole like a dog; the cold metal was a horrid reminder of her weeks in captivity. Her gut was blazing with determination to get away. *Tonight.*

They would be expecting it, but they didn't know she'd kill to accomplish it. *They don't know what I'm capable of!*

Samantha edged to the flap and slowly lifted a tiny corner. She swept the men, who appeared unhealthy with cold sores, coughs, and noses being wiped on filthy shirtsleeves. They were an ugly group of hardened killers, with bruised faces and clothes streaked in blood that drew insects in swarms. Sam hated the snapping flies swarming the filthy camp, but it was fitting that the mutations were here, in this place of abominations.

The town outside the camp had been gone before the slavers arrived. Sam cursed herself for being caught off guard. She should have known trouble was coming by the way the rescue party had been leaving so quickly. It had taken days to figure out how to power up the CB system. After finally succeeding, she'd fallen asleep in front of the radio and missed the engines through the wind and her bad dreams.

Samantha shivered as the noise levels increased with more cries, gunfire, barking, shouts. Help wouldn't come from any of these men. *What about the females here?*

As she started to raise the flap higher, instinct took over. Sam ducked a big boot slamming into the tent where her face had been.

“Closed!”

Samantha scrambled back, afraid the guard would come in and hurt her too. *What am I going to do?*

*Keep trying.*

That, she would do until she was dead. She was a survivor, no matter how many times this new world tried to kill her. At one point, Samantha had laid low in a supermarket full of decaying bodies during a dust storm. The warning had only arrived an hour before the sandstorm, but it had been enough. The waves of energy made her heart clench in longing. It had come from someone who was like her. She had almost chosen to skip Cheyenne and hunt for the person, but she wasn't sure how to do it. Now, she bitterly wished she had tried.

“You won't find anything.”

Samantha was on her knees in front of the flap. She looked up to find a tall, thin white man with shifty eyes and a black bandana around his neck. He held a jug of brownish water in one hand. He looked so much like one of the slavers that Samantha forgot her own plan.

“What do you want?!” She backed up on the blood-splattered floor. She wouldn’t get near the cot again unless she was dead or unconscious.

“Cesar wants you to get cleaned up and ready for him.”

Sam ignored the words, escape plans reforming in her mind as she watched his green eyes crawl over her exposed flesh. The steel in her spine hardened. She stood, facing him. Maybe she had gotten lucky. If he wanted her when she was this battered, he was a sexual deviant at the least, and therefore, weak. “Are you one of his men?”

Rick let the flap shut them in smelly dimness. “Slave.”

Sam took in the fresh and old bruises, the dirty, ragged jeans and shirt that hung on him. The voice inside warned her this man could not be trusted. “Can you get a gun?”

Rick shook his head again, ogling the bare skin showing through her torn shirt. He had a thing for broken blondes. It had sent him to prison. “No. Pills, though. You’ll be a zombie while he’s using you.”

Sam forced her lips to curve into an inviting shape. “Do you have a woman or family here?”

“No.” Rick hid his sly nature. Cesar would be pleased with how easy this was going to happen.

Samantha stared.

Rick felt his body respond. The blood and bruises were a turn-on for him. That was another reason he’d stayed. Here, a man was allowed to be just that: a man.

“Do they let you come and go?”

“Sometimes. Usually, I have a guard.” Rick gave a slight wince that he made sure she saw. “I got away once.” His voice lowered to a mutter. “Haven’t tried in a long time.”

Aware of the dim day fading fast, Samantha ran a hand up his arm, letting her shirt fall open. “You like women?”

His expression was full of want, but his mind was full of control. It was all part of the plan. Rick had done it enough to know he’d already succeeded. He was numb to the guilt as he worked her. “Hell, yeah!”

“Wanna touch?”

Rick did want her. Unlike the other females here, who cried too much and cowered, this one had the feel of a fighter. He broke Cesar’s first rule: don’t touch until the deal is done.

Samantha was unprepared for the bolt of lust his gentle hands drew. When she arched into his caress, to her shame, it wasn’t completely faked. “Wanna do more?”

His hands slid to her bony hips.

Sam pulled back, closing her torn top as best she could. “Then get us out of here. I’ll be *your* slave.”

Rick’s hands lowered in mock fear. “He’ll kill us!”

“We’re not Mexican. He’ll do that anyway.”

There was truth in the statement.

She leaned against him, sensing weakness. “It’ll be great. Just the two of us, and you’ll never be alone.”

“It’ll have to be fast, while they’re drinking. Be ready.”

His words surprised her, even though it was what she wanted to hear. “I will.”

“Good. You can trust me.”

#### 4

“She went for it already?”

Rick told Cesar everything word for word, like he always did. They were standing just out of sight of the tent where Samantha was stashed. This wasn’t the first time they’d run across a valuable female and used her to get inside a defended town. It would be the first time they’d used a government employee. Rick and Cesar both assumed she’d been one. They’d spent enough time around detention center females to recognize the type.

“She is smart. Talk to her a little. Sneak out on one of the horses.” Cesar fingered the handle of the knife in his belt as the cool wind blew by them. “You will contact me in two weeks. If you do not...”

Rick gave in without a fight; shame was no longer something he felt. “You’ll have what you want, like in Trinidad and Boulder. This plan always works.”

“And what reward do you ask, white man, for betraying your people? Again.”

Rick didn’t flinch. They weren’t his people. They hadn’t been since the war. “The woman, until I’m tired of her.”

“We have no white unions!”

“Not a union. *My* slave.”

“If there is a child, it will be killed.”

Rick snorted. “I want her, not some screaming shit machine. If she comes up pregnant, I’ll make it go away.”

Cesar didn’t doubt him. “Deal. Do not forget. Two weeks, and then you will deliver Safe Haven to me.”

Cesar watched Rick go to the woman, waiting until he was out of earshot. “You follow. Make sure your witch is with them. We’ll be along.”

“We will.”

The twins hovered in the shadows, eager to go. The tracks from the school might have led them to the witch, but the brothers had lost their tracks in a sewer drain and hadn’t been able to find them again despite checking exits for hours. The weeks that had gone by had made the twins doubt themselves. If the woman wasn’t what they had assumed, then they would just keep going.

Cesar had put a lot of time and effort into this now. He’d made strong plans based around the control of such a power; being denied would cost someone’s life. They’d likely be caught and killed in the future if they had to run, but the need for revenge on the woman was undeniable. If she was what they thought, then they would gain something any man would risk his life for—true magic. If she wasn’t, their lives might be over in this country.



Chapter Thirty-Eight  
**Fire And Desire**

Near Chadron, Nebraska

**March 30th**

1

“**W**e are an American Red Cross Convoy picking up survivors. We offer food, shelter, medical care, and protection. Does anyone copy?”

“We hear you, Safe Haven! We’re in Hot Springs. We’re out of food. Are you around here?”

“Close enough. How many people?”

The man who answered the woman’s plea for help was different from the one they’d been hearing for the last week. Marc and Angela both stopped cleaning up their late lunch to listen to the conversation. The waves of authority from that voice were impossible to ignore. To Marc’s ears, he sounded military.

“Twelve. Two are sick. We don’t know what it is.”

“We offer help to everyone, sick or not. Do you know Morse or phonetic code?”

“I know both, but go slow, it’s been a while.”

“Are you an ex-sailor by any chance, Hot Water?”

“Nancy, and yes, for seven years. How’d you know?”

“Because of the slight dislike in your tone. Marines and Navy didn’t mix well in the old world.” The Safe Haven man’s tone was laced with a comforting humor.

“No, sir, they didn’t.”

“They do now. We’re all soldiers in the same fight for survival. Take down this message.”

“He tells his men that too.” Angela was listening in many ways.

The taps came slowly enough for Angela, who'd been learning the code from Marc, to understand. "They're in the Black Hills. That's one day from us."

Marc stared over the hood, full of longing. *I want more time. Me too.*

*Can we?*

*...no.* Two days would be All Fools' Day. Was it an omen?

Marc frowned. "You all right?"

Angela scanned the vast field of corn that ran as far as they could see on both sides of the road. They were five miles from the Nebraska-South Dakota state line. There were barbed fences lined in brown grass struggling to survive. Other than a faded red barn and a tall silo on one side, there was only moldy corn here.

"Angie?" Marc hated the fear in her expression. It hadn't been there as much in the last weeks. She had worked hard to overcome her weaknesses; he was amazed by how fast she'd done it. "You could call now. Talk to Charlie."

"I don't want Kenn to know where we are." Angela pushed aside the fear as her mother's heart spewed awful words. "And we need to talk about what happens when we get there."

Marc straightened up. "After we make camp tonight?"

"Let's stay here. Meet up with them in the next few days." Her gaze wandered large circles of charred dirt that reminded her of the empty holes they'd seen in middle Nebraska.

Marc's unease grew. They had covered three hundred miles in nine days, driving continuously. Last night, he'd had to insist they rest and get ready to face whatever was coming. They had made one long stop to replace his Blazer. Again, they were identical; the one they had found was the exact match to hers. Fate...? Marc wasn't sure. She had been pushing them hard to get here. Now, she was hanging back. Nerves? "Are you sure? We could be there by dusk tomorrow."

"It's already been ninety-eight days. A few more won't matter."

Marc took a step toward her. "You can't put it off, honey. Face it, and we'll go from there."

Angela watched Dog patrol the edges of the shoulder high corn. “I’m not avoiding, but I am nervous. I’m cutting ropes, erasing his hold on me, and he’ll hate me for it. You need to have the details you asked for back in Indiana, but I need to strengthen my determination. Will you drill me on the things you’ve taught me, remind me that I’m allowed to fight back?”

Marc’s heart broke for her. “I think that’s a great idea. You’ve gotten a lot stronger. He won’t know how to handle you.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.”

## 2

“Faster. You can handle it.”

Angela pushed the pedal down; the Blazer leapt forward, throwing them back.

“On my mark. Just like before.”

Angela concentrated, hands and feet connected to the thrum of the engine, the vibrations of the tires.

“Now.”

She spun the wheel, jerking up the emergency brake, and then they were spinning in the dusty street, seat belts holding them in place.

“Now.”

Gunning the gas, Angela slammed the brake and straightened the wheel. The Blazer shot forward.

“Again. Seventy this time.”

Angela mashed the gas, emboldened by her successes. She managed to make the emergency rotation without his instructions this time.

She waved at the line of dirty, faded targets they were now facing. “Next?”

“Loser has dishes!”

Angela got out of the car and took off at his challenge, darting for the distant line of dented cans they’d set up.

Distracted by her happiness, Marc gave chase and left their vehicles in the middle of the street for anyone to see.

Angela was able to match Marc shot for shot until he moved the cans so far back that she could barely see them. After her missing half, and him missing none, she reloaded her gun and put it away. “That’s not a challenge for you, is it?”

Marc shrugged, expression shuttered. “Does it matter?”

Their eyes locked for a brief, intense moment.

“Maybe. Stand by that speed limit sign.”

“If you like.”

It was amazing to watch. When she asked him to go farther, Marc did it with a curious glance she chose not to answer.

*Is she imagining a showdown between me and her man?*

*Yes.*

Pride swamped Marc; he fought it down and settled in to give her the proof she needed.

Marc didn’t miss a single shot. Angela knew this wasn’t hard for him. Marc was good. Better than anyone she’d ever seen, maybe even Kenn, who liked to take her to the range but not let her shoot. Designed to rub in how defenseless she was, it was yet another difference declaring the two men worlds apart. Kenn had been her warden, while Marc... *He makes me feel safe.*

Angela smelled him as he stepped by—smoke, sweat, and underneath, musky man. Her nostrils flared; she inhaled deeply before it was gone. She turned away, lost and hurting all over again. *We’ve missed so much!*

“You all right?” He couldn’t stop asking that question.

Angela stared at the thinner layer of sky grit instead of his handsome profile. She could almost feel the sun again, but even the good things couldn’t distract her from the fear, the desire. There was no way this would end well. “Just thinking.”

“Care to share?”

She shook her head.

Marc could feel her unease, her sadness. He tried one last time to get her to take the easy way out. “Let’s grab our son and go. We’ll find other people to settle and rebuild with.”

“I can’t.”

Marc sighed. “Because you owe him.”

Angela chose to give complete honesty, whether he was ready to hear it or not. “Not anymore. When he left me out here to fend for myself, hoping I couldn’t, I wouldn’t, it cancelled our deal more than anything else he’s done.”

“Then why?”

“It’s hard to explain. I’m going for my son, but there’s something else pulling at me too, at the other side of me. I dream a lot. I’m sure you know.”

Marc knew it too well. The nightmares had come less often, but when they did, they seemed worse. Twice last week, she’d woken him up screaming about a metal monster.

“I dream of a refugee camp most nights. It’s full of people—our kind of people, and they need help. I want to belong there. I want us to be a part of that protection.”

Marc grunted. “In the same group as your man? Don’t you think that’s asking a little much?”

She shrugged. “Yes, but our son is all that matters in the end. We’ll handle the rest of it as it comes.”

“Remember the night we made him?” Marc hadn’t meant to say it out loud. He was relieved when Angie blushed.

“No, not so much.”

“Ouch. That hurts.” He feigned being crushed, aware that he really felt it. He’d thought of little else during sex for the last fifteen years.

Her voice softened. “Don’t ask questions unless…”

“You’re prepared to hear the answer.” He laughed with her. When she met his eye and held the contact, Marc tested the water. “We could talk about it. Maybe you’d remember.”

She stiffened. “No need to.”

“So you do?” Marc watched her eyes glow a smoky, midnight blue; he tensed. *Mistake! Shit!*

Angela was unable to keep the bitterness from her voice. “All the time at first. I’d think about you, and I’d wonder what raven-haired, blue-eyed whore you were with. I’d wonder if you were able to sleep afterward, if you stayed until morning and kissed her lips, if you promised to love her forever *as you walked out on her.*”

Marc took a step forward, heart aching. “No, Angie, to all of it. I’ve only said that to one woman, and I still mean it. Forever hasn’t come yet.”

A tear spilled down her cheek. “Don’t. It hurts.”

“I’d take it away if I could.”

“You have, some of it. Knowing you came to my apartment back then means something to me.”

Marc blinked. “I didn’t think you knew.”

“I picked it up a while back.” She shrugged. “Didn’t seem like you wanted to talk about it.”

“I didn’t.”

“You would rather I went on thinking you didn’t come back for me at all?”

“Yes!”

Angela frowned. “I don’t understand. Why would you want me to hate you?”

“Because you should.” Marc faced his mistakes. “I knew you’d forgive me. You’re a good person, but I have to be punished.”

“Because I was hurt?”

“Because you were being hurt right then and my cowardice let it continue for another decade!” Marc’s shoulders slumped. “I’ve never run from anything in my adult life...except you.”

The pain she’d been carrying all these years began to ease a little. *He was scared to face me; he thought I was happy without him.* He’d tried to do the right thing, after doing the wrong thing. It hadn’t worked out for either of them, but that was the one explanation she’d never considered.

Marc smothered under thick shame. “It was unforgivable.”

“No, it was fate.”

Marc was startled from his self-evisceration. “What?”

Angela tried to be comforting. She'd had a long time to think about it. "One of you would have died that day. The other would have gone to prison. Fate didn't want that; neither do I."

"You don't want either of us dead or gone?" Marc was dazed at how fast she'd ripped him open and then begun healing him from the inside.

"No." She sighed. "We've all made mistakes; the past is done, as much as it can be, but only if Kenny gets a pass too. Charlie wouldn't be waiting for me in that refugee camp if he hadn't cared for us all these years."

"That wasn't care. It was ownership."

"I know. But it allowed us to survive. Fate has jobs for all of us. I believe that."

"I don't." Marc didn't want any part of fate.

"I know." Angela smiled. "But fate brought you back into my life, Marc. Not when either of us wanted it, but when it was needed. You'll see that in time, I think."

Marc made a face.

Angela snickered.

The awful tension was broken; sadness took its place.

"I'm sorry I didn't knock on your door that day." Marc was relieved, but he wasn't sure if it was okay to feel it.

"I'm sorry I didn't call for you. Fate or not, if I could do it over, I'd call you."

That was enough for Marc to be able to let it go. He put his hand out. "Truce?"

She shook with him. "Didn't know we were at war." Angela let her hand linger. She'd missed the feel of skin sliding across hers in warmth and love.

Marc read the moment and pushed his luck.

Angela held still as he leaned in, needing to know if the stray curls of desire she'd been feeling were real. *Can I be whole again in time or will the thought of sex always scare me now?*

Marc saw her nostrils flare as his hands came up to her face; she shut her eyes as his palm slid along her cheek. His thumb rubbed across her bottom lip. "So beautiful."

Marc pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth. He felt her sudden intake of breath. Not sure if it was fear, he pulled back. “Angie?”

Her hands were curled into tight balls. She wanted his kiss, but she was scared. *Time to face it and see how damaged I really am.* Angela melted into his arms and tilted her mouth up.

Marc didn’t give her time to change her mind. He delivered the welcome he’d been saving since she’d recoiled from him back in Indiana.

Angela stiffened as his hand slid to the back of her neck, but the mouth against hers was sweet. He tugged her closer... She curled her arms around his neck, lost in the first real passion she’d felt in too many years.

Marc deepened the kiss. Their tongues touched, thoughts mixing.

*Missed you!*

*Need you!*

*Taste like a woman.*

*Smell like a man.*

*My woman.*

*My man.*

The last one made Angela gasp against his mouth. She slammed the doors and broke the embrace. *So much feeling in a single kiss!*

Marc glanced away to lie. “I’m sorry.”

“Marc.”

Her voice was rough, sexy. He looked at her, prepared to hear almost anything.

“It wasn’t fear.”

Marc laughed, body hard and heart light. *It’s gonna be a good day, Pa.*

Angela’s thoughts were along the same line. She hoped the feeling stayed with her through the hard reunion that was coming. She had a plan of action based on what little she’d picked up about the people Kenn had joined. Marc would have to watch his back,



but there might be a chance for peace. She would know within the first few hours of being in the camp if that stood a chance.

#### 4

Angela ducked under Marc's arm, grunting. She spun and dropped, throwing her leg out to trip him.

Marc jumped.

Angela had counted on that. She immediately spun again, catching his ankle as he landed.

Tripped, he rolled forward. Marc was on his feet in an instant, spinning, but he knew she was already there.

Angela used the palms of both hands to shove him, hard.

For the first time since he'd begun to teach her, Marc landed on his ass in the warmed dirt, grunting at the impact. Marc chuckled. "Very, good. Now, do it again."

Angela rushed him the second he was upright, looking to his right. When he defended the left, she came straight up the middle, hands going to his big arms. She used the leg sweep on him again as she shoved, and then had to duck the fingers that tried to pull her along as he fell.

"That was great." He started to get up.

"Don't move!"

Her tone froze Marc with his hands splayed in the moist dirt. He sensed something moving nearby as she drew her weapon.

"Roll to your right when I yell and come up firing. Targets at... ten, two, three."

Marc heard the soft pad of paws; he watched her for the moment to react.

"Two more at twelve o' clock!" Angela watched the three very thin, gray and white wolves, trying to judge their intentions.

A big black and gold animal she hadn't seen lunged from the shadows. *Shit!* "Now!"

Angela fired, a bit wildly on the first few shots. One of the rounds caught a wolf in midleap, slamming into the chest. It landed on the ground in a hard thud.

Marc rolled and hit his feet; he began to fire. “Watch your six!”

The wolves were pack hunting. Marc put them back-to-back as the brittle stalks around them swayed with barely seen movement. The sky had begun to darken as they worked out, but neither of them had worried over it. They were used to being in the dark, but this time, they’d let themselves be surrounded by dangerous predators. More eyes gleamed at them through the dusk tinted rows.

They fired at the same time, dropping two wolves that jumped from opposite sides.

A dark shadow appeared at her hip; Angela stopped herself from shooting as she recognized Dog. She narrowed in on a stocky white wolf running through the distant, yellow stalks. Before she could take aim, a shadow streaked by her.

“Damn it!” Again, she kept herself from firing by a hair. “Dog went to my right, chasing the white one!”

Marc spun them to face another dual attack meant to separate prey. The thin animals came in low, lunging for legs. Both shots killed, but two more hungry hunters jumped at Angela.

“Duck!” She got the lowest animal in the chest as the other sailed overhead. She heard Marc take care of it as more and more eyes shined in the dimness. Wolves were streaming through the corn like rats.

Marc made sure they stayed tight against each other. He moved them in half circles, firing and kicking at wolves not quite hungry enough to lunge but still bold enough to snap. He could feel Angela doing the same behind him; her grunts and shots mirrored his.

Flames rose up behind them. Marc saw the tall shadow of a man as he turned, shot a leaping wolf in the chest, spun again and killed a snapping wolf going for Angie’s leg.

More fire erupted, along with the pungent smell of gasoline as full darkness fell over the area. A few of the wolves hesitated, but not the hungry frontrunners.

Angela jerked forward, stiff-arming a determined predator in the throat. Her gun was empty; she knew by the silence behind her that Marc's was too.

The wolves padded forward with their back fur bushed up.

Angela fumbled for the speed loader on her belt.

Marc turned them again, slamming his mag in as two more wolves lunged. He caught one in the neck, blood spraying. He shoved Angie backward in time to let the second animal go sailing by. "Incoming!"

Reloaded, Angela shot the wolf as it hit the hard ground, then fired at one in the air as Marc rotated them again. Shadows lunged, coming through gaps in the wall of fire. She picked them off as they got closer, assuming the silent gun meant Marc was reloading.

Marc stared at the hulking man, fingers working. The circle of flames was discouraging many of the animals, though it wasn't complete yet. The newcomer was gigantic, over 8' tall, and yet he was graceful as he poured the last of the gasoline to ignite the gaps.

Before Marc could say anything, Angela spun them, six shots gone. She gasped in surprise at the big man, but like Marc, her fingers didn't stop reloading. She had to be ready when he turned them again.

"On your right, woman!"

She twisted the knob to load the bullets and flipped the chamber shut as she dropped the loader to the ground. She fired without looking, almost able to hear the slobbering jaws about to clamp onto her ankle.

A heavy body thudded to the ground.

"Dog! Guard her!" Marc fired repeatedly.

Dog appeared at Angela's side, snarling at more wolves trying to sneak through a thin gap in the wall of fire.

Nearby, an engine echoed but no one noticed.

He wasn't afraid of being alone in the darkness, but he was more than scared of not being able to find a way to keep Adrian from discovering what he'd done, who he'd been.

*Angela's here.* It had been a relief to get to Cheyenne and find the slavers (he'd watched for an extra day to be sure she wasn't there), but he knew she was within a day of him, just not in what direction. She was likely southeast, coming in on a straight line, but instead of going that way at the highway sign, Kenn kept the Bronco on the path he had taken after slipping away from the massive slaver camp.

Kenn had his lights off, brake bulbs loosened to eliminate the telling glows; he slowed as loud, rapid gunshots disturbed the darkness. He put his window down and rolled slowly, trying to pinpoint the location. *It's her.* Kenn was sure.

More gunshots rang out. It sounded like a battle for survival. He stopped. Scope always at hand, Kenn narrowed in on what appeared to be a ring of fire.

*She's in trouble.* The plan fell into place with a horrible snap. He would arrive in time to finish off whoever had killed his wife.

*What if she survives?*

Kenn grimaced at that possibility. *I can't go back to Adrian unless I make sure she doesn't.*

## 6

Angela muttered a curse. Three more wolves slunk into the ring. She heard Marc echo her expletive as he fired, hitting them all. They were in deep trouble. The ammo was almost gone, but the wolves weren't. It was time to let the witch out and worry over the consequences later. "Fire!"

Bright flames spewed from Angela's outstretched hands, hitting a gap in the wall right as two wolves tried to dart through. Their fur lit up; the heat of her power blew them back into the dark cornstalks as the gap filled in.

"Over here!" Marc shouted as the stranger took a rifle from the sling on his shoulder.

She obeyed, flames shooting like golden comets from her fingers. It closed the spaces as each infusion traveled the circle of fire, strengthening it until the ring was solid.

All the animals were outside the ring now, whining uneasily, fighting each other. Angela pushed the witch back as she continued to shoot weak balls that only disappeared into the air. *Stop. We can't win this way.*

There were numerous dead wolves, but dozens of eyes glowered at them from the darkness behind the flames. They would just wait for the fire to burn down and attack again.

“Bad time to be bleedin’.” The big stranger fired a well-aimed shot that took down a pair of wolves trying to breach the wall. One bullet did the job of two.

Marc kept track of the stranger as much as he did the wolves.

“You hit, Marc?!” Angela kept her attention on flickering shadows.

“Duck!”

They did it at the same time, dropping low, firing together. Two more wolves hit the dirt, and slid through the already dying flames.

Dog jumped, meeting a wolf as it came over the fire. His powerful jaws clamped onto an unprotected throat.

Angela fired at the second animal stalking Dog.

Her first shot landed near its paw. Angie was afraid of hitting the wrong dark body, but her second shot went straight between its eyes.

“This is my last mag.”

“Me too.”

The stranger fired a bright red flare into the sky before their words had faded. Seconds later, a tremendous howl split the air.

*Wwwhhoooo!*

It was a piercing whistle of some kind. The notes were melodic, yet offensive at the same time. It seemed to go on forever.

Marc put a calming hand on Dog's shoulder as the wolves hesitated in their attack. Marc thought it had come from maybe two miles away, but no more.

Angela winced as the wailing increased and the wolves joined in. The volume continued to rise as the wolf call came again, pulling at them.

“That’ll be the Missus. She’ll have the poison bait out. We’ll be able to go in a bit.”

“Won’t she need help?” Marc was amazed to see the wolves start leaving.

“No. They don’t climb none too well.”

Angela frowned. “How will you get to your family without running into the wolf pack?”

The man leaned in, big form intimidating. “You tell me, *witch*.”

Angela concentrated, aware of Marc tensing behind her. “Underground, *Max*.”

The man grunted. He pushed back his hood to reveal a disfigured face partially hidden by a thick, shaggy beard.

Angela stiffened as the witch whispered. “What payment do you expect for helping us? Nothing’s free. Not before and certainly not now.”

The man shrugged, gaze darting over her shoulder to Marc. “We got a broken radio, no medicine, no ammo. Got any of that?”

She relaxed, rubbing Dog’s ear. “Possibly. What else? That doesn’t equal the debt of three lives.”

His face was hard as he swept her from head to toe. “Girls could use some clothes. Maybe some books?”

Surprised, Angela gave him a genuine smile.

Marc heard the man’s sudden intake of breath. He recognized the sound, that reaction to Angela. He rotated them. “The woman is *not* for trade.”

The stranger’s face tightened. “Can’t get it up now anyway. Damn diabetes.” He crossed over the dying flames. “Come on. She’ll have supper waitin’.”

Angela and Marc exchanged a long glance of uncertainty, but they chose to follow the big man into the darkness. The corn around them was empty now, but not silent. The breeze blew

through the hollow stalks, making an eerie moan that resembled the calling howl they'd heard.

Dog followed, fur still bushed out in warning.

The rows ended, revealing a dark stretch of sick evergreen trees; they exchanged looks that said they would be careful. The wind was cool, smelling of shit. They both spotted the fresh scat littering the dead rows of corn. This was a hunting ground.

“Almost there.” Max moved steadily despite his size. He stopped in front of a large clump of bushes.

Marc stayed by Angela, as did Dog. His fur was flecked in blood. Marc estimated they had come two clicks from the battle scene.

“Grab an end.” The large man bent to clasp a large handful of the damp foliage.

Marc did it while keeping his ears open, content to let the man's true colors show when they would. The odds on this stranger winning weren't as high as with the wolves.

“Pull!”

Angela chuckled in surprise at the disguised sewer entrance. Thin, dark green puddles glistened where it met the ground. She was careful not to step in it, wondering if it was the fumes that kept the animals from coming through, or if they had learned to avoid it from seeing their pack mates die.

Marc snapped his fingers, bringing back Dog to his side. For some unknown reason, canines loved to drink antifreeze. He couldn't be sure Dog wouldn't try it too despite his intelligence.

“Close the flap. Watch out for rats. The antifreeze don't tempt 'em, and they don't scare easy.”

Marc gestured to the night vision glasses on her belt as they trekked into the damp, stinking air of underground.

Instead of putting them on, Angela tapped the stranger on the arm and held them out.

Max started to take them, then shook his head, stepping by her. “You keep 'em and watch out. Your blood'll probably make fire shoot from their piss. Then we'd never be able ta keep 'em out.”

Angela heard Marc snort in amusement.

She slid the glasses onto her belt. She didn't sense evil in their huge guide, but him knowing what she was made her uncomfortable. She dropped back, putting more distance between them.

Marc was relaxing. He was almost sure the man had been some sort of military before the war. He lit a smoke as they walked over and around rotting furniture, mildewed piles of clothes, whole and broken cinder blocks. Gray and green moss climbed tall, dank walls that met a cobwebbed, shadowy ceiling above them. Their boots echoed in time to a distant drip of water.

"About there. Be quiet. She'll have the little 'uns back ta sleep by now."

Marc sent Angela a silent warning. *He thinks we're a couple. Tell him different and I may have to fight for you when it comes time to leave.*

Angela also felt the man's interest, but there was no sense of him being the one to fear unless he was given orders.

They came to a stop. When Marc gestured, Angela spotted a trap door in a wooden floor over twenty feet up, an impossible jump.

A rock flew through the air. It slammed into the stranger's cheek.

Max sucked in a surprised breath at the pain as another, bigger stone sailed toward him from the damp darkness. "Damn! It's me!"

The rocks stopped. An indignant woman snorted. "Shoulda said something!"

Max grunted, rubbing his arm where the second rock had hit. "Jealous, I think. Seen your woman."

Marc nodded.

"Come on, Lenore! Did I save 'em from the wolves to feed 'em to the rats?"

Angela was unable to keep from grinning at the longsuffering sigh the big man let out.

"Definitely jealous."

"I am not! The rope's kinked up again. Hang on!"



Round gleaming eyes appeared in the deeper shadows.

“Now, woman! They’re comin’!”

The trap door slid open; a rope ladder dropped onto the man’s head.

“‘Bout damn time. Here!” Max grabbed Angela by her clothes and lifted her onto the ladder in one effortless motion. As she climbed, his big hands settled onto her ass, shoving, caressing.

Angela climbed faster. She jerked herself up and out of his reach. The .357 was pointed at him an instant later. “You touch me again, and your missus will use your balls for bait!”

The man stopped halfway through the opening, glaring.

“Angie.” Marc’s tone was patient, resigned.

“What?!”

“There’s a rat about a foot long trying to have sex with my boot. Let him through.”

Angela’s rage cleared. She holstered her weapon and turned to study the other person in the big, cluttered kitchen.

Dressed in a stained white shirt and an enormous pair of farmer overalls with the pockets ripped off, the large woman smirked back at her. A grand beehive of black and white hair hung in every direction like a bad wig. The long, jagged scars on her face and huge arms said she had defended her life at least once, and she could do it again if needed. Angela felt an immediate kinship. She also knew better than to trust the woman just because of that.

“Lenore Codd.”

Angela held out a hand, faint bell ringing. *Isn’t there a fairy tale based on the life of a giant by that name?* “Angela. I hope we won’t be a bother to you.”

The woman watched them as she shook, huge hand engulfing Angela’s. “Me? No. Him?” She nodded at the man leaning down a hand to help Marc. Max didn’t react at all when the wolf riding on Marc’s shoulders nipped at him. “Probably already have. ‘Twas me that sent him after ya. Told him I wudn’t cookin’ till he got ya here.”

Angela covered the woman's large hand with her own. "Then it's you I owe the debt to. Good. Let me start paying on it. I'm a doctor." Her voice lowered. "Diabetes can be controlled. Then some of the effects go away."

"Might could be. Let's get them men fed and we'll talk." The woman clapped her on the shoulder.

Angela held onto the big arm to keep from falling as the reek of corn filled her nose. "Deal."

Angela took her sweater off and tied it around her waist, not wanting to sweat and stink. She was barely able to walk through the dusty 10x12 room as she followed their host. Cluttered shelves of bags, canisters, and unpacked boxes lined every wall. "Can I help? Set a table? Do cleanup?"

Lenore stared at her, bushy brows coming together. "You're polite, eager to help. You remind me of the past."

Angela didn't look away, though the stench of corn was making her eyes water. "I'm sorry."

Lenore shrugged massive shoulders. "Don't be. Wudn't all evil."

"Damn it, woman! Feed me! Them!" Max dropped down at the long, wooden table in one corner of the narrow, lantern-lit room.

His wife motioned at a chair, indifferent to the large wolf standing tensely in her kitchen. "Put your man to the right. We'll stand. Only got two chairs left now. Keepin' warm's more important than pass-me-downs."

Angela shook her head at Marc when he started to offer to take the floor. She brought the heavy chair over with no visible effort. She knew the big woman was pleased when Marc obeyed her and sat in it. The feeling increased when Angela snapped her fingers at Dog to get his attention, then pointed at the trap door. *Please?*

The wolf went to that spot and laid down, tail and ears tense.

Angela stayed by Lenore while she served huge bowls of what looked like stew from a large metal pot on the wood stove.

Marc fell into a conversation with Max about the wolves. He and Angie kept track of each other with almost constant sweeps.

“Everything’s against us now.” The mountain man cracked his knuckles impatiently.

Marc frowned. “But so many? Packs are never more than ten or fifteen.”

“We killed the world.” Max watched Lenore approach the table. “They hate us enough to band together.”

“Still.”

Max grunted, spoon already in a beefy hand as Lenore set his bowl down with a heavy thud.

Angela looked away from the mats of dark hair on his forearms as he scooped up a big bite of the steaming stew.

Lenore stepped back. “It’s not just the wolves. All animals are the enemy.”

Marc made a face, dismayed by that thought.

Lenore saw his reaction. “Must not be that way where you came from.”

Marc felt danger enter the air. “No idea.”

She studied Marc, ignoring Max when he scowled at her for it. “How far have you come?”

Marc decided to try for a humor distraction. “So many miles I can’t feel my ass anymore.”

Lenore leaned in, intelligence blazing. “Is it safe where you came from? When were you there last?”

Marc nodded toward Angela. “Wrong one to ask.”

Lenore produced a tight, grim smile and turned back to Angela. “He’s trained. We can make some deals, trade. I’m Lenore. He’s Maxwell. Welcome to the killin’ fields of Nebraska.”

## 7

“Ohio, huh?” Lenore grunted, handing Angela a thick slab of cornbread a few minutes later.

They both ignored the belches and grunts echoing from the table.

“This is so good!” Angela groaned as she chewed the first bite.

Marc glowered when Max's sly gaze went to Angie's face and lingered there.

"Missus makes the best." Max leered at Angela, hungry eyes dropping to her chest.

Angela held her ground, though she had the urge to put her sweater back on. She let her eyes glow red.

Max paled; he dropped his eyes and went back to his meal.

Marc hid a smirk. "You've been here since the war?"

Marc wasn't surprised when Max glanced at his wife.

"Tell 'em what ya will." Lenore ducked through a curtained door.

Marc saw a long, oddly decorated horn on the frame above that door. *I wonder if that's what made the weird howls.*

When Angela turned to see what Marc was staring at, Max waved a hand. "She's checkin' their breathin'. Corn fumes."

They both frowned, confused.

The man finished his last bite before explaining. "We grow the corn. We have to keep it from the rats. Fumes build up while it sets. Poison, o' course, so we sleep in shifts. When we puke, we know to get out the guns and open the windows 'til it airs out."

Angela was horrified. "Why?"

The big man's tone was rough, but his demeanor said he hated it. "To eat. Can't hunt anymore. Damn wolves get ya or there's no meat around to hunt cause o' them. Gotta eat. Gotta last 'em out."

"You could leave."

Marc's suggestion was met with silence.

Angela shook her head when he would have repeated himself. "Not our business. Maybe you should examine their radio now."

It was enough to fool Max, who immediately responded to the tone and got up. Angela hid a smile at the warning look Marc slid her way. Up to a point, this could be fun.

Marc tried again to get information. "Are you from here?"

Max belched, hefting the radio case to the table. "No. We came from the mountains, near on six months ago now."

Dog's head lifted. He put it back down when he recognized the big woman's steps.

Angela turned to Lenore as she emerged through the curtains. “You vent the corn?”

“Yes, but the generator is out of gas.” Lenore handed her a list. “This is what I need and what we have to trade. I’ll throw in some cornbread if you have the last one.”

Angela scanned the list. When Lenore handed her a pen, Angela understood the male here wasn’t allowed to know how much of what they had. To prevent theft? Control was more probable; the fact that Max had none was likely more responsible for his impotence than the diabetes.

“I can spare this much of each of these. You can find that one here.” Angela pointed with the pen. “That one, I haven’t seen in over a month.”

Lenore creased her brow. “And the last?”

Angela grinned. “Six months’ worth sound good?”

Lenore’s leer said it would go faster. “Deal. I’ll bake while you sleep with your man.”

Unprepared for the probing comment, Angela flushed. She saw the woman’s eyes fill with speculation. She hurried to distract. “You have room for us?”

Lenore nodded absently. “Too much. You’ll stay?”

Angie didn’t like the hungry stare the woman gave Marc as he removed his coat to work on the radio. “Yes, but be clear now. The man is not for trade.”

Marc tensed. *There’s the threat. Damn. I thought Max was the problem.*

Lenore studied Angela, voice cool. “Things not for trade are often taken by force.”

Angela let the witch surge forward, eyes glowing red again. “And often, people die in the trying. Perhaps mankind will be smarter this time.”

Lenore grunted bitterly. “Not the men.”

Angela let more heat come into her words when Lenore didn’t back down. “Maybe not the women either.”

Lenore flushed at the pointed tone. “But if he’s not yours—”

“He is!” Angela prepared to fight.

Marc got ready to help.

They were both relieved when the woman sighed resignedly.

“I’ve mistaken, maybe. Forgive me?”

Angela waved it away, hoping this was the end of it. “My first time in control. I overreacted.”

“First one’s always the best. They still have a hope it will change back.” Lenore grinned, clapping her on the arm again.

This time, adrenaline and anger kept Angela on her feet without an anchor.

## 8

“Coming in.” Marc entered, scanned, then locked the door. He’d just finished with the radio and had been escorted to Angela, who had already called it a night. That had surprised Marc, but he understood she wasn’t threatened by the couple anymore. Marc hoped she was right about them.

Dog went straight to Angela for a sniff. Then he explored the room. Covered in dust, it sported a rickety bed, one end table, a plush, dusty chair below a window, and a long, cluttered dresser without a mirror.

Marc blinked guiltily when he saw Angela had a row of medical supplies spread across the dresser. “You hurt?”

Angela didn’t look up from the needle she was threading. “Funny. Get over here.”

Marc gave a sheepish grin at the dry tone. He took off his sweat stained shirt, trying not to wince as the cloth peeled away from the wound.

“When did I get you?”

Marc shrugged out of the gun belts and laid them on the end table near the bed as Dog curled up under the front corner. “First few shots. It’s just a trim.”

Angela rolled her eyes at the crusted, three-inch furrow along the underside of his arm. “I’m always hurting you, Marc. I’m sorry.”

He saw she had cleaned herself up and put on the jeans and black shirt from the emergency kit he had helped her assemble. They'd gotten lucky to have them on when the wolves attacked. "Mistakes happen."

"I could have killed you. Again."

Marc tensed as she cleaned the wound with alcohol pads.

Angela found herself watching the way his muscles flexed.

"This world is full of chaos. It was your first real fight. I think you did great."

Angela fought the urge to reach out and run a hand along his bearded jaw.

"You learned well."

She examined his injury, letting the doctor take over.

Marc twitched at the needle as it sank into his skin.

Angela tried to hurry. It occurred to her that she had stitching in both of his big arms now. How many more times would he be put in the line of fire for her?

The wind outside picked up suddenly, as if responding.

Angela shivered.

"Damn. It got colder. How do they keep warm in these rooms?"

Angela kept her tone light, but she blushed at the pictures running through her mind. "Body heat."

That explained all the people in one sloppy tangle in that center room. It made Marc think of how Lenore had held his arm as she led him through, fingers caressing. She had whispered of being a good master if he was unhappy with his current one.

Angela's anger flared. "She made a move on you?!"

Marc said nothing.

Angela went to her side of the bed as she dried her hands and controlled her rage. She had no real claim on him. If he wanted to sleep with the woman, he could.

"I don't."

Her eyes flew to him in time to see him grimace as he tried to pull on the clean shirt she'd put out for him. "You sure?"

"Yes."

Marc sounded amused; it calmed her.

He began trying to button the emergency shirt, but with only one good arm and pain shooting through the other, it was slow going.

Angela waved a hand. "Leave it open or you're going to rip out those stitches."

"You could do it for me."

Angela frowned. *He won't ask for a painkiller even though he's out of them, but he'll take one if I tell him to. What is it with men and their pride?* "There's Vicodin in my bag, top left side. Take two, leave the shirt as it is, and go to bed."

Marc lifted a brow at the curtness. "What's up?"

Angela sighed. "Damn. I'm sorry."

"Tell me what has you on edge."

Angela turned toward the window, glad for the bars on it as she spotted shadows padding outside. "Besides the wolves? I'm not sure."

Marc saw the V on the bottle and dry swallowed two of the tiny blue pills. *She sounds restless.* "You wanna talk it out, play some cards? Both?"

"No."

Marc sat in the chair and began working on their guns.

Angela started her own nightly rituals, but she was aware of the man pretending not to watch her. This would be their first time in a real bed together since they made a baby. The old Angela harassed her with memories. The mating had been sweet, soft, beautiful. She'd forgotten none of it.

Marc knew she was thinking about him, but he was out of time. If she said her man was near, then he was, and that meant this was their last night alone together. Marc burned to remind her of what it was like to be made love to instead of being taken.

The sparks thickened.

Angie unbraided her long hair and began to brush it.

"Can I do that for you?" Marc let a little of his longing show when she hesitated. "Please?"



Angela couldn't deny him or herself. The need to get close to him tonight was undeniable. "Okay."

When he slid behind her, big body warm and already hard, she snapped her eyes shut and held herself in place.

Her curls felt like silk on his calloused hands. Marc took his time, using his fingers to gather it, touching her neck softly.

Angela heard the brush hit the bed behind them; his big hands went to her shoulders, but instead of moving away, she allowed him to rub her. The heat from his touch was incredible. "That feels good."

"Yes, it does."

Angela didn't stop him, even when his fingers brushed the curve of her breast and sent chills into her stomach. She forgot to listen to the voice of fear as his thumb brushed her again. The sensation rushing into her gut like a bullet. "Mmm..."

Marc's eyes snapped shut at that sound, liquid heat flooding his gut. He moved his hands to her waist, her slender hips.

*We have to stop now.* Angela knew she'd probably hate herself later, but when he tugged gently, she leaned against his hard, bare chest, wishing she had the nerve to give him what he wanted.

Marc didn't thrust against her ass like he wanted to. When she would have shifted to get closer, he retreated, not willing to destroy the peace.

Angela stifled a protest, cheeks flushed. She hadn't meant to lead him on, but need was riding her now.

Marc recognized her reaction. The killing had done it for her. It was something no one liked to admit, but he'd had some of the best orgasms, alone, right after a battle where blood had been spilled. "You okay?"

"Yeah. You?"

Marc snorted. "I'm all good, Baby-cakes."

Angela giggled.

A sharp draft ran through the room, making her shiver.

Marc frowned. "You should get settled, and cover up."

Angela nodded, pushing off her shoes. She really was cold, sore, and tired. She climbed onto the bed, relieved to find it clean under the thin sheet.

Marc got another blanket from his kit and tossed it onto the pillow next to her. “Put that one around your shoulders.”

Angela drew on her courage. “Share it with me?”

Marc felt the need rise up, strong and hungry. He sat next to her, but shook his head at her offer. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Flames sparked.

Marc felt as if he was sweating, body making it hard for him to sit. He shifted restlessly, waiting for it to go away like it usually did. He had pleased himself from time to time while Angie was asleep, but right now, he felt like he hadn’t cum in years. He struggled to keep it out of his voice. “You ready for tomorrow?”

“As much as I can be.”

“You’ve learned a lot. I think you’ll do fine.”

She smiled at him, in a good mood despite the wrongness here. She tried not to let the thuds and creaks outside the ranch home bother her. She was with Marc. They could handle just about anything together. “I had a good teacher.”

Sparks flew, thicker.

Heat flooded her stomach. When his eyes darkened, she knew he sensed it.

Marc got off the bed and settled into the chair under the window, blowing out the candle closest to him. His body and arm were throbbing together—one a pain, one a sharp, sweet pleasure. *What’s wrong with me?*

Angela was asking herself the same thing. She was pushing him. Marc was a man, one with needs that hadn’t been met for a long time, and here she was letting him kiss her, touch her breast.

Her cheeks flamed at the thought.

She heard him shift in the chair, as if he caught the image. His shirt fell open at the movement, making her stare. *He’s still beautiful.*

“Angie.”

She heard the need. Instead of fear, the woman inside responded. “Yes.”

Marc’s eyes snapped open, but her pale face made him shake his head. “Go to sleep.”

Angie braced herself. She had one last lesson to learn. “Come to bed, Marc.”

Marc groaned, breaking out in a sweat. He shuddered. His blood pounded through tight veins, breathing rough.

Angela frowned. “Are you all right?”

Marc tried to nod, but the tempo of the lust beating inside him grew. He shifted again. *I’ll have to do something about the iron bar in my jeans before climbing into that bed with her.* The picture made the need tighten another notch.

He jumped as her cool hand settled onto his brow. He hadn’t heard her move.

“Damn, you’re hot. Let me see your eyes.”

Marc gritted his teeth as she checked him out. The feel of her hands on him, her loose hair sliding across his skin, was torture.

“I don’t understand. You don’t ha...” Angela broke off, frown growing. *My bag.* “I think I know what’s wrong.”

Marc did too. *I need to get laid more often.*

“You didn’t take Vicodin. It was Viagra.”

Marc was horrified. “What?”

Angela opened her worn medical bag. “It got mixed up during the wolf fight. You didn’t read the label.”

Marc scowled, hands itching to pull her down into his lap. “How long will I be like this? And why the hell do you have that?!”

Angela flushed. “It’s for side effects from diseases. Lenore wants to trade it for the cornbread.”

Marc groaned, on fire. He eyed the white pills she held out. He was used to much stronger pills. He hadn’t paid enough attention. He dry swallowed them before she could get him something to drink. “How long will I be like this?”

“At least a few hours, maybe six or eight.”

Marc's head snapped back, eyes slamming shut. *I won't last that long.* "Can't you give me something to counteract it?"

When she hesitated to speak, he knew there was something, but she didn't want to tell him what it was. "What?"

"If you...take yourself in..." Cheeks a furious red, Angela indicated the bed. "It will go away once you..."

"Next!"

She shrugged. "Let it wear off."

Marc stifled a curse, shifting again. "There's gotta be something else."

"I'm sorry, there isn't."

The tension in the room continued to grow.

After five minutes of watching him squirm, and feeling her own hormones respond, Angela stood up. "I'm going out in the hall for a few minutes." She waved off his protests. "I'll take Dog out in the hall. You...handle things."

Marc sucked in a tight breath. "Stay?"

Angela froze at the blatant need in his rough voice, gaping at him. "While you...?"

Marc heard himself beg. "Please?" He'd never been so hard in his life, not even during their time together all those years ago.

Angela was surprised to find herself considering it. "I couldn't."

"I'll stay right here. I won't leave this chair. And it will cover your story to our host."

Angela knew she should leave, but the heat between them was stronger than the fear; she hesitated, torn. He'd made her feel so alive when they were young! Memories, old and powerful, swirled through the drafty room.

*"I can't." He groaned as their lips met again. "I'm sorry."*

*The beautiful girl shifted restlessly under him, body begging for his touch. "But I want you to!"*

*The boy held himself in place by a hair. They'd never gone this far before. The hormones were in control of her mind. She was too young, forbidden...*

*When she slid a hand between them, he sucked in a harsh breath. "I can't do—"*

*"Sshhhh." Her hand closed over him, stealing his voice. He bucked in her grip as she stroked. Struggling to think, he let her slide his tense hand under her skirt.*

*"Love me, Marc." She moaned against his lips. "As much as you can."*

*Tortured will crumpling, he did.*

"That's one of my favorite memories of us."

Angie blushed at his words. The time after that, they'd gone as far as they could. There hadn't been any holding back. "I can't, Marc, I—"

"Just love me, Angie. As much as you can."

She shuddered, need rising.

Dog groaned. *I don't need to see this.* He found a dark corner and settled down to sleep.

She took a tense seat on the edge of the bed.

Angela watched his hands go to the buckle of his jeans.

Marc couldn't stop himself; lust was raging. He held his breath as he popped the button on his jeans. He expected her to flee.

Angela's cheeks were red, but there was no denying she wanted to be here. When he lifted his hips to slide his pants down, she tore her eyes away, breathing rapidly.

"Throw me a blanket."

Angela did it without moving from her perch. She heard the blankets rustle, hands shifting for comfort. She couldn't stop herself from stealing a peek. It was in time to see his hand go around hard flesh.

Marc saw her eyes go over his body, flashing fire and desire. He tightened his grip. "Mmm..."

His sound woke the woman inside. Angela found herself gawking as he pulled the blanket up and started to stroke... She wasn't sure she could look away.

Marc watched her through narrowed lids, need tightening as she stared at the movements the blanket now hid.

He pulled down the top of it.

Angela's breath went out in a rush; the sight of his thick flesh sent another blast of heat into her gut.

Stroking faster, Marc nodded toward the bed. "You too? You used to love this."

*I still do.* How many hours had they spent that way before lust had driven them to actual touching?

Marc let the man inside push. "There's another blanket. I'll stay right here."

She shifted restlessly.

He shut his eyes...most of the way. "I won't look."

Angela was shocked to find herself here, in this moment, but fear wasn't the strongest emotion—desire was. Physical contact was something she'd been reminded of during this trip and it was one of the things she had hoped to conquer before now. In all the years since they'd been apart, she'd only pleased herself about a dozen times, and not at all in the last year.

"Baby?"

Before she could change her mind, Angela grabbed the second cover and tossed it over herself, but from there...

"Angie, you don't have to do this."

The sudden flare of guilt from him made her shake her head. He had nothing to feel guilty about and neither did she.

With that choice made, she put her hand under the cover and watched Marc like she used to when it was just them against the world.

Marc tried to slow himself down, not wanting to be done before she was, but he was on edge already. He saw her arm brush a rigid nipple as she got comfortable. He listened to her small hiss of surprise at the sensation, fire boiling.

She did it again, intentionally this time.

He stroked harder. That was the Angie he knew, the fearless, sexual nymph that he'd eased into womanhood wasn't scared of pleasure. It was okay to think of that moment now, of how her tight body had wrapped around him in willing surrender.

He groaned at the feel of the memory mixing with reality. Marc jerked himself back from the edge by a hair.

Angela had stopped, watching him, also remembering. She shivered.

"I can't wait much longer!"

The fear rose, making her tense.

Marc delivered a smoldering smile. "Scared?"

She nodded, voice rough. "A little."

"You're free, Angie. No one owns you anymore."

The happiness that gave! Because it was true. She grinned, cheeks darkening further. "I'll watch you for a minute."

Marc wasn't sure he had a minute after that.

Her hands stirred under the blanket. The urge to storm the bed and have her screaming in climax was a hard one to resist. "Move the blanket. Let me see, too."

She did it slowly, revealing long, sexy legs and then white panties with a hand pushing the center aside. Her fingers rotated in small circles.

Marc's heart thumped as the edge flew his way. "Damn, that's hot. Lie back, pretend you're alone."

"Mmm..." The sound of Marc's sexy voice made her convulse in pleasure; her legs opened further to reveal dark curls and slick skin that pulsed.

"With me!" Angela demanded hoarsely as the first wave of fierce light exploded through her body.

"Uuhhh!" Marc arched, grip freezing as he released wildly. "Yeah!"

Coming down first, Angela rolled over and pulled the blanket up. She'd thought to face fear or even guilt now, but there was only relief as her body continued to jerk and twitch in satisfaction. *I really am free now.*

Very unsure of her mood, Marc cleaned himself up and kept his mouth shut. He blew out the candle, then moved to his side of the bed. He was surprised when she held the blanket up and smiled at him.

“After that, I think it’s okay to ask if you’ll hold me while we sleep.”

Marc chuckled as he eased into the bed with her. That was what he wanted the most, what he longed for at night. “My honor, baby.”

Sated, the witch and old Angela both faded a bit more, pushed back by the new person who was emerging. This new woman belonged to herself. She wasn’t so afraid to take chances that she forgot to live.

Angela let out a sigh of peace, tight against Marc’s hard chest. She fell asleep listening to his heartbeat for the first time in fifteen years.

Marc didn’t sleep at all. He just held her and remembered.

Eavesdropping from the next room, Lenore was disappointed, but she planned to keep her word and let them go without trouble. She was sure she would forget about the handsome couple the minute they were out of sight. There was trouble on the horizon for all of them. Lenore could feel it coming. *We won’t see them again. At least, not alive.*



Chapter Thirty-Nine

# Tell Me

Chadron, Nebraska

March 30<sup>th</sup>

1

“I really didn’t think I’d see her again; at least not alive.”

Kenn watched the couple as they slept, ignoring the unpleasant feel of the ash tree between his legs and the angry animals padding below. The beasts sniffed and pissed, trying to find a way into the truck he’d parked up against the thick trunk.

Kenn had found the ranch house just before dawn, hitting shapes in the fog that were either dogs or coyotes as they attacked his tires. He’d taken up a high vantage point as a dim, foggy morning lit up the area, sure she was in there. His starlight scope had penetrated four barred windows, and then he’d found them.

Covers tangled, limbs entwined, it looked like a night of passion had worn them out. The woman wore a sleeping shirt that barely covered her thighs, flashing white panties as she stirred. The man, the wife-stealing, walking dead man, had on a pair of green boxers the intruder recognized even from a distance. They were military issue.

Kenn’s grip tightened on the rifle in his hand, nails digging shallow grooves into the stock as he spotted a dog tag, familiar tattoos, and a quick scan upon waking that every Marine did.

Then he saw who it was.

Dread and cold rage formed a thick knot in Kenn’s gut. Sergeant Marc Brady was Angela’s show of force. He was one of the few people Kenn had ever felt threatened by. He was enraged all over again as he remembered Angela’s mental calls for help. He’d heard the name she called for, but he hadn’t made the connection.

The Marine struggled with himself. The old Kenny wanted to aim and fire; the new Kenn didn't want to kill without justification.

He chose to wait and see just how close his wife and former team leader really were.

## 2

Curled against Marc's back, Angela woke all at once; she tensed, sensing danger.

*He is close.*

Her eyes snapped open.

She glanced at the window and tried to focus. *It's coming from that direction.*

"Are you all right?"

After a minute of nothing happening, Angela told herself it was just nerves. She would be reunited with her son today...and Kenn. *At least it'll be Easter and not All Fools' Day.* "We should get moving soon."

Marc stretched, loving the feel of her pressed tight against him. She hadn't moved away yet; he wasn't leaving the bed until she did. "You regret it?"

"No." Angela lingered. "You?"

"A little. It wasn't what I had planned."

Angela's cheeks turned red. Watching him had been a blast from their stolen past—one she would replay in her mind for a long time. "As hot as it got in here, I'm surprised it didn't go all the way."

Marc rolled over, sliding an arm around her tense waist. "Don't go back to him, honey. Please. We're so good together."

Angela was tempted. The time they'd spent together was seared into her, but her first emotion upon waking had been fear. "I won't make a promise I might not be able to keep."

Marc knew that wasn't good, but he lowered his lips to hers anyway. *I'll take whatever she lets me have.*

### 3

Kenn couldn't take this.

Rage exploded in his mind as their mouths touched. When she let out a moan Kenn couldn't hear but still felt, blood pounded in his brain. How many times had that sound brought him to a thick, instant climax? A hundred? A thousand?

Kenn kept his finger away from the trigger by sheer will. If he killed them now, like this, he could never return to Adrian. Those sharp eyes read the blood on a man's hands.

He had to do something, though. He couldn't just sit here and let her betray him, not while he was armed and in range.

### 4

Angela pulled back as another swell of fear interrupted a moment that she didn't know the ending to.

Even the wolf was tense, fur bristling.

Marc lifted a brow. "Problem?"

She hesitated, aware of him lying mostly on top of her. "Just wolves, I think. We should get up."

Marc sighed when her arm slid off his bare shoulder. "It didn't happen, right?"

Angela flushed in the cool morning air. "For now."

Marc sat up.

Angela rolled out of the bed.

### 5

Kenn lingered. Her creamy flesh was enticing as he studied them from a quarter mile away. The rifle was across his lap now that she was out of the bed. He had yet to find a woman whose body called to him as strongly or promised as much. Weak, Angela was, but she was also hot. Always had been.

Kenn saw a clear moment below and took it, pulling the string to open the hatch of the sunroof. He slid down the slimy tree, rifle

over his shoulder. He was inside his truck with the roof latched before the hungry predators reacted. They lunged onto the truck anyway, but it did them no good.

Kenn plowed into the animals, seeing everything through a red haze. He wasn't going far, just back to the two Blazers he'd found and searched. The pictures of Charlie had told him who they belonged to. He had until the couple returned to figure out how to get rid of Marc so he could give Angela what was coming to her. She had brought a dangerous man he'd hated long before the war. His thoughts raced with fury and fear. Coincidence? *I don't believe in those. She's been keeping secrets.*

## 6

“Will we have to fight our way out of here?”

“No. She heard us last night; she knows she was wrong.”

To Angela's surprise, Marc flushed. “That bothers you?”

He considered. “I might have been quieter.”

Angela laughed, tossing her small notepad onto the bed where he was tying his boots. “That makes two of us. Page seven is what I agreed to trade and what I got for it.”

Marc picked up the small notebook, observing her as she moved around the room, getting ready to deal with what was coming. She left her hair down, braids mixed in. When she tugged her jeans up over a creamy cheek, Marc forgot to breathe.

“Well?”

He mentally snickered. “Looks good to me.”

“Max said to leave it at the barn. The wolves don't come out until dusk. I also agreed to have you check their venting system while I give the kids a checkup. We'll probably be here until midafternoon. I wanted to ask you first, but she's set in stone on this women in charge shit.”

“Works for me. I'm well trained, remember?”

The amusement was forced, the room tense. Marc wasn't sure how to begin. There were things he needed to know, things he

needed to say. "What do you think about Safe Haven? Do they feel okay?"

"They seem organized. Careful."

"They're his people. Whatever he's told them, they'll believe."

She shrugged. "Beyond grabbing Charlie and running, which you already know I don't want to do, we'll have to hope they're good people who can recognize the truth."

"So, you do plan to stay with them."

"Plan? No, but I'd like to try. What I won't do is pledge my loyalty to some asshole who thinks he's God just because his nuts still work. I want to try being with other people, but I'll be picky. I've just gotten my freedom back. I won't give it up."

"How do you want to handle it?"

She sighed. "I need to get Kenn alone, if possible."

Marc frowned. "I meant about me."

Angela's eyes softened. "You're a good friend who helped me, a lot."

He strapped on his Colts. "Most of the problem is solved if you tell the truth. We're family."

"That would mean you can't claim Charlie."

"It's probably for the best anyway, right? At least until you decide what you want."

Angela shook her head. He'd been too good to her. She wouldn't allow him to make that sacrifice. "You're a good friend."

"Okay. Just tell me beforehand, so our stories match."

She scowled. "You make it sound like I plan to lie."

He stared back. "Don't you?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure yet."

Marc was always impressed with how she chose to be honest first and lie second. "I understand. Say what you have to. I'll support it."

She warmed. "Thank you."

"Anything for you, honey." Marc's attention dropped to her shoulder, to the scar showing from under her tank top. How it had got there was the only unanswered question he still had at this

point, though he would insist she get it all out. It would be one less thing for her man to use against her. “Did he give you that?”

“...yes.”

“As a punishment?”

“As a reminder.” Her voice dropped to an ugly mutter. “He’s the boss.”

Marc held in his anger to get the full story. “Will you tell me about him?”

“Why?”

Marc grunted. “Because we’re a day out and all I know is he’s a Marine, a bastard, and a dead man if there’s any justice, but that’s not enough. There has to be something I can use. Profile him.”

Angela was quiet for a minute, considering how much honesty she wanted to give. You had to know your own mind when you dealt with Kenny or he would rip you apart. Marc did need the information. “You won’t find anything. At least, I don’t think you will, but I’m only going to go so far. I can’t relive it during the day too.”

Marc thought her nightmares had gotten a lot better since their night around the fire, since the morning she had woken in his arms.

“He’s strict on everyone but himself; he’s obsessed with appearances. He can’t admit it when he’s wrong. He had a bigger shoe collection than any man should. He hates to be dirty, unshaven, or out of style in any way and he demands the same of those around him. He’s manipulative; he really believes what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“Good.” Marc locked eyes with her. “Now, really tell me about him. Get it over with.”

Angela stared at the foggy bedroom window. “I knew he was dangerous when we met; I knew I couldn’t trust him, but I thought I could hide it. I thought if I was careful and did what he wanted, I could have the same connection that...you and I had.” Angela perched on the window ledge. “We dated for a few weeks before he invited me to live with him. When I said no, bad things happened.”

Marc’s face darkened. “Like what?”

Angela couldn't believe she was about to tell her shame to the one person whose respect meant more than anyone else. "My babysitter's daughter was hurt in a hit and run accident that required her to be there while her child went through therapy. The sitter's mother, who was already a heavy drinker, suddenly had an endless supply and stayed too drunk to talk, let alone care for an active one-year-old. I had to call off, miss classes. Stress built up. Kenny found me crying on my smoke break one night. When he offered again, I accepted so I could keep my son."

She sucked in a calming breath to keep speaking. "I couldn't apply for welfare because I was underage, and I didn't know if the family had reported me as a runaway. I always assumed they didn't care, but I wasn't taking the chance after having my baby for all those months." Angela paused, voice sad, heart breaking. "Charlie was my only joy."

"So you moved in. Did he know then, about what you can do?"

Her tone grew cold. "I don't know that for sure."

Marc was certain her man had known exactly what he was getting into. "When did he find out?"

"He kept up the act for almost a year. I was...content. I began to doubt he was the threat I'd first sensed. It made me careless. I would reach for the phone when it rang, stare toward the door before someone knocked. Sometimes...I'd respond to things I picked up from him." She forced herself to continue. "I met the real Kenny in our bedroom a little after our first anniversary. We were about to make love. I picked up an image of him with one of the teenagers at the recruiting office."

"And you didn't hide your anger."

Angela gave a bitter laugh. "I went nuts. It got bad fast. After I'd slapped him a couple times, the police knocked on our door. I was arrested, and he kept my son!"

Her voice was rough with hurt and anger. "He left me there until the court date. *Five days*. When we got in front of the judge, he told them I had a violent temper and he was considering filing for custody because he loved my boy, but he didn't want me. I was put on probation. 241-Kids opened a file. When I got out, he let

me find my own way home and made me wait outside the door until I'd pissed on myself before he would let me in."

"Son of a bitch!" Marc's fury broke through his control. "Why didn't you kill him?!"

Angela didn't react, stuck in the past. She continued as if Marc hadn't interrupted. "When he let me in, Charlie was at his mother's house. I knew I was in trouble, but it was too late." She sighed heavily. "I don't even remember there being any neighbors home."

Marc sucked in air, forcing himself to finish this ugly moment. "What did he do to you, Angie?"

She turned slowly, pulling up the sleeve of her shirt. "He marked me as his."

Marc repeated his question. "Why didn't you use your power on him?"

"I couldn't. Between the Child Protection people, his mom's money, and my age, I would have lost my baby. Even if the court ordered Kenn to give him up, he wouldn't have. Kenny would have sold Charlie off on the black market first. He told me so. He said he wanted control of what I could do, and then things could go back to the way they were before I fucked it all up."

"Back to him being in charge and you being his slave."

"Yes, but he didn't count on the witch inside. She decides who we use these gifts for, not me. When I would have given in, the witch locked it all up. It went away and there was nothing he could do about it." Her voice shook. "He was so mad..." She closed her eyes against those days of living through hell.

Marc unclenched his fists, angrier than he had ever been.

"He didn't believe me at first. He tried to make me use it to defend myself. That's how I got this." She tilted her arm so he could see it was indeed the letter K. "After he cut me and...raped me, he made me stitch myself up and then I was his." Her voice lowered. "Every hit he ever gave me after that was because I let the witch deny him what he wanted most—my power. Deep down, he always suspected I could access it again."

Angela took a deep breath and brought herself back to the present. "I think maybe he did give up after a while. As long as I



was defenseless against him, he was content with that as revenge. In time, I learned that I could have some of what I wanted if I was willing to pay the price. His affairs continued. I was the perfect woman. The witch stayed asleep. Until the war, I hadn't used my gifts in over a decade." She let the pain bleed into her voice. "I lost who I was to keep him from getting it."

"You should have called me!" Marc was full of fury and guilt that he didn't know what to do with. *I should have been there for her!*

"...Kenny was my punishment for our love."

Awful hurt filled Marc; his rage crumbled. "That's not true! I was the one who should have been punished!"

Her sadness grew. "Because we were wrong to give in. Our love is a sin."

Marc gestured. "No. Because I let them keep us apart. Our love wasn't wrong, honey, it was meant to be. They were wrong for getting in the way."

Angie was afraid to believe him. "You mean that?"

Marc opened his soul to ease her pain. "Yes, even when we were apart. I stayed away to give you a chance at a better life. I'm sorry you paid for it. I'm sorry I was too weak to recognize the trap. I let them keep us apart! I'm so sorry."

Angela fought not to cry. She'd longed to hear that from him.

"We should have run together. If I could do it over, I wouldn't leave you twice."

"But you will if I...choose to stay with Kenny?"

He shook his head. "Not until you're happy."

She stared at him sadly, already sure Kenn couldn't give that to her.

Marc needed to be done with this conversation. It hurt too much. "What's the first thing he's going to do or say when we pull up?"

She gasped. "He'll demand to know who you are to me!"

"Yes. He'll force your choice right away. Tell him we're family and let him cool off."

“If I do that, when it comes out that you’re Charlie’s dad, people will think he was born in incest.”

Marc shrugged. “We’ll tell the rest of it at that point, but if you just say we’re good friends, they’ll think there’s something going on between us.”

“Isn’t there?”

Marc was caught off guard and then stunned by her next words.

“I don’t want to ruin any chance we might have in the future, Marc.”

Hope and love filled him, but he controlled himself, replaying her words. Had she found a way for them to be together? “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Yeah, I haven’t made a choice yet. I can’t until I get my son back. I’ll handle the rest after that.”

“But you’re thinking about it...about us?”

“Even more after last night.” Angela blushed at her own boldness.

Marc smiled. “I won’t push. You’re in charge.”

“I know better.” She put the last of their things into the two kits. “It’s all spinning faster now. These are our last hours together before the collision.”

Marc bared his soul. “I love you, Angie, so much it hurts. I want us to be together if you can forgive me for all the hell you’ve survived. I don’t blame you if you can’t, but you *can* count on me now.” Marc leered, trying to lighten his somber words. “I’d also agree to be your man toy, but I can’t wear leather. It gives me hives.”

His joke surprised a laugh out of her. “Thanks. That’s another beautiful picture in my head.”

The tension thickened as they stared at each other. When he advanced, she stayed still, afraid of what it might lead to.

He nuzzled her jaw. “Just this.” Marc pressed his mouth to the corner of her lips.

Angela sent her arms around his neck with a sigh of pleasure that he responded to. Angela felt him tense when *she* deepened the kiss, tongue touching his, breath mingling.

Angela pulled away, eyes wide with fresh desire.

Marc let her go. “It’s going to work out somehow. You have to believe that.”

“It may take a while.” She locked down on the loneliness already trying to overwhelm her heart.

“I understand. We’ll handle things as best we can, and maybe there will be time for us later, when things are...safer.”

*There will be, Angela vowed. I won’t give you up twice.*

Part Three:  
**Safe Haven**  
April

Chapter Forty  
**Reunited**

1

*He's here!*

Footsteps crunched behind her. Angela's hand dropped to her gun as her eyes found Marc in the moldy doorway of the barn.

Marc snapped his mouth shut on the warning that would have been too late, realizing he knew the man marching down the middle of the street, and not just from their time together in the Marines. The cold glower of ownership he threw at Marc said this was her man. The piper was here. It was time to pay.

Kenn stopped a few feet away, hoping Angela pulled the gun so he could kill them both and claim self-defense to Adrian.

"Kenny?" *He looks different... Charlie!*

Kenn knew the joy spreading across her face wasn't for him. It faded fast.

"You're alone."

Kenn glared. "I've come to get you."

"Little late for that now." Angela pointed out, able to feel him trying to control himself. Would he end it all right here? Marc was telling her to duck when it started, that he would do the rest.

Angela didn't retreat from Kenn's thunderous visage, waiting for fate to determine who would live and who would die.

Kenn already hated this Angela. She didn't blink, didn't take her hand from the gun on her hip. "You don't look happy to see me."

"Of course, I am. I'm glad you survived."

The breeze blew her hair around.

Kenn saw her wary glance as he stared at it. She wasn't allowed to have her hair down in public. It was another transgression she would account for. "Show me."

Angela stepped into his opening arms with a heavy heart. *Can I endure a little (five years!) longer, so no one else will get hurt? Can I just give in?*

Hand resting on his holster, Marc watched from the lonely doorway, unable to believe he hadn't been able to use her clues and come up with loudmouth, obnoxious, snotty Lance Corporal Kenn Harrison.

Marc's stomach was full of hot anger. He began mentally preparing for the battle of his life even while the pain of her being in someone else's arms flooded his heart. Angie had her man back...and he wasn't at all surprised. Had Kenn been spying?

Their moment in the bedroom, right after they'd woken, came to mind. Marc's gut tightened. *What all did Kenn see?*

Them in bed together, the kiss... *Too much.* It implied a lot.

Their eyes locked over Angie's tense shoulder.

Kenn sent a greeting. *She's mine. Go away or I'll kill you!*

Dog's thick fur bristled.

Marc put a hand on the animal's shoulder. "Me too, boy. Me too."

Angela regretted the hug the second Kenny crushed her close. She tried to pull away when his mouth lowered to hers, but he tangled a hand in her thick curls and held her still as his tongue invaded, conquered, revolted.

Kenn ground his mouth against her as that distinctive, addictive scent of vanilla filled his nose. He wondered how much more Marc would allow before stepping in to get himself killed.

*Ah! Not much at all.* Kenn shifted them to be in the right position as he shoved his tongue deeper. Her tag-along was already moving from his place in the doorway.

Angela picked up the thought and understood Kenny was trying to provoke Marc. She slammed her boot against his ankle, leaning her weight into it as she elbowed his flat stomach.

Not expecting her to fight back, Kenn grunted, letting go.

Angela stayed between the two men.

"What was that for?!" Kenn closed the distance between them.

“You wouldn’t let go.” The witch said to provoke him so they could either kill him or be killed but be done. Angela couldn’t help but consider it.

Kenn leaned in, itching to break her crooked nose again. “I never will!” He scanned the Marine who had paused by her bumper, then the big black-and-gray dog bristling at his side. “You have one minute to tell me what you’re doing with him! Who is Marc to you?”

Angela tilted her head. “How do you know Marc?”

Kenn clenched his hand. “Answer me!”

Angela shoved him with both hands, moving him out of her personal space as she’d learned. “Stop yelling!”

Kenn gaped. *What did she say?*

Angela kept going while she had him off guard. “We can have a normal conversation, or we can spill blood right now. It’s your funeral!” It was dangerous to push, but the old Angela, the one who’d battled him early in their relationship, was guiding her through this minefield.

Kenn’s eyes flicked to Marc, then Dog.

Angela let herself breathe. Getting Kenny to think before he acted was key to surviving the encounter.

Kenn hated it that he might be outnumbered by the tense Marine edging closer, the bristling animal that appeared to be a wolf...but also by Angela herself, who had obviously done a lot of reverting during her trip. “Fine. We’ll talk.”

“We’ll start the entire conversation over.” Angela gave him a cool smile as the sun came through the clouds of grit. “Hello, Kenn. Good to see you. How have you been?”

Kenn recognized her tactics. He should. He’d used them daily on her. “Never better. Enjoy your trip?”

Kenn felt his rage go up another notch when she nodded, glancing back at her escort.

“Some of it, yes.”

“Hope it was worth it.” Kenn’s expression promised payment.

“It was.” Angela continued to defy the rules even though his beefy hands were clenching into fists again. “Where’s my boy?”

Kenn said nothing, waiting, wanting to hear her beg.

“I don’t need you to find him! How do you think I got here?”

Kenn was too pissed to be worried, though he understood he might be in danger. *She did more than revert. She’s using the power. She unlocked it!*

He’d always known she could. The old, thwarted bitterness settled back into his stomach. *Is there a way I can get control of her power now?* His mind flashed a picture of her son. *Yes.* “You do need me to get near him. He’s with *my* men. They won’t want to kill you, but they will.”

“Be careful, *Grunt.*”

Her tone was deadly. Kenn growled at her.

She didn’t back down.

He hated the new knowledge of life and death he read in her eyes. She thought she could kill him. *How much practice did she get? What did she do, survive, to get here?*

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Angela kept defying his rules.

Kenn stared at her, shocked that she would get into his thoughts so openly, so arrogantly. Didn’t she remember what he’d threatened to do if she used it on him?

“Everything has changed, Kenn. You broke our deal when you abandoned me for that group of strangers you’ve been lying to!”

On the edge of control at her veiled threat to reveal his secrets, Kenn was surprised to discover her disobedience was attractive. He hadn’t thought her hold on him was that strong anymore. “You have five years left! You belong to me!”

Angela forced the truth out “Not anymore. I want out.”

“No.”

“You don’t own me!”

“Yes, I do.” Kenn switched to the topic eating at him. “How long have you two been sleeping together?”

Angela tensed. *Here we go.* “We aren’t.”

“Lyin’ bitch!”

“You go to hell!”

Kenn’s hand moved.



Angela felt herself being brushed aside.

Marc slid between them. "It's been a while, Harrison."

Kenn also stood his ground. "Not long enough, *Brady*."

Marc didn't respond to the accusation.

Kenn waited for one of them to get nervous and babble; they remained silent. "You're...traveling together?"

Marc took the lead, big shoulders prepared to take what came. "We were both coming this way. I couldn't let her go it alone. She was hard to convince, though." Marc lied easily. This was indeed a thin line and he wasn't the only one walking it. She hadn't been exaggerating even a little. Kenn was deadly with the M16 he had slung over his shoulder.

Kenn's sneer spread. "Well, thanks, *buddy*, but I've got it from here. You can hit the redline."

Marc's responding grin widened into sharp white teeth. "Welcome, *pal*, but a funny thing happened on the way here. I discovered I want to be with...people. I might stick close for a while." Marc took a step forward to bring them within inches of each other. "*Real close*."

Angela knew blood was about to spill. She stayed out of it. She wasn't as eager as Marc, but if it had to happen, the best time was now, while Kenn was alone.

Kenn's hairy knuckles inched toward the 9mm on his hip. "She has a man, you fucking Jody!"

Marc snorted. "If you want to call yourself that."

"What the hell does that mean?!"

Marc bumped Kenn's chest without hesitation. "It means she's not your punching bag anymore! You want to hit someone, you hit me!"

Kenn took the suggestion. The hit rocked Marc's head backward. "Like that?" Kenn followed the upper cut with a powerful roundhouse.

Marc ducked the blow and landed a nasty knuckle to Kenn's temple that made the Marine stagger. "Yeah! More!"

Kenn rushed him, slamming into his gut.

Marc drove his elbow into Kenn's shoulder.

Kenn jerked, grunting as he was rocked off balance. They hit the dirt together in a hard thud, swinging, wrestling, trying to get the advantage.

Angela waved at Dog to stay back as Marc shoved Kenn off and then rolled onto his feet.

Kenn rushed.

Marc ducked again, foot flashing out at the last minute to trip him.

The blow glanced off Marc's wounded arm. He kicked Kenn in the ribs as he went down, wound stinging from the ripped stitches.

Kenn was on his feet in a blur, hand flying to his hip.

Both of Marc's guns were out before the furious Marine could pull his own.

"Do it!" Marc's finger tightened, longing to squeeze. "Make it count. *I will.*"

Kenn thought about it. He was fast, better than anyone in Adrian's employ, but Marc had always beaten him before the war. Always. Kenn's hand moved away from the holster he'd already gotten open.

"Wise choice." Marc felt blood seeping through the dusty white gauze on his arm.

"I'll kill you for this." Kenn tried to think through the rage, but it was hard.

Marc nodded. "Then let's end it now."

Kenn had no doubt Marc would pull the trigger.

"Someone's coming!" Angela's odd voice got their attention.

Both men responded to the tremor of fear.

"Good or bad?" Marc lowered his guns, but he didn't holster.

She looked at them with hazy eyes that made Kenn's heart slide into his gut. *Adrian won't miss that.*

"Both?"

Marc glared at Kenn with the hatred of a lifelong enemy. "This isn't over."

"You can bet on that!" Kenn spit blood at Marc's boots.

Marc slid his guns into the holsters. "Where?"

Angela pointed west, watching Kenn even though Marc had turned his back with no obvious worry. Kenny lost. That made him more lethal than if he'd won.

The faint echo of hoofbeats came to them.

Dog growled low in his throat.

Marc gestured for Kenn to protect her, then did the same himself, putting her between them.

Angela was shocked when Kenn obeyed. She made the connection an instant later. *That's how he knows Marc! They served together. ...did Marc know all along?*

No, she realized. He couldn't have kept that from her. He was too open to be holding such a huge secret. "There."

A muddy black horse thundered around the corner as she spoke, carrying a thin male with a black bandana covering most of his face. Behind him, a blonde woman in a long trench coat waved frantically. Dust flew from the animal's hooves.

"How did they know we were here?"

Kenn smoothed his short dark spikes. "They found you the same way I did." He threw a cold sneer at Marc, then one to the growling animal that had returned to its master's side. "They passed over that ridge and saw two muddy Blazers in the middle of the street!"

Before Marc could respond, the foaming black horse was upon them, barely stopping before the woman leapt off. She staggered toward them, sharp lines of her skeleton poking through sagging skin. She collapsed against Angela, pulling them both to the dusty ground. "People! Oh, God, people!"

The man also dismounted, lowering the bandana from his scruffy face, but he stayed by the exhausted horse. He studied Marc and Kenn with shifty green eyes.

They both noticed he paid no attention to the raving woman now trying to get a rush of words out through her tears.

"Slavers! Escaped. Have to get further...gun? Have a gun?"

The woman cried gut-wrenching sobs as Angela helped her take off the stinking trench coat so she could check her out.

"Escaped from who?" Kenn marched toward the man.

Rick cringed. “Big group of Mexicans! We got away while they were drinking.”

“Where?”

“On 25, near Cheyenne.” Rick wondered who this hard, beaten man was. The outline of a dog tag under a blood-splattered shirt caught Rick’s attention. His lips tightened. *The enemy.*

“How many?” Kenn swept his dirty jeans, cruddy fingernails, greasy brown hair. *Adrian won’t like this guy.*

“Sixty or seventy, maybe.” Rick was glad Samantha hadn’t seen all of Cesar’s camp. He had three times that number.

“Armed?”

“Isn’t everyone now?” Rick gave a pointed stare as he thrust restless hands deep into jean pockets to keep his nervousness from showing.

“How long were you with them?”

“A long time. They took me back in Trinidad.”

Kenn scowled, frustrated. He hadn’t gotten rid of Marc fast enough. The couple would have to be taken to Adrian. They had information about the slavers. That meant no time to ditch Marc or hole up with Angela for a few days. *Damn it!* “Who are you?”

“I’m Rick. She’s Samantha.”

“Load up.” Kenn joined Angela before the man could respond, one resentful eye swelling.

Dog gave a menacing growl.

Kenn hesitated, then snarled his own warning.

Both Marc and Angela were surprised when Dog retreated a single pace. Even the wolf knew Kenn was a violent, trained killer.

Kenn glared at Angela. “How is she?”

Except for the infected burn on her hip, most of the woman’s injuries appeared to be minor. Her mental state might be a different story. Angela assembled a quick list. “Dehydrated, malnourished, shock—”

“Can she travel?”

Marc wanted to protest the interruption, but he stayed quiet. Angela wanted to try again to handle it peacefully now that they had witnesses.

Kenn pointed. “Get her in your Blazer. We can make it to camp by dawn.”

“Camp?” Angela gestured sharply. “As in Safe Haven, the place you had yet to mention?”

Kenn didn’t deny the accusation, but he worried over how much she already knew. Would any of his bluffs succeed?

In the tension, the now sedated blonde saw Rick’s brief smirk of success at the name of the camp.

Kenn and Marc moved the muttering woman to the passenger seat of Angela’s Blazer.

Kenn picked out details that enraged him, like the edge of a lacy white bra under a purple gift bag, and a pair of green boxers showing from the corner of a black duffle bag. He saw the vehicle for what it was—living quarters. *They were playing house!*

When the two men moved back to let Angela through, their eyes locked.

“You’ve disgraced the Corps. Once we get to camp, I’ll do my best to have you banished for it!” Kenn stormed away before his rage could take control again.

Angela handed Marc the hat she’d retrieved from the middle of the street. “You all right?”

His bruised face was troubled. “Yeah. You?”

“Better now. It’s good you were able to back him down. Thank you.”

Marc fingered his swollen jaw. “It isn’t over, honey. This was the beginning.”

Kenn pulled up to them a minute later in an ugly green Bronco. He got out, waving at Rick. Marc, he ignored. “You drive your woman. Leave the horse.” Kenn looked at Angela. “You ride with me.”

Marc would have protested, but Angela waved it off. “I’ll be fine, just keep up. He’s hell behind the wheel.”

Angela let Kenn push her into his truck. As he got into the driver’s seat, she turned to him, determined to throw him off balance from the start. “What were you doing out here, away from camp?”

She didn't wince as he slammed the door, though he'd expected her to. She was no longer scared of him just because he was a man. She was afraid of the dangerous person she knew lurked inside, though she thought she had done a good job so far of pretending that she wasn't.

Kenn stared at her for a long moment, saying nothing. When she didn't speak either, just waited for an answer, he shifted into drive and hit the gas.

He didn't make sure the others were ready, but Angela knew Marc was on their bumper. "Well?"

Kenn lit a smoke. "We got a call from the woman. Adrian sent me to get her and some medicine we need."

His voice was laced with pride. Angela frowned. "Who is Adrian, and who are you to him that you're trusted with something like that?"

Kenn was surprised again. The Angela he knew wouldn't have realized the mission was important. "I'm whatever he needs."

Kenn didn't want to tell her how high in the chain of command he was, or how permanent a place he'd carved out in Safe Haven.

"Well, what does he usually need you to be?"

Her sarcasm shocked him. Marc had done all this in a few weeks? It had taken him years to train her. *I should have used the knife.* With a K-Bar, he and Marc were equals. "I drive, I make out schedules. I teach, I count, I defend, I lead. Wherever we're short someone, I do it."

"How long have you been with them, Kenn? Long enough to build a new life?"

"That's above your pay grade! How long have you been having an affair? Before the war?"

"It's not like that. We're—"

"Friends?" He swerved around a wreck. "You've been screwing him all along!"

Angela sucked in a calming breath, heart racing, "You would think of me that way, but it didn't have to be. I was prepared to love you, to be your mate."

"I wanted your obedience. The rest of it is shit!"

” “That’s what I mean. I had hoped the war might allow you to—

“To what? Be okay with you bringing your lover along? Wake up! We have a deal!”

“It’s an unfair agreement! You lied, manipulated, *hurt me.*”

Kenn didn’t deny her accusations. “A deal is a deal.”

“Why, Kenn? You didn’t come back for me; you don’t want me here. Why keep me? I’ll take Charlie and go. You can tell people whatever you want.”

“You have five years left.” He slapped the wheel. “You’re going to pay for every rule you’ve broken!”

Angela stiffened. “There won’t be any more punishments. Those days are over.”

Kenn couldn’t help but hear the danger. It didn’t matter. “You have to be sleeping with him to talk to me like that. Wait until I get you alone!”

“We are not! He’s a good friend who helped me.”

“Yeah, helped himself to what’s mine! Unfaithful bitch! It started before the war, didn’t it? Answer me!”

“No! We’re just friends!”

“You’re not allowed to have friends! You belong to me!”

“Never! I’ve always been Marc’s!”

Kenn’s hand flew out. *Slap!* He swerved as he leaned over to hit her again.

Angela took the hit as she pulled her gun. She shoved it against his neck, finger tightening on the trigger. “Do it again! Please.”

Things had just changed between them forever.

Kenn eased off the gas and took a fast glance at her. Lip bleeding, her face was perfectly calm otherwise. Death glinted back at him from her eyes.

He brought the Bronco to a gentle stop.

The two Blazers pulled alongside. Only Marc understood what was happening; he didn’t interfere, hoping Angela would solve the problem on her own.

A drop of blood dripped from Angela’s lip. Her knuckles were white from her grip on the gun as she struggled not to pull the

trigger. *I hate him so much!* “Next time, keep going until I’m dead, or you will be.”

Kenn recognized the tone and knew he was as close to death here as he ever had been on the battlefield, but he couldn’t back down. “They used to stone whores!”

Angela drew in a shallow breath. “I’ve been loyal to you, even when I didn’t want to be. You can’t say the same. I want my freedom. I’ll do whatever it takes to get it. Whatever you make me do.” She lowered the gun to her lap.

Kenn noticed she didn’t take her finger off the trigger. *How much did Marc teach her?* Kenn slowly took his smokes from his pocket and lit one.

When he offered it to her, Angela didn’t hesitate to take it, sensing it was his peace offering.

After a moment, Kenn eased on the gas, thinking about what she’d said. He believed they weren’t sleeping together. She was too pissed to lie, but something was going on. The kiss proved that, even if he forgot about all the other signs, the sparks he’d witnessed, her words: *“I’ve always been Marc’s!”* What did that say?

Kenn glanced over to find her staring in her mirror at the Blazer rolling behind and a little to the right—the bodyguard’s place. *Are they talking?*

The rage flared back to life. Kenn hit the gas, swerving so they couldn’t make eye contact. “You better remember who I am. He’s tough, and while he’s definitely unexpected, he’s not invincible. Neither are you! I’m important to these people. Maybe he’ll have an accident.”

Angela’s anger was replaced by a flood of sadness. “Just let me go, Kenny. You don’t love me. You don’t even *like* me. It will cause all of us pain, including you.”

Kenn refused to do the right thing. “You owe me six more years. If I catch you with him or anyone else, I’ll take Charlie out on a supply run and we won’t come back. Ever!”



## 2

Obsessed, malevolent eyes watched the small convoy drive off with Rick. The twins were a mere mile away. They were glad the traitor had been taken in, but the strength of the men he'd joined was a worry. The second Marine was as much a problem as the first. Clearly, both males wanted the woman, which would make it harder for Dillan's plan to work.

"They'll fight to keep her." Dean counted ammo as they trudged back to their hidden jeep.

"Yeah." Dillan took his place behind the wheel. He picked up the mike. "Package has made contact. Tracking. Report later."

The twin hung it up, not really caring if Cesar got their messages. They had a good plan. Fear was a powerful weapon, but the way the men were so willing to fight for the witch made the eldest twin nervous. *Maybe we should have a backup plan in case she gets lucky again.*

## 3

Kenn drove hard and fast, fuming. By dusk, he was taking big risks as he released his frustration on his Bronco. When his luck ran out, Angela wasn't surprised that he blew a tire.

The truck swerved; Kenn handled it expertly. "Damn."

He didn't sound mad, despite the curse. *He wanted a delay.* Angela began monitoring his thoughts.

Kenn brought them to a rough stop in the middle of the empty, two-lane road that was surrounded by dying fields of wheat. "Ten-minute break. Stay close."

Angela waited for Marc to circle the vehicles and give her a motion before getting out.

Kenn felt an iron hand tighten in his gut. *That's how it really is. She switched owners during my absence.*

Kenn worked on the tire, expecting them to be together the whole time, but after the bathroom break that they all needed, Angela took her doctor's bag and went to check on the sedated woman.

Marc circled their stopped convoy, Dog at his side.

Kenn glanced up at Marc as he walked by, but the man's gaze was on the dark South Dakota borderlands they'd crossed into.

Kenn's anger grew. That level of automatic responsibility was exactly what Adrian was always hoping for in new arrivals. Despite his bluffs, Kenn already knew Adrian would want them to stay and help build the dream. It was an ugly thought for Kenn, envisioning a life in Safe Haven where Angela and Marc were not only a legal couple, but also in the chain of command. The only thing worse would be if Adrian gave Marc his job.

"Will he really want us?"

Kenn swung around in surprise.

Angela stared. "You've told some big lies and you don't want them to find out what kind of person you are. Does that sound like the truth or have you forgotten what that is?" She studied his red face and sullen eyes. "Wanna make a new deal?"

"No!" Kenn scratched the idea off his list of things to try. He stood up and kicked the hubcap back on. "Get in, we're leaving." He hated this new Angela. *Where is the timid mouse I curled into the corner with my fist, and what will it take to get her back?*

"You can't. Ever. I'll die first." She slid a hand to her gun as she stepped around him.

Marc came by on a round, holding out a pack of smokes. His nod of encouragement gave her a warm rush of confidence and a frenzy of longing. She was already wishing their time alone hadn't been wasted. *I denied Marc for nothing. Kenny hasn't changed at all.*

#### 4

As dawn neared, Angela was awake and bitter. She couldn't wait to hug her son; she was grateful she had made it so far, but she was scared again—the way she had spent so many years. It was depressing that the best she could hope for was Kenny letting his guard down long enough for her to grab her son and run. He

thought he had her trapped, but this time she had Marc in her corner. *Will it be enough?*

Kenn scowled when she lit another cigarette without asking for permission, but he only lowered both front windows a bit to clear the smoke. He saw her attention go to her mirror again.

Kenn swerved the truck, throwing her a warning glare that had the old Angela bracing to fight again.

“We’ll be there in about an hour. We need to talk about what you’ll do and say.”

His hard tone and body language sent flashes of blind obedience through her mind. She immediately resisted. “No, Kenn, we don’t. You want to tell me the rules or the way things work? Fine, but save all that other shit. You don’t own me anymore. That life ended with the war I survived alone!”

Kenn was speechless.

Angela sighed. “I won’t embarrass you. I won’t run my mouth. In return, you remember I’m a person, not your property. You don’t own me. You never have.”

Kenn burned at her words, her tone, even hating her using the short version of his name. It made her sound less needy, less weak, and he knew who was responsible. “This is all *his* doing, isn’t it?”

Her response was quick. “Because of Marc, I’m here and alive, two things you didn’t want to happen!”

Kenn enjoyed her pain.

“Can’t you be even a little glad to see me?”

He sneered. “Woulda been easier if you hadn’t brought your lover along.”

“You left me there to die. I did what I had to, and I went through hell to get here.”

Kenn gave her a disbelieving once over. “You look fine.”

“I am...*now*.” Her taunt implied Marc was the reason for it.

Kenn let out a frustrated hiss. “Send him on his way!”

Angela shrugged indifferently, but her hand remained by her holster. “I don’t think I can. We’ve become close.”

Kenn stomped on the gas, throwing her back in the seat. “I’ll kill you both!”

Angela was overwhelmed with what had been caged before—anger. “I owe you a lot, Marine. If you miss, if you underestimate me, it’ll be *your* body they bury.”

Kenn barely controlled himself, almost sure she was trying to get hit this time so she could shoot him. While he was fast, Kenn wasn’t sure he could grab her arm in time if Marc had taught her to fire from that hip holster. The way she was keeping her fingers on the butt hinted the wife stealer had.

*Damn it! I have to get her under control.* Kenn foresaw embarrassing explanations, denials, and a trial he would lose. Assaulting a woman wouldn’t be overlooked.

“My...problems are not going to be made public.”

Kenn scowled, realizing she was trying to stay a step ahead by reading his thoughts. He would stop that later, when he had the concentration to bring up the old wall that had kept her in the dark when they first met. Right now, he had to find a way to save his place in Safe Haven. “The people here will make it their business to find out. Safe Haven has few secrets. Adrian arranged it that way to keep the bad people out.”

“One sure slipped through.”

Kenn flushed in shame instead of the angry denial she expected.

“A truce? A week or two and see how things go before you spread lies and make me do something ugly?”

“A truce? Hmm... Okay.” Angela understood she had just won the first of many rounds. “You have seven days to convince me I should forgive you or forget you. After that, I’m free to do what I want.”

His hand flinched toward her again.

Angela held herself still as he grabbed the mike off the dash holder instead.

“Don’t push me! I’ve done a lot of changing, but you owe me six more years. If I’m banished, I’ll sneak back in to slit your throat! You’re free when I say, not a second sooner!” Kenn keyed the mike. “This is Eagle Two, calling Safe Haven. You out there, Mitch?”

“You got me, Big Daddy.”

Kenn grimaced. “I’m half an hour out. Four new arrivals, two of each, adult. One needs medical care. Have the QZ set up and tell the boss he’ll want to talk to a couple of these people.”

“Roger, Eagle Two. Did you find anyone?”

Kenn grunted in bitterness. “Yeah, my wife.”

Kenn hung up the mike before she could protest the title, wondering if Angela knew from the call he was second in command. *She isn’t that smart, is she?* “These are my men, witch, and they’ll hate him because I do. I can make things ugly.”

Determination to make him understand his timid Angela was gone forever filled her mind in a roar that would eventually have to be heard. “A truce, Kenn. Seven days, then we’ll talk. I’ll walk the line until then, and so will Marc. If you lose it all, it’ll be *your* doing, not ours.”

Chapter Forty-One

# The Line

Black Hills of South Dakota

April 1<sup>st</sup>

1

“**Y**ou are entering an American Military refugee camp. Identify yourself!”

Angela jumped.

Kenn’s beefy hand had been hovering over the radio before the call came. He keyed the handset without picking it up. “From sea to shining sea.”

“Welcome home, Eagle Two. The QZ is in the corner. He’ll meet you there.”

“Copy.”

The valley was covered in fog and huge trees. Among these towering giants lurked a camp of survivors. Dozens of people were in sight through the swirling mist. As they crested the muddy hill, Angela gawked. *It’s a small city! I’ll never be able to hide it from so many people!*

It all flashed by too fast for more details as Kenn steered the Bronco to a faint but clear trail etched in the mud.

*What kind of place have we come to? Is my son happy? Healthy? A prisoner?* Angela forced herself to breathe normally, determined to be the strong survivor she had discovered on the hazardous trip here. She counted five small tents inside an area marked by bright yellow caution tape. A larger white canvas sat just outside the quarantine zone, sporting a red cross and a name she wasn’t close enough to read yet.

Kenn drove the truck behind those tents and put it in park.

Angela’s Blazer pulled in on the left.

Marc’s slid in on her right.

Kenn had been searching for an explanation that Adrian would accept. If anyone found out he had hit a woman, he would be banished. He glanced at Angela with desperation flickering. “You’ll keep your mouth shut and behave?”

Angela thought his face was worse than Marc’s, but she wasn’t sure if that meant Marc would win in a fight to the death. This one had been more like two big dogs sizing each other up. “Yes. Leave me be for seven days, then we’ll talk.”

Kenn got out, calling greetings to the armed, black clad sentries on duty here.

Angela could hear him struggling to invent excuses as she opened her door and stood on the Bronco’s wide foot rails. She studied the vague, shifting forms of the foggy refugee camp as the heartbreakingly welcome sound of dogs yapping echoed. *Charlie! I’m here!*

She heard his answering cry of stunned happiness as shimmery forms of people advanced through the high fog. The hair on her arms and neck tingled; blood pounded through her ears as a door in her mind tried to swing open. *Someone here is like me...* Yes, definitely. *He* was coming this way.

Three tall men in jeans emerged through the fog. Angela picked out Kenn’s idol easily. She wasn’t surprised to discover the vibrant sense of power was coming from the great looking blond man who wore crisscrossed holsters around both hips, like Marc. That was where the similarities ended. This man had sexy, sun-streaked brows, a goatee, and short spikes of yellow hair like rippling wheat. He was average height and weight, but the way he carried himself said he was different. His pace wasn’t a strut, but a confident step implying he could handle what came, he knew what he was doing, and little would stand in his way. The rattling door in Angela’s mind swung open as the witch took over. She pulled hard, with no time to resist as the colors of his energy flooded her.

Stopping in surprise, Adrian stared at the pretty woman with long black curls and a fresh wound on her lower lip. Their eyes met across the distance... The air became crisp, sharp, then faded,

taking the camp noises away and replacing them with the soft, lapping waves of a calm ocean.

A second later the sounds snapped back into place, making Angela flinch.

Adrian faked a yawn and forced his feet to move. “We’re done for now.”

Instead of disappearing as they normally might have, Kyle and Seth stayed, waited. Something had given Adrian pause. The off duty Eagles wanted to know what it was.

*Who all noticed?* Adrian swept the area. The observant males at his side, for sure, and probably Neil as well, but no camp members were in sight. One glance at Kenn’s *bruised* face told Adrian not only had he witnessed it, he was angry about it. Understanding fell into place. This was Kenn’s wife, why he’d left. Surely she hadn’t beaten Kenn up? The guy with her, then. *Must be a hardass.*

Adrian saw Neil moving subtly toward Kenn’s wife and her escort. Neil had the same questions he did. Content that end was covered, Adrian scanned the other new arrivals.

Unease sank into his gut. A thin woman with dirty blonde curls was slumped against the Blazer on the left. She was staring at the uniformed guards in fear instead of relief. *Abused. I can help her.*

The thin man at her side had a black bandana around his neck and shifty eyes that increased Adrian’s unease. He had a natural slump to the shoulders that suggested a lifetime of being shit and no desire to change. *That, I only have one solution for.*

Adrian motioned Billy and Cris toward the couple as he went to Kenn. He scanned Kenn’s wife again, encouraged by her. She stood straight, showed no fear, and she was healthy. *One of my herd or one of my shepherds?*

Ignoring Kenn’s glare, Angela stepped over to Marc. He was standing stiffly by the open door, wolf at his feet. *Please, guys. Walk the line for a bit, give this place a chance. It feels good here.*

Marc nodded, eyes saying all the things his mouth couldn’t as he pulled on his long coat. “We will. You okay?”



“I will be, I think. We’ve called a truce. Just be careful, like you always are.” Angela swept the foggy landscape again, drawn by the murmur of voices when the wind dropped.

Marc handed her two full speed loaders. “I’m here if you need me, Angie.”

She slid them into her pocket, along with a few things from her kit. “I’ll run if he makes me.”

Despite her words, Marc could almost feel her rebuilding the walls between them. “I only need five minutes warning and to know where you guys are.”

She nodded, sad these were the last private words they would share for a while.

Marc caught her thought. “I’ll miss you too.”

Angie was sure she’d never get to sleep tonight without the sound of his breathing, without being able to roll over and stare at him. “I just need some time to read things. It might not be the right place. If not, we’ll go.”

Marc sighed. “Five minutes and locations.”

Dog shifted menacing golden orbs to a tall man in all black passing by their bumper. His state trooper hat was the only other color on him.

The guard swept them with an open hand on the holster of his Beretta. Marc recognized a gun run. The sentry was seeing who was armed, and assessing the threat. Marc turned back to Angela but kept the guard in his peripheral vision. “You’re here. Bet you can’t wait to hug Charlie.”

She looked anything but happy. Marc’s trained ears heard no fear from the people they couldn’t see yet. *Smart to separate the areas.* “What’s wrong? Isn’t he here?”

Also busy feeling things out; Angela was eased a little by the sense of a normal, safe life she was picking up from the men on duty. “He’s here, on the way to us now.”

Marc’s lips thinned. “You mean to you. I’ll wait right here.”

“No.”

The same guard made a second pass, sharp green eyes on the bristling wolf.

Marc lowered his voice. “Now is *not* a good time.” Marc noted the glints of steel in her eyes and knew she wasn’t going to budge before she spoke.

“It’s the only time. You can’t hide it from him, and you two can’t start out on a lie.” She looked away before the sparks flew. “Besides, he’ll know right off. He picks stuff up as easily as I do.”

“What about Kenn? He’ll go nuts.”

Her face paled, but that glint of steel never wavered. “Maybe.” She slipped into his mind. *Maybe not, if we can keep it quiet.*

Marc was relieved no one else would know yet. He couldn’t protect her from so many armed men.

“Others may suspect, but Kenn will figure it out; he’ll call us on it. Right now, he just thinks it’s me introducing my son to my new man.”

Marc’s spine stiffened at those words. “I’ll handle him if I need to. You’re sure it should be now?”

“Yes.” Angela replied, watching Kenn. He was deep in conversation with his idol, no doubt telling him of the slavers the others had escaped from.

*Such loyalty, her witch whispered sleepily. And to a stranger. Where’s the devotion he should have for you?*

Angela ignored the question, but it burned. “Come on, Marc. Our boy’s here.”

Marc followed, more nervous than he wanted to admit. He had never allowed himself to consider having a child at all, and now, he had one who was almost grown. “Stay, Dog.”

The wolf sank down, mostly hidden by the tires.

Angela led the way to the corner of the caution tape, experiencing fierce joy as Charlie’s taller form came through the thick fog.

Neil had been watching the new arrivals. He now had a list of questions about how all the bruised faces were connected, but he didn’t doubt they were. He assumed the males had been fighting over the woman, but which one had hit her? ...Kenn? Neil stepped forward as they reached the tape. “I’m sorry, but you can’t cross the—”

Invisible heat shot out, burning him. Neil retreated, confused and leery. *Was that a flash of hot wind?*

Neil met Adrian's questioning eyes as he started to step in front of them again. He was relieved when the boss gestured in denial. Adrian had missed none of it.

The woman moved around him, eyes tinged in red.

Neil took another step back.

When Charlie stopped at the tape, young face full of overwhelming happiness, Neil relaxed a little. The teenager knew them. *Family?* Neil nodded. That made sense considering Charlie was also...*different.*

Angela's heart was in control of her emotions. Instead of ducking under the caution tape, she snatched her knife from her boot and sliced through it. She sheathed the blade without losing stride.

Everyone, including Kenn, was sure she knew how to use it. They also understood the message. Nothing would separate her from her son.

"Mom!" The teenager threw his arms around her neck.

Angela crushed him close, swinging him around. His face buried in her hair, heart beating furiously against hers. She hugged him tighter, pain warring with her happiness. At least one of her sons had made it through the war. "God, I've missed you!"

Charlie kept his arms around her as she let him down, struggling not to cry. "I knew you'd come! *He* said you wouldn't make it, but I knew!"

Hot rage pulsed through Angela—the same hatred she'd had to pull back in before it hurt the guard who had stepped between them.

She held her son back, looking into eyes that were the same shade of blue as Marc's. "Our time apart is over. We will never be separated again!"

Angela hugged him once more before letting go, not allowing herself to think. "There's someone I want you to meet."

The teenager agreed reluctantly, hands going into the pockets of his dark blue hoodie.

She threw a comforting arm around his thin shoulders as they stepped over to Marc, who had observed their reunion with a sad smile. She was obviously a loving mother. It didn't come as a surprise, but it did hurt that he'd missed it all.

"Charlie, this is a good friend of mine. He's the reason I made it here. His name is Marcus Charles Brady."

They both noticed the fourteen-year-old wasn't surprised at the exact opposite of his name.

Charlie regarded Marc with his own cool stare. "So, you're my dad."

Glad the words had been low enough for only the three of them to hear, Marc held out a calloused hand. "Charlie, right?"

The boy reluctantly shook with him.

Marc felt the subtle tinkering of a child trying to get into his thoughts.

The role of teacher automatically fell back into place for Angela. "Never without permission."

Charlie glared at the dusty ground. "*Sorry.*"

Marc ignored the sarcastic tone. "Maybe we could talk sometime? Alone."

The careful request drew a nasty glower. "About what?"

Marc pushed the silent words at him. *About the last fifteen years and why we haven't spent them together.*

Charlie shrugged. "The past is dead. No one cares." His voice was full of bitterness that no child should feel.

"I do." Marc met his eye. "I care a lot."

Charlie's face blazed with anger befitting an adult. Marc heard the words clearly, as if Angela had sent them.

*Well, I don't. You left us in hell. You're as bad as he is. Maybe worse, 'cause now he's pissed at her again!* Charlie spun back to his mom. "When is he leaving?!"

## 2

Rage rolled off Kenn as he and everyone else watched the reunion. *I can't believe she introduced her lover to Charlie!*

Adrian and many of the guards felt the inevitable coming. A cold wave fell over the battlefield.

Kenn's fists clenched in an effort to control himself, but he already knew it wasn't going to be successful. *Marc has to go!* Soon... Maybe even right now.

The two men locked bruised eyes. All the witnesses understood the exchange.

*I'll kill to keep her!*

*I'll kill to have her!*

Adrian stayed still, aware that personal drama had just entered his peaceful camp.

Kenn moved forward a second later.

Adrian observed with the rest of his men, wondering whose blood would spill and what it would cost them.

Angela and Charlie turned at the same time.

Their fear drew instant attention from the rest of the guards. Eagles moved closer.

Marc saw Kenn coming, but he focused on the black-and-gray blur streaking toward the Marine. "Dog! No!"

The powerful animal slid to a rough stop, long snout drawn up in a ferocious snarl as he glared at Kenn, who had pulled his weapon.

"Dog! Sit!"

The wolf dropped to its haunches.

Marc joined him, attention now on the real threat.

"You should have that thing on a leash!" Kenn growled, lowering but not holstering the 9mm. He'd finally recognized the wolf from their time together as Marines. He hadn't liked the animal then either.

"Maybe you shouldn't provoke him." Marc rubbed behind the animal's tense ears, glad the wolf had obeyed.

"I didn't even see him!"

"He saw *you*, read your intent. He's very protective of her."

Kenn ground his teeth together as he shoved his gun into its holster. He gave the bushy wolf a hateful glare.

Marc gave the animal a loving pat on his stocky chest as Kenn moved toward Angela. They'd just had their first close call and they'd only been here five minutes. *Wonderful*. "Good boy."

"Praise for the quick response to your commands, or because he would have attacked Kenn without being told?" Adrian had come over during the aftermath.

"Both, more." Marc was still watching Kenn.

Adrian took it all in, liking the sharp intelligence. *Is this hardass another member of my circle?*

Adrian felt relief. It made perfect sense that they would come together. He would also give the thin blonde woman slumped against her man an interview, in case they had come in threes.

The Eagles understood Kenn's uncontested power and cool control had taken a hit. The entire camp couldn't rattle him. Many had tried, but this one man had shaken Kenn, and without doing much. Who was he?

"Everything okay?" A guard in an approaching group scanned for the problem.

More men emerged through the fog, weapons in hand.

Marc was impressed they had come without being called.

"Everything's 5-by." Adrian's voice was tinged in relief.

Marc picked out the earpieces and understood one of those already here had given a signal to alert other guards. Marc tried to determine who. The one Angela had pushed back with her heat wave? Probably. The trooper was hovering near her and Kenn now. Satisfied that she was okay for the moment, Marc did a scan of their dangerous new companions.

The two men flanking the leader were observing him intently. Marc returned the scrutiny. They wore civilian clothes, but he knew they were off duty. *The boss must be either really hard on them or really good to them to have earned such loyalty*. Marc finally gave his full attention to the man at his side, but he didn't speak first, showing respect.

Adrian noted the dog tag as Marc stood; he heard a click of new pieces being put into place. *Kenn will be livid when he realizes he brought in the very people he has to share power with.*

Adrian considered what he'd already witnessed and corrected himself. Kenn did know, and he was beyond livid. "So, is he dangerous, or does he just look it?"

"He's a wild animal with a little training." Marc was aware of the double entendre. "I did him a favor. He chooses to stay."

"Do you make shit like that a habit?"

Marc felt the man searching him. "Shit like what?"

"Doing favors for those less able. I need that kind of help here."

Marc indicated the tag around his neck. "Service is my chosen field, but helping animals is easier. You know their nature when you first meet."

Adrian held out a hand in welcome.

Marc shook it, feeling as if he'd just passed a surprise quiz.

"Mitchel, Adrian."

Marc automatically squared his shoulders at the authoritative tone. "Brady, Marcus."

"Where you from, Grunt?"

At full attention now, Marc was surprised to find himself responding as if he were addressing an officer. Like Kenn, it didn't take him long to figure out that he was.

"West Virginia. Ohio."

"Marine?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Record?"

"Eight speeding tickets in four years; a couple of bar fights. I paid restitution."

"What are your plans, Grunt, now the country you were sworn to protect has fallen in flames?"

Marc couldn't stop his eyes from going to Angela and Charlie as they came toward Adrian, Kenn in the lead. "My country's not dead. Her people still need to be protected."

Guards nodded in approval.

Adrian smiled. "Did you rehearse that?"

Marc shook his head, smiling back, but Adrian noticed it didn't reach his wary eyes. *He'll add strength to my Eagles!*

“I’m a quick thinker under pressure.” Marc shrugged. “My mother said I’d make a good politician. My CO said I was a wise smartass. I consider myself safely between the two.”

Adrian chuckled. “Brains are welcome here, Marc, as are you. May Safe Haven become your—”

“Check it out, Adrian. This is *my* Angela.” Kenn shouldered between them, not quite daring to drag Angie, but pulling her arm in a way that made Marc grit his teeth.

Adrian noticed it, and her flash of anger at Kenn’s title. *She’s not his. He just lied. Again.*

“Ang, this is Adrian, our Commander in Chief.”

As Marc was forced out of the circle, Adrian saw the slender female actually grimace at the introduction, not caring if anyone disagreed. *There is great strength in her.*

Their eyes locked, kindred souls meeting for the first time...

Lightning flashed suddenly, brilliantly, drawing everyone’s attention away, but Angela and Adrian didn’t react as time stood still. Their life forces melded for a second of completeness, of incredible joy, and then it was gone.

To cover the flames of confusion, Angela let the witch ask a question that demanded honesty. “The last men to hold that position tried to kill us all. Do you plan to follow in their footsteps?”

It drew displeasure from everyone except Marc, who was now studying the small streak of gray in Angie’s hair. It was new.

Adrian saw Kenn’s hand flinch toward her, but dive into a pocket instead. *Because of all the witnesses? Is that where her split lip came from?*

Adrian reestablished the earthshattering connection he and the woman had made. He tried to keep his voice steady, now feeling like the one who was taking a test. “No, I don’t. I don’t consider myself that important.”

Angela was already certain his people would argue if anyone else said that. Their protectiveness was evident. “Good. We have enough controlling jackasses left as it is.”

There were frowns and surprised murmurs.



Adrian forced himself to confirm who she was referring to. The tone of his reply wasn't quite joking as he noted the bags under her eyes and the hand resting on her gun. "We'll talk later; you can point them out. I'd be happy to have them slapped and threatened for you."

He caught Kenn's reaction. The Marine flushed in guilty anger.

Adrian's stomach twisted. Kenn had been here for a long time, but there had always been something a little off about him. Adrian now suspected what it was.

"I'm a healer, not a punisher."

"You're a doctor." Adrian's pleasure hit them in waves.

Kenn's rage grew. "Yeah, if you need first aid, she might be able to do it. You'll want to talk to—"

"Later!" Adrian jerked his hand. "Your mission has not ended until the supplies and refugees have been squared away!"

Kenn flushed, pinned by the pissed, cold tone.

Adrian's gaze went to the lone man studying them all, and then to the thin blonde, who was slumped against the Blazer again, as if she couldn't stand to take comfort from him. "Separate those two; get her to John. Get on it!" Adrian turned his back to Kenn, something he'd never done before.

His men noticed it.

Angela couldn't help feeling bad for Kenn. His nature would make this hard for everyone, but she was also relieved to be away from his anger.

Adrian looked at Marc, who subtly shifted to Angela's right. *The place of protection*, Adrian recognized, also liking the wolf's neat stance at her side. "If you need something, ask one of the guards. We'll talk tomorrow at... eleven thirty. Someone will be by to show you around once you're out of quarantine."

Marc knew he was supposed to follow Kenn now. He gave Angela a resigned sigh. This was it. The separation had begun. "Catch you later."

Angela didn't like it either. "Yes, you will." She gestured to the wolf sitting at her side. "Go with Marc."

The wolf didn't budge until Marc whistled.

Dog rose slowly. Angela patted the wolf she'd come to respect for his devotion to Marc. "He'll need you more than I will."

The wolf's ear flicked; he padded after his master, causing people to move out of his way.

Adrian stored her obvious rapport with the wild animal. "Are you two a couple?"

Angela shook her head. "No."

They both noted the relief that Charlie was too inexperienced to hide.

It made Angela sad. "Marc's a good friend. I never would have made it here without him."

"She'd know if she was sick. Does she have to be in the QZ?" Charlie wanted her to spend the day with him and avoid Kenn. It would also get him out of chores.

Adrian was aware of how intently the boy was listening, and how reluctant his mom was to talk in front of him.

"If you have chores, we'll meet later." Angela wanted to hole up in her tent. She was unsure about handling a huge group of strangers, but the witch said if she wanted a life here, she couldn't spend the first day hiding.

Adrian forced himself to act as if he hadn't noticed she'd just read her son's mind. "He has a shift with the vet. You can wait in the quarantine zone, but it may be dinner before he's finished. Or you can go on rounds with me. It'll give you a chance to meet your future patients."

Angela thought he was assuming a lot, but she also understood from the expression on Charlie's face that she had just been offered something that was sought after here—time with Adrian. "I'd love to spend the day doing...rounds with you, but I haven't agreed to stay, let alone be your doctor. I came for my son."

"But you will." Adrian turned to the teenager. "Put your mom's gear in a QZ tent, then get to work before Chris marks you late."

The teenager snapped a salute. "Yes, sir."

Angela saw a lot of Marc in her son. He was changing, growing into a man; she was suddenly sad for all the years Kenn had kept them chained to his side. It hadn't been easy on either of them.

“See ya later, Mom.”

“Yes, you will.”

Adrian waited patiently for the boy to be swallowed by the thinning fog. “He’s a great kid. Marc’s?”

Angela froze.

Adrian hated being right. “Kenn doesn’t know?”

She slowly shook her head, hoping the good feeling of this place meant she could trust him. If not, this would get ugly, fast. “No. What gave us away?”

Adrian lit a smoke. When he walked, she followed.

“A number of things I’m surprised Kenn missed—hair the same shade, same stubborn chin...and they both worship the ground you walk on.”

Angela went into panic mode. “It’s not like that! Marc’s an old friend who came when I needed him. Kenny and I had been together since Charlie was a baby.”

Adrian caught the wording. “Had been. Until the war?”

She nodded warily. “Yes, and then I did what I had to. Nothing will keep me from my son.”

Adrian felt respect. *I like this one.* As they walked through the fog in silence, he was also aware of a strong feeling of anticipation. It said something special could happen, something special *would* try to happen if he wanted it to, but he had to choose now. *What is it about her?* Adrian questioned his own gift reluctantly.

*Kindred... Yours.*

Stunned, Adrian stumbled over a mud hole that all of the camp had tripped over.

Angela chuckled as he juggled his body to keep from going face first. The sound echoed into the air and exposed a new surprise.

Adrian watched the colors over the camp ripple in vivid patterns of the sharp, clear hues of health and hope. It faded quickly, something easily imagined. Adrian stared at her, heart twisted. *Will you do that to her? To everyone here?*

Already damned, Adrian answered the witch's inquiry with shame and fierce determination. *Yes.*

Angela's face iced over. She turned toward his camp without another word.

Adrian followed, mind spinning.

Kenn pointed Rick and his woman toward the medical tent, then studied Angela and Adrian until they were out of sight.

Marc stared after them too.

Kenn realized the guards were staring in curiosity and disapproval. He grunted, hefting two heavy boxes from his Bronco. "Grab one of those and stay close. Leave the QZ, you'll be shot."

Marc followed with a box on each arm, nodding to the men who moved aside to make room for the wolf, but inside he was dying. *How long will I last here now that Angie has her man back?*

### 3

Now out of Kenn's line of sight, Adrian pushed. "You two hooked up in Ohio?"

"We met in Indiana. I left Ohio in February." Angela was distracted. The witch inside was peering through door after door, trying to discover who Adrian was.

"Damn. Hell of a swoop you two made."

Angela's eyes grew murky, like the layers of grit above the fog. "What is it you want to know?"

Adrian blinked. The male inside asked before he could prevent it. "Are you sleeping with him? Was he paid with sex for getting you here?"

Instead of the anger he expected, Angela gave him a small, cool smile that made him stop.

“That’s not the question you wanted to ask, was it?”

Adrian chose his words more carefully this time. “No. The query I have requires a certain amount of trust to answer.”

Angela waited, witch listening. “It’s good you have respect for these things. Ask your question.”

Adrian hesitated again, sure it was all moving too fast.

“I guess it takes trust to ask, too.” Angela closed the door to that cage.

She was the real thing—he could feel it. Yet he couldn’t come out and just ask her to prove it. Everything had to be given willingly to accomplish what his dreams hinted at. Still, he longed for it to be true. He was disappointed by his unexpected lack of courage. It was a simple question. *Are you my Seer? The witch I was promised?*

Angela froze. “Are you asking me?”

Adrian forgot to breathe. He forced himself to nod. *The one I need the most is here!*

Angela’s face was cold. “I’m here for my son. I don’t even know you.”

“Fate brought you here.” Adrian hated it that she would have to start out in hiding. “You’re here to help me.”

Angela wanted to believe that, but she’d been protecting herself too long to give in so easily. *They must be okay with magic here. Does that mean there are more like me?* “I don’t know what you need help with, but that’s not what I came for.”

Adrian hid it all as footsteps approached. “That will change in time; you’ll stay. We have great and terrible things to do together.”

Before Angela could deny or question, she wasn’t sure which, the tall guard from the QZ joined them, trooper hat in place.

“Camp’s up and running. Kyle’s on Point.”

“Good.”

As Neil left, he gave Angela a quick, curious glance.

She responded with an apologetic smile.

“He’ll be okay.”

Angela became unreadable again, not liking how easily Adrian was picking out her triggers. “He’s loyal to you. They all are.”

“It’s good here...but it could be better.”

Angela recognized the hard sell and remained silent. *What does he want from me? An immediate oath of loyalty? Recognition of our power?* He was like her, but that needed a lot more thought before she would take any action.

Adrian got them moving, aware of how standoffish she was. He switched them to safer topics. “You’ll get used to the way things work here, but basically, everyone’s required to follow the rules and put in twenty-five hours a week on various chores. You have medical skills, so you’ll be with our doctor, John. Beyond that, your time is your own. For now, you’ll have a few days to settle in before you get a schedule.” Adrian gestured toward the mess. “You hungry?”

She grimaced at the thought of being around so many people so soon. She could hear the noises of a big meal from here. “Not really. Coffee would be great, though.”

He paused to relight his smoke.

Angela took the opportunity to pull off her sweater and tie it around her hips, eager to straighten herself up a little before she met anyone else. She let her dark hair out of the wild ponytail, drawing the notice of every guard in sight.

Men stared in longing as she brushed through the thick curls with her fingers and braided it in seconds with a grace born of practice.

Her pale shoulders gave Adrian a gentle chill of lust he filed away, thinking her dark blue tank top was almost indecent against that pale skin. The edge of a nasty scar was visible for a brief second from under one sleeve. Anger boiled in his stomach, hoping she’d killed whoever had given it to her.

*There’s another topic I’ll need to avoid.* Angela distracted him. “I know, I know. Women: always waiting for them. Some things haven’t changed.”

Adrian chuckled, aware of her tactic. “I’m okay with it. Most people here aren’t sure if it’s all right to joke with me, let alone keep me waiting.”

“You don’t tell them any different?” Angela sensed a great love of humor in him.

He shrugged. “It’s another way to tell the leaders from the followers.”

Angela stopped, impressed as the camp came into view. *Impressed?* All the people were something of a shock. They stood in small groups, talking, drinking coffee, moving in and out of tents and trucks, waiting in small lines, cleaning up Easter garbage and dog piles. Her ears rang with sounds she hadn’t heard in months. Marc had taught her to make very little noise.

Dishes clinked, thuds echoed from things being relocated, dug out, set up; doors slammed, kids ran around playing. She picked out the details faster than her thought processes could sort them. Piles of multi-colored glass were swept against a charred garbage can, indicating a celebration had gotten out of hand.

She swept the people. Mostly white, she was able to spot a few Indians, Mexicans, and blacks. She was comforted by it. The people here were healthy, unafraid, and prepared to deal with what came, yet they were somber instead of arrogant in their survival. Most wore ball caps, jeans, and jackets that didn’t quite cover the guns on their hips, but there were also women in dresses and skirts. There were no bright colors, as if these people were in mourning. Except for one occasional flash of flame, they were all wearing blue, black, or green. Angela liked the feeling of respect it conveyed. These people cared about the dead. They were Americans. “Wow.”

“Little more than you expected?”

She nodded, sweeping again. “How many?”

“One hundred eighty-eight, counting your group.”

“You’ve done well by them.”

“You think so?”

She thought of the dead towns she and Marc had passed along the way. It wasn’t like that here. Safe Haven still held hope. “Yes. So do they.”

“There’s still a lot to be done. I need help.”

Angela instinctively knew he didn't say that to many people, but she didn't respond.

Adrian let it go again, though it was hard to keep waiting when it had already been so long. Angela would stay. He would make sure his wishes were clear. His men would convince her.

He had worked a lot of it out before, how to integrate someone like her, but to his pleasure, most of it wouldn't be necessary. Angela already had a strength he would use, and it would start now. After the day he was about to put her through, the people here would suspect she was being evaluated for a place in the chain of command.

Adrian smiled at her. "Welcome to Safe Haven, Angela. May it quickly become your home."



## Chapter Forty-Two

# Examination

### 1

**T**hey continued down the left side of the rectangle shaped camp; Adrian explained the areas as they walked by them. “The two big tents are separated by gender. They’re for anyone who can’t, or won’t, put up their own canvas and break it down each time we move.”

Angela thought community tents were very considerate. It kept people off the ground and protected them from chemical rain. “How often do you travel?”

“It depends on what’s around us. Usually we’ll be on the road three or four days, from about 9am to 7pm, but in bad areas, we keep going. If it’s good, like here in the Black Hills, or there are a lot of supplies around that we need, we’ll stay an extra day or two.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Southeast, for now. We pick places to search at each meeting.”

Angela didn’t ask what he was hunting for while trekking across the country. She already sensed it was connected to magic and she didn’t want to have that conversation now that people were all around them.

Angela followed him to join a lengthy line of people waiting under a dark green canopy attached to the rear of a flatbed semi. On one wooden wall, an American flag flew over a chalkboard that read *Adrian’s Mess*.

Angela noticed nearly everyone called a greeting to the blond leader, and stared at her. She gave the buffet style meal of pancakes and powdered eggs an approving glance while Adrian talked to the elderly people who had surrounded them. She noticed

his refusal of offers to skip to the front, and that he didn't pull away from the needy, arthritic fingers of the seniors.

Adrian placed a hand on her arm as he introduced them. "This is Angela. She's an MD."

Angela jumped at the sweet curl of lust produced by his fingers on her bare skin. His hand tensed on her for a brief second before letting go, telling her he'd felt it too.

The seven men and women turned to her with grotesquely swollen hands, assailing her with questions and complaints. They scared her a little.

Adrian saw her fingers flinch down, then go out to shake the nearest hand instead.

"Are you a real doctor?"

"Will you check my rash?"

"Who'd you come in with?"

The queries came fast. For Angela, who'd been alone for months, it was hard to smile and keep her gift under control. It was crying for hunger that food couldn't quench. *I'm not ready for this yet.*

"Nice hair. You dye it?"

"Are you staying here with that wolfman?"

"It itches all the time."

"Because we have laws..."

"Do you play...?"

They jostled each other, trying to get her attention.

Angela's thumb slipped, letting a bolt of frustration escape. *Enough!*

The mental shout stung them all like the small, sharp bite of an insect.

Adrian's heart thumped as silence fell among the older people who were usually never quiet. *Will she fail the first test?*

Angela's eyes lit up in regret, even as a satisfied gleam flickered in her blue depths. She took a gnarled hand. "That was rude." She connected to the miner. "Please. Forgive me?"

Another second or two of tense silence held, then Ralph bellowed, "Will you come read to us geezers sometime?!"

Adrian relaxed as the older people lost their confused, hurt expressions, adding their support. *Did she know Ralph is the unofficial senior, senior?* Adrian hadn't seen them take to anyone so fast, not even little Becky.

Angela smiled at the group. "I'd love to."

Adrian felt the magic again, that spark of flint on flint, and he wasn't the only one. Men across the mess were turning her way.

Angela knew. She slid between the older people so she was mostly out of view. "Tell me about this rash."

The seniors converged on her again, more gently this time. The rest of the twenty-five or so people in line and already at the tables went back to what they were doing, not sure if they had missed something. Adrian knew how they felt since he'd been studying her the whole time and he *knew* he'd missed something.

They got their cups and walked up the other side of the neat camp. Adrian stopped. He didn't speak right away.

Angela could feel her gift wanting to taste him. His energy, willingly given, might be as refreshing as Marc's. He was like her but different. Together, they could—

"What did you say to them?"

Angela fell back into covering like she'd been doing all her life. "What do you mean?"

"Don't do that!" Adrian's voice blazed with emotion. "If we're going to build something, honesty between us matters!"

The old Angela was saying she could trust him, but she based her choice on that first sharp connection. For too brief a second, she had known she was exactly where fate meant her to be. The feeling was gone now, but she sensed this man could help her find it again. "I told them I'm young, that I don't have enough control over my emotions. I asked them to be patient, *quiet*, while I learn."

"Mental conversations." Adrian cleared his throat. "You can do that whenever you want?"

Angela nodded nervously, missing his happy greed as she reaffirmed the plan. She would be herself here—the newer, stronger woman—or she would take her son and go somewhere else. "Usually."

Adrian struggled not to ask her for more proof. He got them moving.

Angela was relieved, surprised, and suspicious. *Shouldn't he call me a liar, or at least ask questions?*

*He knows you for what you are.* The witch's tone was ominous. *More so than Kenny ever did. Be very careful.*

Safe Haven was awake now; people were everywhere, gawking at the new arrivals. Angela could hear them wondering who she was and when she'd come in, but it was clearest in the expressions of the guards. Most of the security was inside the tape. The black clad men were patrolling set areas. They looked like old SWAT officers. They wore the exact clothes and gear from what she could see, but the difference was in their gazes. They were more aware, more alert, than the cops of the old world had been.

She and Adrian walked by a taped off area, stopping in front of a large grassy field holding three enormous tents set in a half moon. The center shelter was a double-sided circus tent with an eighteen-wheeler backed in on each side. Angela saw a smaller tent in the far corner. She concentrated. "You have a veterinarian?"

Adrian smiled. Despite all the trouble he already foresaw, he was thrilled. His witch had come. "Yes. We've gathered him a small herd. The goal is to produce our own food. We try to be careful." He led her through a maze of chest high, portable, wooden stalls smelling of fresh straw. "We even keep them away from the gun area. Chris says it might make the meat sour if we upset them."

Adrian gestured at a tall, harried man of about forty, who was kneeling in one of the straw covered pens.

Angela watched his gentle hands push a big pill down a tiny mouth before putting the rabbit into a cage by itself.

"I've heard something like that." Angela kept the safe conversation going. "Farmers used to say their livestock wouldn't produce as well if they weren't kept in the right surroundings."

The vet finally noticed them. He raked Angela in contempt. "Who's the Barbie?"

The man's voice put off equal waves of impatience and dislike.

Adrian gave him a warning look. “This is Angela. She treats people. This is Chris. He treats animals.”

Angela automatically held out a hand, forcing the vet to wipe his on his filthy white coat.

The second they touched, she caught flashes of the future. Some of them disturbed her. She quickly let go. “It’s pregnant.”

Before he could respond, Adrian moved forward. “You do this week’s tests yet?”

Angela realized she had overstepped. The leader might think he was ready, but he knew his people weren’t. *Should have known it was too good to be true that someone like me had built a haven for our kind.*

The vet’s gaze lingered on Angela as she wandered the cluttered aisles. “No. Tomorrow. I need...”

Angela swept the area as the men talked, admiring cats, chickens, a goat, and other animals that each had their own neat cage or pen. It impressed her to see extinguishers and fire alarms hanging from tent poles.

Adrian gestured.

Angela took his right, positive that’s where he wanted her. She looked at Chris.

The vet returned her stare with no change in annoyed expression.

Knowing she shouldn’t, Angela slipped into his thoughts. She was surprised to find a thin wall.

*He’s blocking me!* She could be through it in seconds. He was waiting for her to try, but she didn’t. *What would I gain? Proving I can, just to confirm he dislikes me because of it? I stopped playing those games a long time ago.* Angela let out a sigh and caught up with Adrian.

Next to the animal area, a large tow truck with a tarp awning sat off to itself. Adrian talked to the man behind the wheel.

Angela understood this was Safe Haven’s communication center. The man standing just under the cover of the camouflage canopy was a guard, though he wasn’t dressed like one.

Her brow creased. Anyone this organized and careful had to be able to recognize Kenny for what he was. Had Adrian ignored it? He didn't seem the type, but time would tell. Time that she and Marc would spend apart. She missed him already.

Angela turned her back to Adrian so she could scan the QZ. It held one less tent now.

Marc appeared in the doorway of the vinyl shelter farthest from everything. *You okay?*

Angela was able to feel how upset he was. Had he been in another fight? *I'm fine. Good place so far.*

Marc shrugged, eyes going to Adrian as he came up behind her. *We'll see, won't we?* Marc let the flap fall over the doorway.

Adrian didn't want her to be upset. "He'll be out of there by morning. I skipped it with you because you're a doctor."

Angela spun on him at the evasion. "Don't do that! If we're trying to build something, honesty matters."

Adrian reddened a little at having his own words used against him. The people here never did that to him. He was surprised to find his soul needed to be held accountable. Needed it, and wanted it. "I skipped it because I didn't want to wait while you were quarantined."

Angela didn't rise to the bait. The moment with the vet had reminded her that normal people didn't like magic.

Adrian knew she was right. His camp needed time to adjust, but he hated it that she was so aloof. He'd only spent half an hour with her and he'd already discovered things that shouldn't be there, even for a war survivor. *Unless she was mistreated before.*

Steady eye contact, mild reactions to gunfire, and curiosity were things most of his refugees had arrived with. These refugees had been fresh out of basements and cellars, or recovering from shock. They were too numb to be scared anymore. Angela carried a deep, wild fear that kept his mind on her arrival. Adrian was almost positive the sore on her lip had come from several backhanded slaps, but it hadn't been Marc. Their stares were too intense, too familiar. She wasn't afraid of him. If it had been Rick,

Kenn would have left his body by the side of whatever road he'd found them on. That only left one possibility.

Adrian felt something shift in his heart as he stole a glance at the quiet woman walking on his right. *I'll protect her. No man will ever hit her again in anger, not while she's under my protection.*

Angela hid a yawn. It already felt as if she'd been traveling the camp for hours, but most people were still eating breakfast. She drew in a steady breath as more trucks and people came into view.

Around the perimeter, Eagles watched Angela. Inside the camp, refugees did the same.

Angela wondered if Adrian had a woman here who would be jealous of him showing her around. A hollow ache pinged deep in her stomach. She blinked away a red haze of blood.

Adrian stopped before they reached the row of trucks and people. "We have a thief."

Angela's brows drew up. "Why share that with me?"

"So you'll look and tell me who it is."

Angela hesitated to say yes or no. She wanted to help, and she longed to be free to use her gifts for the greater good, but if she searched those doors for him now, she wouldn't be able to refuse later. Still, the thought of earning her place here based on what she could do was appealing, as Adrian had known it would be. Who could resist being used for what they were good at?

*Besides, the witch seduced, he's the best ally to have here. Give him what he wants. Build a debt.*

Four of the five men sitting on crates by open semi doors called greetings as they were spotted. Adrian stepped over to the largest of them. "Hey, Doug. How's the count?"

Angela hung back, observing, fighting with herself over the choice.

Doug frowned, grinding out a cigar in the dry earth at his boots. When he stood, he towered over them all by inches. "Light in every truck. Same as last week."

The man's Irish lilt was barely noticeable in his frustration. When he caught her stare and winked at her, Angela couldn't help

smiling back. She was amused and intimidated by all the interest from everyone. Kenn had ignored her unless he was in the mood for sex or she pissed him off. At the hospital, people weren't aware of their surroundings enough to notice something as unimportant as looks. Until her trip with Marc, she hadn't felt pretty in a long time.

“They didn't break in. The locks are fine.” Doug scanned Adrian's guest again. “They must have a key.”

Adrian stared into the nearly empty truck.

Doug waited for the new solution he knew was coming, but his mind stayed on the woman, recognizing the way she carried herself. *Did she serve?*

“Okay. Post new rules. Fuel and water trucks are now shut from 11pm to 6am. Only the Eagles will have access after those hours. Put a red collar dog out.”

Doug nodded. As soon as he finished writing, his eyes went back to Angela.

The other men hadn't looked away from her yet.

Angela's cheeks were bright red as Adrian motioned her forward.

“This is Angela. She's Charlie's mom, and hopefully, our second doctor. This is Doug, Daryl, Cris, Tony, and Danny. These guys are useful, so you'll remember their names after a while.” Adrian didn't say Danny and Tony couldn't really be included. Those two were mostly useless.

Angela exchanged polite glances, and avoided leers.

Doug limped forward to shake. His massive hand swallowed hers.

Angela's gift surged forward at the contact, pulling violently.

The sky darkened to charcoal; thunder crashed, shaking the ground they stood on.

A surge of protectiveness flashed across Doug's face, an involuntary reaction to her kind. Angela slid her hand free. “Nice to meet so many good men.”

Excluding Adrian, no one else had seen or felt anything. They'd only heard her words.



Adrian snickered at Doug's confusion, eyes ordering the man to let it go even as his mouth distracted the others. "She must want extra shampoo or something."

The men snickered.

Doug kept staring. "You're Kenn's lady."

Angela scowled. "Not anymore."

Her quick denial was noticed by all of them.

Doug gave her a friendly grin, finally getting the hint to cover the moment. "I'd be honored to take his place."

Angela blushed. The others laughed again.

She joined in, embarrassed. "Thanks, but I'm not searching for a replacement."

Doug wondered how much the new man had to do with that. Their arrival story was racing through the waking people. "Well, you say the word, lass, and I'm all yours. I'll even take off me vest if ya want."

Even Angela laughed this time.

*Have you found my thief?* Adrian drew the attention back to himself. "Did anyone report anything in this area?"

Angela realized she had made up her mind. She'd hoped for this a long time ago, a world where she could be accepted because of her gift instead of in spite of it. Safe Haven could give that to her if she could help people accept magic. To do that, she had to let Adrian place her where he wanted. Once things settled down, maybe she and Marc could—

Angela stopped herself, not wanting to search her future again and find only darkness. She knew what that meant now. She would do these things for the right reasons, and never take another life. That was a guilt she didn't think she was strong enough to survive again.

Angela knelt down to tie her shoe as she slipped into their minds, hard and quick. The dark glow of thievery lit up around one of them. It had been common at the inner city hospital where many of the patients were strung out addicts trying to steal drugs.

When Adrian lifted a brow amid the conversation, she gestured at Danny, the only one pretending to belong, then turned

her back to all of them. She was unable to look at the man now that she had condemned him.

Adrian was floored, not sure if he believed her, yet sure he did. Danny was arrogant, lazy, disrespectful to women. Adrian hadn't cared for the handyman when he'd come to them in Utah; the feeling had grown in the weeks since then. Especially when they had realized there wasn't anything the man was actually handy at.

"I'll be around." Adrian led them away.

Angela exchanged a friendly glance with Doug as they left.

He nodded back, expression telling her he knew something special had happened.

They passed a group of men playing soccer on one side of the camp, then a circle of men and teenage boys learning to handle dirt bikes. It was impressive. Such neat organization amid so much destruction and chaos eased some of her fears. Maybe these people were different. Adrian certainly was.

They hadn't gone far when Angela noticed a group of five people following them.

Adrian felt her nervousness. Normally, people waited until he was ready, but the leader wanted her to relax. He stopped, waving one of them over. "What's up, Matt?"

The gawky teenager flushed in pleasure at being chosen first. "Dad said to ask you if I can relieve him for an hour."

Adrian pretended to be studying the teen in suspicion. "You passed Kenn's new radio test?"

The pimple-spotted boy stood straighter. "Yes, sir! Yesterday."

Adrian grinned. "Great. Tell Mitch I said to take two hours."

Matt's face lit up. He was gone a second later.

"He seems like a nice kid."

Adrian nodded at Angela's comment. "He is." *It may change Matt forever when the moral board votes for his dad's death.*

Angela frowned at Adrian's thought, not asking what the father had done to earn that judgement. The fact that he would get a trial was enough for her.

Adrian recognized the moment. *She just gave me trust. The biggest obstacle has been cleared.* A thick shield slid over Adrian's mind as he turned to the next waiting camp member.

Chapter Forty-Three  
**I Stand By It**

1

**A**drian spent five minutes standing in the light wind, making choices and pleasing his people while getting what he needed from them. When they were gone, he gave Angela a knowing look. “Is that better?”

Angela didn’t like mind games. “You’re set up like a king, and the peasants don’t know.”

Adrian saw purple sparks in her crystal eyes. He would have to dig up information on that. He’d never seen it before. “They know. It’s their doing.”

Angela didn’t consider calling him on the lie, but she knew one when she heard it. There was no way he’d left his approval to chance. That realization sent her back to Kenn’s introduction. It had made her uncomfortable, but she wasn’t sure why. *Someone has to be in charge, right?*

People were staring now, pointing and whispering. Angela assumed Adrian was giving her a long tour, but as more and more camp members watched them, she was forced to consider that he probably wasn’t the one who usually gave this tour. He was telling them he considered her important. Angela was surprised to feel honored by it.

“They don’t mean to be rude. They’re trying to figure out if you’re one of the good guys, and why you’re with me.”

“That’s why, right?” She lifted a brow. “So you can find out if I’m good or bad?”

Adrian held her stare. “I was sure of you the second our eyes met. I just need time to convince you of it.”

Angela chuckled.

Adrian steered them toward three long, white semis parked in a tight half circle.

She approved of the multi-colored lanterns and Disney character decals. A play mat sat inside this closed space, along with a jungle gym, swings, and slides. Angela also noticed the guard, something she wouldn't have picked out if not for her time with Marc. The armed sentry was stationary between two of the rolling homes. She could feel him assessing her level of threat. The attention paid to detail here was astounding after fourteen hundred miles of chaos and horror, but the sense of safety, of being protected, pulled at Angela the hardest. Here, she wouldn't have to kill anyone. *Except maybe Kenn.*

Adrian led the way to the main kid camper. "We try to have two sitters available at all times. It's important for parents to be able to come and go."

"Do you have a lot of kids?"

"No." Disappointment laced his tone. "Only a dozen, but we have so many people who lost children that we had to create a test for them to pass to even be considered as a sitter or live-in. We have to be sure good people are raising our orphans."

He saw her lifted brow and explained as he tapped twice on the door, then stepped in. "Live-ins do just that. They live here with the kids and help them. Peggy's the sitter today. She's a favorite."

Angela immediately liked the older redhead, thinking it made a lot of sense to do things this way. She tried to ignore the children so her heart wouldn't start aching.

Adrian noticed it, but he didn't push, mind trying to figure out that part of her puzzle. Most new females immediately offered to spend time here.

"You're very organized." She lit a smoke as they left.

Adrian steered them toward the east side of camp. "These people work hard. You will too, but it's all worth it."

*I'll need a pit stop soon.* Angela wondered why Marc was so pissed. She could feel his anger from here and assumed someone's words had struck a nerve. She didn't offer him comfort. Marc

always landed on his feet, and while they were falling through hell, he knew how to take care of himself.

They stopped at the rear of the now empty mess, by a large row of trucks with pictures of American cities on them. Adrian hit a button on a small black box attached to his belt.

“Eagle Four to the refer trucks.”

“Copy.”

Angela was surprised. “You grow reefer?”

Adrian chuckled. “*Refrigerated*. We butcher our own meat.”

“A girl can always hope.”

Angela was smiling, but Adrian caught the small note of seriousness in her words and understood it was a question of his leadership. Did he sweat the small stuff?

He opened his cigarette pack and held out a joint. “If I can, you’ll have it. You’ll be happy here.”

He chuckled at her expression. “Freedom with a capital F. Fire it up.”

Adrian turned to greet a man with black hair and full lips under a black mustache. Angela hadn’t seen him coming. Sporting a shiny Glock on his hip, the sentry had an Italian profile, with large, bushy eyebrows and deeply tanned skin.

“Have the perimeter guards checked in?”

Kyle nodded, taking a quick glance at the woman nervously lighting a joint. *Nice .357 on her hip. Too big for her, though. Great body. Stunning eyes. Kenn’s woman. Who hit her?* “Yeah. They’re all where they should be for a change.”

Adrian was aware of the mobster’s reaction to Angela. “What about the weapons truck?”

Kyle caught a whiff of vanilla; he was instantly distracted. “Uh, ammo missing again. I just finished talkin’ to everyone who had a shift last night. No one saw squat.”

“Figures.” Adrian glanced at Angela. “Puff-puff give, Bogart.”

She let out a sexy chuckle that made both men aware they were single. She held it out, quickly lowering her hand as Adrian took it.

Adrian inhaled deeply, then passed it back to her.

Kyle delivered a curious smile. “Hello.” Adrian hardly ever smoked with his men, and never in public. *She’s more than just Kenn’s wife.*

“This is Angie, our new doctor. This is Kyle Reece. He’s usually in charge of our highest level of guards. Today, he’s in charge of all of them.”

Adrian observed as Angela held out a slender hand.

Both men saw her calluses, signs of someone not afraid of labor.

Kyle froze as the temperature of the wind dropped to ice; it gave him a deep chill as they shook.

Angela was in deep, reading his automatic acceptance that she was different, like Adrian. The voices in her mind whispered of honor in this man that ran deeper than even the leader here knew of. Angela forced the witch to let go without taking energy. Control would be a challenge with so many good men in one place.

“Ma’am.”

“Angie.”

Her voice was low, sensual. Kyle’s pulse tripled.

Almost instantly, nervousness and fear flooded her expression. She took a step back, color in her cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

Kyle reacted before Adrian could, drawn to her. “Don’t be. I’m Kyle. Reece, if you like. You need anything, *want* anything, I can take care of it.”

Angela’s cheeks flamed at the passion in his tone. “Uh, thanks.” She inhaled hard from the joint.

Kyle tried to act normal. *What happened? Did I just declare loyalty to a complete stranger?* “The kid’s on the air.” Kyle’s voice sounded odd to him. *Yes, I did, and I stand by it.* He didn’t know her, but he knew he wanted her. “He’s a natural, too.”

Adrian glanced at Angela, a question flickering. “Talent runs in the blood.”

Angela only tensed for a split second, but Adrian saw it. That sense of pieces falling into place hit him again. The one he needed most was here; things would spin faster now—he could feel it.

Adrian handed her the roach. As their fingers touched, he felt her start to pull away and stop herself, facing her fears.

“Base to Eagle.”

Two radios crackled, full of static.

Angela did jump this time. She hated it that she felt awkward again, but the voices were now saying Kyle would be important to her in the not-so-distant future. That was the last thing she needed.

“Eagle One.”

“Jeremy just rolled in with three trucks. No people.”

The voice was calm, confident, and sounded much older than the teenage kid Angela had met.

Kyle keyed his mike, watching a rare sunbeam light up the long, dark braid swaying in the breeze. She was like a model from a magazine. “Four, on the way.”

“Copy.”

The guard left after a casual nod to Angela.

The preoccupied expression on Adrian’s face kept her quiet as they headed toward a row of port-o-lets.

“These are for everyone. The ones by the QZ and kid area are off-limits. The campers are men’s and women’s, but just showers for now. The time limit is five minutes; we don’t monitor that too closely.”

Angela hurried, not wanting to keep him waiting. When she came out of the smelly camper and didn’t see him, she scanned the area, growing more uncomfortable with all the people observing her every move and expression. *Don’t they have anything better to do?*

She turned her back, reading the laminated sign on the bathroom wall.

### **Safe Haven Rules of Conduct and Penalties**

1.) Abuse (Mental, physical, verbal) is forbidden. Punishable by banishment.



2.) Fighting, property damage, violence for any reason except self-defense, is not allowed. Punishable by hard labor or banishment.

3.) Sexual Assault is a capital offense! Punishable by death, or branding and banishment. Jury vote required.

4.) Killing for any reason, other than self-defense, is a capital offense! Punishable by death. Jury vote. Guardian can overrule.

5.) Child abuse is a capital offense! Jury vote. Guardian will almost always overrule any decision but death.

6.) Rape is a death sentence. There is no reason or excuse. It can only be overruled by a unanimous camp vote that includes the victim.

7.) Treason/ Mutiny. When more than half the camp agrees, a new leader will be voted in.

Angela heard Adrian come up behind her. She pointed at one of the detailed maps posted next to the rules. “What’s in the off-limits area?”

“It’s another training site.”

She found the answer a bit evasive compared to the openness he’d been giving her questions so far, but she didn’t push.

“You ready?”

“Yep.” She fell in on his right, able to read people around them without using her gift. They were wondering why a new woman hadn’t been put in the QZ. She didn’t feel any hostility or resentment about it, but word was flying that Adrian had broken his own rules. “What happens if someone refuses the tests you have your doctor run?”

It was an astute question. Adrian was impressed. “What do you think?”

“You send them on their way.”

“Yes.” Adrian hurried to explain his reasoning, something else that was out of the norm for him. “With supplies, and only after trying to change their mind. I hate to refuse anyone, but an epidemic would overwhelm us. There’s no way we could handle it.”

“Has anyone refused?”

“No. The red cross symbol is what draws most people in.”

She believed that. “We heard you all the way back in Nebraska. It’s great, what you’re doing. No one else is.”

“I want to do more. I want to search for survivors and give them a chance to rebuild what was stolen from them.” Adrian’s tone deepened. “You can be a big part of that.”

Angela sighed, wishing she could see the future clearly instead of the foggy, distorted glimpses she sometimes got. She did know one thing. “Kenny wouldn’t like that.” He hadn’t cooled off at all. She dreaded facing him.

Adrian frowned. There would be trouble over her, no doubt about that, but she was one of his—the one he already wished fate had sent him first. “The women here are free, more than they were before the war.”

“Them, not me. He’s very...determined.”

Adrian’s unease grew. “Yes, he is, and we need that from him, but you’ve done fine on your own. If you have problems with him, I want you to tell me.”

“He hates it when I talk to his friends.”

The submissive answer gave Adrian a fresh curl of anger. While Kenn probably wasn’t responsible for all of it—life had a way of beating a woman down and using her up—he was the main reason for it now. Adrian was suddenly furious with the Marine for the first time since he’d come here. “I am not his friend! I am the guardian of this refugee camp and you are now a member. He has to follow the rules.” Adrian looked at her pointedly. “I’ll do what I have to, remove who I’m forced to, if it will mean we survive.”

Angela was aware that Marc would be the one asked to leave. That couldn’t happen. It was a dealbreaker and she let Adrian know that with two simple sentences. “Thank you for giving Marc a chance, despite everything Kenny will say. I probably won’t stay here without him.”

Adrian snorted. Kenn had already lost her, he just didn’t know it yet. “Don’t thank me. Marc will have a tough time of it until

people decide whether he's a gentleman helping a lady or a fox in the hen house."

"It's not like that. We're friends."

"Yes. How close?"

Angela couldn't force herself to lie, not to Adrian.

When she glanced away, Adrian frowned. "I've been around you for a brief time, and I already know this will cause trouble."

"Then give me my son and we'll go!"

Adrian was surprised to feel a small chill at the coldness of her tone. *Damn, she has a strong heart! A fighter's heart...*

Adrian stifled a gasp as her full place in Safe Haven's future was revealed. It was bigger than just the magic he'd asked for and already begun to plan around. She was the fighter, the female warrior he'd dreamed of. She had chains, but she was fighting them. He would finish what Marc had obviously started and set her free. Hope breathed life into his deepest plans. Immense and endless, they began to grow. "Go to the medical tent and fill out a paper John has. I'll get Charlie."

Adrian was glad to see unhappiness cross her face, but he was unsure if his bluff would work. What if she did leave? Would he go after her and beg?

"Wait."

When she put a hand on his arm, electricity sparked. He felt her flinch before she let go.

"Please, don't make us leave."

Adrian hated it that he'd upset her.

"I'm sorry."

He was sorry too. "I never said you weren't worth all the hassle, but you are free to go whenever you want. You need to understand that."

Angela, now studying the dusty ground, answered in a cool tone. "Thanks for the lesson."

Aware that he'd hurt her somehow, the sarcastic words made him blow out a breath of frustration, not sure how to handle her.

Angela let the new, stronger female respond. “As a woman first. Always. And then as...someone who hasn’t agreed to stay and play these games with you yet.”

It was the second time she’d called him on that, reminding him that she didn’t intend to grovel for a spot near him like the rest of his people. “This will be a good place for you. I’m sure of it.”

Angela had to smile. He was handsome when he was happy.

Adrian sighed. That one small wave of happiness from her could steal a man’s mind and make him obsessed to create it again and again. “Come on. We’re attracting too much attention.”

That made her happiness fade. She followed him to the western corner, relieved when the main camp and all the people were out of sight between truck trailers and the trees. She could still hear the babble of voices though.

Gunshots rang out; her hand flew down, impressing Adrian with how fast she got her holster open. “It’s just target practice.” He used a subtle gesture to deny the guard already moving their way to defend him. “There’s a contest tomorrow, so that will be an all-day sound. Usually there’s a class with more words and less shooting.”

Angela didn’t ask questions, not wanting to draw more attention to her gun than she already had. If there was a class, then they also had a test to carry one. She would have to fight him on giving hers up, even temporarily. Since Versailles, the .357 was never out of reach, even when she was with Marc. It was a lesson she’d learned too well.

The parking area was crammed with a small lake of cars, trucks, jeeps, vans, and bikes, almost all sporting tattered American flags. The hoods were up on many of them. She saw a guard leaning under the front of a long, brown wagon. She recognized him from the QZ. The former state trooper was every cop who had pulled her over, from his suspicious green eyes to the hat line on his head that refused to grow his brown curls any longer. Even the Beretta slung high on his hip was familiar. She gave him a restrained nod.

Adrian frowned. “Where’s your help?”

Neil gave an irritated roll of his shoulders, shooting a surprised glance at Angela. "Sleeping it off would be my guess. Said he had the runs."

Adrian smirked. "Yeah, I hear you can catch that now from a bottle while at the bonfire until 2 am getting bombed."

"That's about what I thought. He said he'd do an extra shift to make up for it." Neil grinned. "I switched him to refueling all next week."

Angela understood no one wanted that chore when they both laughed.

Adrian turned back to Angela. "I'm going to give Neil a hand. You can hang here or wait at the mess if you're ready for a break."

Angela untied her sweater and tossed it over the handlebars of a nearby Harley. "Marc taught me basic car care. I'll help too. What's first?"

"You'll follow behind Neil and add what's on the window while I fill them up..." Adrian was unable to keep the doubt from his voice. It was something none of the women here would volunteer for.

Angela felt insulted. "How long does this usually take?"

"Two and a half hours, the last time we had three people." Neil checked his watch. Neither man pretended they were doing anything but waiting to see if her words could be believed.

Holding back a stray curl against the breeze, Angela read the window.

*1 qt oil. 1/2 gal water. Wash fluid. Gas used? Left rear tire.*

The loaded dolly was nearby. She got what she needed, ignoring the men. She knew this had become a test; she wanted to pass it.

She tilted the oil bottle in, leaving it, then added the water to the radiator while the oil drained in. She replaced both caps, then threw her trash in the bag on the dolly. She filled the washer fluid to the first line, but the tire was someone else's headache. *I'm not doing that.*

Angela started to go to the next car, then stopped. She closed the hood, then wiped the things she'd done off the glass before pulling the dolly to the next vehicle.

Their approval was obvious.

“Women usually act the way you'll treat them.” Angela saw agreement instead of the scorn she had expected. Her heart eased. *I can tell this is a good place. I can build a life here. Will Kenny let me?*

## 2

Three hours later, they were on the last vehicle—a red, white, and blue semi with a shotgun under the front seat. At Angela's request, the two men had shown her where the other fluids went. Now she was standing on a foot rail, with Adrian and Neil on the bumper; they were all leaning inside the big rig—a bit closer than some would have approved of.

Angela was surprised to feel protected instead of smothered with a stranger on each side of her. She opened her mouth to ask another question... Alarm bells sounded. Uncomfortable nervousness flooded back.

“You can dump it in now.”

She didn't respond.

Adrian gave Neil a shake of his head when he would have asked if she was okay.

Neil snapped his mouth shut, watching her eyes turn a smoky, roiling blue. *Well, that's...different.*

Angela let them feel her fear. “Kenny's watching us.”

Both men immediately stepped down to meet him with hard glares.

Angela stayed behind them, washing her hands and listening hard. *How mad is he?*

“John said I'm clear.” Kenn tried to stay blank, but he knew it wasn't succeeding.

Adrian stared with cool blue eyes. “Kyle is off point at noon; you're on until 6pm. Jeremy's back from the supply run. Make

sure it all gets squared away. Then I want John's report on the new people. Ask Chris if we're doing meat tomorrow. If so, we'll need that other refer truck ready by morning. Schedules end for the entire camp tomorrow at midnight, so I suggest you get on them today."

Kenn was now scribbling furiously to get it all.

Angela felt Adrian's anger as if it were her own. He'd added up the clues and was upset over what he'd come up with. He hadn't known. *How did Kenn hide it for so long? Did that mean Kenn was a different person here? Did I ruin his second chance by showing up?*

Kenn's thoughts were along the same lines. He was gone quickly, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

Angela could feel Adrian and Neil forming questions. She smiled brightly, retying her sweater around her hips with a woman's slow distraction. "Did we beat the time?"

Both men shook their heads, jaws tight, expressions unreadable.

"Missed it by half an hour."

Angela smiled brighter at Neil's thin tone. "Oh, well. I'll get better the more I do it."

Very aware of the neat way they were being manipulated—this tactic was used regularly on the camp—Adrian turned to Neil. "See you at lunch?"

"You know it." Neil was sure Kenn would hate the way Angela fell in on Adrian's right as they left.

Adrian checked his watch. "Ready for food yet?"

"For lasagna and garlic bread?" Angela chuckled. "I'd do dishes for that!"

"Me, too." Adrian liked it that she was taking the time to read signs they had posted. The sooner she learned the rules and settled in, the sooner they could get rolling toward the future. "Meet you in the mess in half an hour?"

Angela wasn't sure where she should go. "I'll wait in Charlie's tent, if that's okay?"

Adrian didn't waste his time telling her which one it was. She had tracked him across the country. She would find it. "You can roam now. People know you're new. They'll help you, but if there's a problem, have a guard call me."

Angela was embarrassed by the concerns running through his sharp mind. "I'll be fine."

Adrian's eyes narrowed. "If you don't tell me, one of my men will. I know everything that happens here." He walked away.

Angela didn't feel arrogance in those words, just pride and protection. She was encouraged. People no longer had a reason to tolerate a boss, yet they worked here, following Adrian's leadership as if he was their savior. She could see why they would feel that way. How many other refugee camps, if there were any, would have old people and kids that were well cared for? Adrian appeared to take the useful and the burdens alike, and still had respect for both. How many of these people had been left for dead before he had taken them in and cared for their needs?

*Most, I'd guess.* Angela went to her Blazer, nodding to people she was starting to recognize. She liked the feel of this place, the constant reminders of good days gone by. Her decision on that front was easy. *I want to belong here too. If Adrian has as much sway as he thinks, there's a lot I can do for him.*

### 3

Adrian went straight to his tent, eager to write it all down while everything was fresh in his mind. He drank a Coke and smoked on one of the blunts he'd rolled last night while heartburn was keeping him up. He'd been smoking a lot lately, trying to ease the worry. In the future, this sort of thing wouldn't be allowed on a daily basis for any of Safe Haven's members. Right now, it helped their grief, and it was better than staying too drunk to function, but it was an evasion of life that had to end. *I'll handle it when the camp is ready.* Long before that, they would have to accept Angie for what she was.



Adrian had done a lot of things during his military career, including four years in an underground lab in the Utah desert. He had been involved in top secret programs that had tried to create people like her. The successes were minor. The best had been a kid who could tell which direction the enemy was, but the things he had witnessed today were genuine, natural. She hadn't spent time in a lab or taken chemicals. Adrian tried hard to record it all. She was the first descendant he'd come across since the war, though her son could also be put in that category once he came of age. Adrian had no real proof, only odd words and odd moments, but he knew it as sure as he knew they would find no place on American soil that was safe enough to rebuild.

The radiation was already making slow changes, working on the smaller animals and plant life, lingering in the air they were all breathing. The mutations would come next, which made Angela a crucial link in his circle. She would help him figure out where they went from here, as long as he didn't push too fast. If the camp found out she could read thoughts, she would never be trusted. Eventually, they would drive her out despite his support. It could get tense, but it could also be perfect. If he was careful, the camp would accept her as another much-needed doctor. Through that, she would get the chance to become more. He would see to it, especially if her gifts were what he was hoping. If she got flashes of the future, he would give her whatever she needed to stay. *The rules won't apply to her.*

Adrian changed his gasoline-splattered clothes, then stepped outside. As he cleared the row of kids' campers, he spotted Angela going toward the QZ with a heavy looking black duffle bag. She stopped at the tape.

Marc came from the QZ tent with the wolf heeling alertly. Adrian knew he wasn't the only one who felt the sharp, yearning connection between them. How close were they? A thousand miles was a long time to resist such a strong attraction, especially when the only rules a person had to obey now were their own.

Marc stopped with a few feet of space between them.

Angela sat the kit down and pushed it under the tape with her dusty boot. “I packed you a few things.”

Marc could feel Adrian studying them. “Thanks. You’re not being quarantined?”

“No.” She stared at the ground. “You out today?”

“No.”

Their mouths said the right things, but Adrian read between the lines. He had forgotten about Marc, too excited at having Kenn’s mate turn out to be even more valuable than he was. She didn’t want Kenn. She wanted Marc. Life would be full of sinkholes and black ice for the three of them until things were settled.

Adrian turned toward the mess but caught Angela’s motion. He waited, watching as she said something to Marc. Sparks of attraction flew between them until she left, breaking the magic.

Angela could feel Adrian’s disapproval as she caught up to him. She let out a soft sigh. “I won’t give up my...friendship with Marc to stay and help you. We should have that clear now.”

Adrian waited, hoping she would trust him with something important to who she really was on the inside.

“Marc and I grew up together. He’s the only person I trust without reservation. When we...lost touch, it almost killed me.” She drew on her courage. “I understand your dreams, Adrian Mitchel, and yes, I could be useful to you, but I won’t trade anything or make deals. What I give will be willing or not at all.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, but if I can give you what you want, I will.” Adrian pushed, needing to know there was a chance at that future. “My word on it.”

Angela found Kenn in the front of the mess line, where a gusting breeze was cooling the sweaty skin of those breaking for lunch from various chores, games, and activities. “I want my family back. To give me that, you’d have to tear apart your framework.”

Adrian assumed she meant Kenn couldn’t be here anymore. “That, I can’t do.”

“And that’s why there will be no deals between us. You can’t give me what I want the most.”

Adrian knew she was right—for now. But it wouldn’t always be so. He knew where she belonged. He would form his plans to make sure she got what she wanted, providing his assessment of Marc went well. Adrian frowned. *Kenn also has to be handled.* “You can’t just end it with him and move on?”

Angela snorted, hand rising to her lip. “Not without one of us dying.” She stepped into the mess line, not looking at him or the angry Marine studying them from the center table. She wanted to be certain about Adrian before she turned her gifts over; she slipped into the leader’s thoughts, concentrating on appearing normal.

Adrian felt as if someone was squeezing his chest. It was a struggle to act like nothing was wrong. Her response was a confirmation. Kenn was a woman beater. How long before the camp found out, forcing him to banish one of his own? He had put complete faith in Kenn. These people would no longer trust his judgment. It was only a matter of time before it fell. All it would take would be for the truth to come out publicly or for Kenn to hit her again. His newest dream didn’t stand much of a chance if Angela was a battered woman.

*They won’t excuse it if you do?*

It took his full concentration not to show a facial response as Angela lit up a mental doorway between them. *Never. Most of these people were lucky to escape the draft trucks and then the gangs. They won’t go back to that environment, and I won’t condone it, in any form.*

She swallowed a deep frown. *We’ve called a truce. It’s some time for thinking, making choices. He’s fighting old demons too. I might be able to get him to let go, but it will take time.*

She felt Adrian’s despair. The tide of misery was heavy enough to crush them all.

The witch jumped forward. *Where’s your will now?*

Adrian’s bitter fury rushed out to greet her. *I have enough will for all of you! I’m not a problem.*

Angela saw his anger, and the immediate denial that he had given up. *I accept your rules and your hospitality, but Marc is my protection. We'll be careful, but I won't sacrifice him. Nothing has to change for your camp, except they'll have a new awareness that some of us were weak before the war. It can all work out as long as Kenn sticks to your rules and our truce.*

Adrian brought up a thick wall around his mind, attempting to shut her out. He had no doubt she would get through. He was just curious how long it would take. He concentrated on finding a doorway. They'd been talking on her connection. He labored to open his own and still appear normal to those who were watching but leaving them alone. The camp assumed he was feeling her out, but he was giving her time to check them out without as much pressure.

*Is there no chance for you two?* Almost breaking a sweat, he closed the mental door in relief. *I have to start practicing again.*

Angela moved up with the line, trying not to think about how it felt to be with someone like herself. She would do that later when she had time to cherish it. *That's what he expects, but I don't think I can even try.*

The trapped tone came through as clear as if she'd spoken aloud. His wall was nothing to her, but her obvious discontent bothered him. It made him feel like he already wasn't doing right by her. Angela wanted him to stay out of it and he would for now, but Adrian hoped she didn't expect that to last. *Fixing people is in the fine print of my job description.*

## Chapter Forty-Four

# My Job

### 1

Angela sat between Kenn and Adrian, more than a little uncomfortable as she drank her tea. The meal had been good; the garlic bread had been great. She enjoyed the full stomach and remained silent, smoking while the five men talked shop. She knew all their names now. They'd exchanged friendly banter when she sat down. These were Adrian's closest men, his chain of command. She was aware that Kenn was powerful here, more...

*Pissed*, the old Angela filled in.

She let out a sigh of agreement she knew was heard by the observant men around her, but she couldn't help it. The anger was rolling from Kenn. Everything she'd said and done today had made it worse, but Adrian's introduction as they sat—"You guys remember Angie, Charlie's mom and our new doctor."—had been the straw pushing on the camel's hump. She thought Adrian had done it on purpose. She liked him for it even as part of her wished he'd just said wife to calm Kenn down.

Adrian glanced at Angela. "Feel like answering some questions about where you've been? It's makes my job easier to have a lot of information."

She felt Kenn tense; she paled. "Uh, sure."

"Have you heard of any place safe to go?"

"No. It's better right here than any place we came through."

"Mutations?"

She nodded, thinking the constant noise made this place feel like a crowded amusement park... *Is that intentional?* "We saw some kind of spider-cricket cross near Kirksville, but the big ants were in every state we passed through."

Adrian wrote it down.

Angela forced herself to keep going, sure he needed to know these things. “Ohio had a weird mold climbing up everything, even telephone poles, along with very aggressive rats and flooding. Most of Indiana was burnt up. Illinois...” She hesitated as the dead eyes of her first kill flashed through her mind.

Adrian shook his head when Kenn would have said something sharp.

Angela blinked away the past. “Sorry. Illinois was ugly. I don’t think we saw one good thing in the whole state.” She went rigid in pain. “There was a rabbit, but I’m pretty sure it died too. Illinois and Nebraska were killing fields.”

She gave him a brief rundown of their battle with the wolves and then fell silent, liking most of the thoughts floating around the table.

“What about radiation?”

She answered in detail, but her escort wasn’t mentioned.

“Thanks.” Adrian went back to handling business with his men.

Angela swept the guards in view, recognizing patterns and weapons from her training with Marc. Seeing them was a comfort.

Adrian noted how she stared at one part of the camp and stayed on it until she figured out how things worked before moving on. *Like an Eagle would*. How much real training had Marc been able to give her?

“Are you going to defend your title tomorrow?”

Doug’s question drew Angela’s attention.

“Yeah.” Kenn leered. “Be at the practice if you want to know how much I’m going to win by.”

The table erupted in challenges, making it the place everyone else wanted to be.

“In that case, excuse me while I go rig the targets.”

They laughed again as Neil left.

Angela was surprised by her longing to be a regular at Adrian’s table instead of a guest. The sights and sounds of everyday life here were bittersweet. She both loved and loathed the voices lifted in conversations, the low mutters of curiosity and disapproval, the

almost constant crunch of footsteps as the guards monitored their surroundings for problems. It was worlds away from how she'd spent the last months, but every peal of mirth from the kids' area sent fresh pain into Angela's heart. If she had been with these people, she wouldn't have lost her baby. Adrian would have been able to help. Angela didn't need the witch to mutter it. She already knew.

Adrian, and others, noticed that she and Kenn didn't speak to each other, didn't even make eye contact. Adrian saw her wince at the can of Mountain Dew against her lip. He frowned. *I'm going to talk to Kenn. If he gives the wrong answers, I might do exactly what she wanted and tear apart my framework.* "Ready?"

"Sure." Angela got up and cleared her mess.

Kenn took out his notebook, stalling. The more time alone with Adrian she had, the sooner the blond man would figure it all out. "Will you be at the practice?"

"We'll be by, but I have a lot of stops left." Adrian's voice was tight. "I'm not shooting anyway. I'm officiating."

"John says the woman, Samantha, is all right for the most part. Severely underweight, dehydrated, exhausted. Says she'll be out of the QZ by nightfall. Said he's taking his time on the men, especially the one Samantha came in with."

Angela could hear the others at the table wondering why Kenn hadn't mentioned all that right away to ease Adrian's mind.

Adrian also caught it. "Have you gotten his *full* yet?"

"No. They're separated. I told the guards to come get me if they're seen together, but she's out." Kenn gestured. "John gave her another sedative."

Adrian nodded. "Collect his story first thing in the morning. The earlier the better."

"You want me to do it?" Kenn was surprised and pleased.

"You've been with me enough times. Make sure I get the report."

"You know it."

To the camp, Adrian appeared to be fully behind the Marine.

Angela knew Adrian planned to have the new couple watched anyway, and maybe even talk to the new man himself. She was comforted a bit under all the misgivings, understanding this was to remind Kenn of how much he was trusted.

Kenn was indeed warmed by the public display of his high place, wanting Angela to be impressed.

Angela was, but not with Kenn. Adrian obviously knew how to handle her temperamental Marine.

As they left, the men at the table noticed she and Kenn hadn't even acknowledged each other's presence. There wasn't love between them. Even couples who fought all the time had more warmth. Confused and getting more suspicious, none of the guards lingered, each wanting Kenn to feel their disapproval.

He did. Kenn's heart was thumping as they fell out of sight. Angela had been here less than six hours and it had already begun to damage his place. *What am I supposed to do now? I never planned on her surviving.*

## 2

“Where to next?”

Adrian led them to a corner of the long camp with only a single perimeter guard in sight. “Your boy should be working outside with the dogs soon. I thought we'd watch.”

Angela's pleasure lit up her face.

Adrian forced himself to glance away. She had a man. Two of them, actually, and she had won over almost all of his chain of command in a few short hours. If she was a demon in disguise, they were in trouble.

“I'm not; I won't.”

His brow arched as he glanced at her. “Won't what?”

“Play with your men.”

A little embarrassed, a feeling he didn't experience often, Adrian answered coolly. “You sure? We have a resident whore, but there'd be no competition.”



Stung, the witch surged forward, sending out a sharp wave of need.

Adrian sucked in a breath as vanilla wrapped around his body like an inviting hand.

“Only two men have ever been between my legs and either of them would kill to be there again. A whore, *I* have never been.”

Adrian fought the desire to take her up on the challenge. “It was a tasteless joke. I ap—”

“Don’t.” Angela stopped him, red haze clearing. “I’m the one who should apologize. I haven’t...fed well. It weakens my control.” It was hard for her, even letting him have that much information. She glanced away. What was it about Adrian that made her want to spill her guts?

Adrian lit a cigarette, wanting to offer whatever she needed.

Angela’s voice was distressed. “I hate to do it. It’s...intense.”

Adrian knew she had to power her gifts. He would take care of that. “I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“I didn’t mean to provoke you.”

“My men couldn’t keep up with you anyway.”

Angela blushed at the compliment, smiling.

The tension eased for those observing.

As they started walking again, the silence grew thick. Angela stopped, looking around as the witch whispered.

She swept the tents near the showers, the curious groups of people, then settled on a sexy redhead in calf high black boots and a short red summer dress. The woman was sneering, locked onto Adrian as she sauntered toward them.

Angela felt the man at her side tense and took a step forward, not questioning the need to do battle for him.

Adrian wasn’t the only one who noticed.

Tonya had been watching them all morning, anger and jealousy growing at each introduction. She moved in front of them, recognizing Kenn’s woman for what she was—a threat. Tonya already suspected Adrian’s interest was more personal than business. “So, who’s the Barbie?”

Adrian blew out a sigh of annoyance that hid his eagerness to witness Angela handle this. First he had to tell her it was okay to do so and hope she took the hint. “This is Angela, our new doctor. *Useful*. This is Tonya. She’s no one. *Useless*.”

Tonya’s painted face iced over; she gave Angela a glare that said meanness was coming.

“So, you’re the timid little mouse he didn’t want enough to go back for.”

Angela gave a knowing glance as the witch whispered the accent was faker than the lashes. “You must be the resident whore Adrian spoke of...” Angela’s smirk widened. “And the piece of ass Kenn’s too ashamed to admit to.”

Adrian laughed aloud. He couldn’t help himself.

Tonya’s cheeks flushed to the color of her dress. “He never said that!” The accent was gone now.

“Didn’t have to. My Marine likes women with their mouths and legs always open. I just added up the clues.” Angela leaned in. “When I’m threatened, I don’t play games. I go for blood...but in this case, he’s not worth the effort. You want him? He’s yours.” Angela moved away.

Adrian followed, sniggering at the unusual flash of fear he saw in Tonya’s reaction of silence. “Next time, be nice.” He caught up to Angela.

“Sorry. Some people rub me the wrong way. She’s going to be one of them.”

Adrian chuckled, mood growing better by the minute. “Tonya’s a snake. She has no real friends here.”

“That does not surprise me.”

They slipped under the caution tape that wound around the entire perimeter. As they got out of sight of camp, Angela heard male tones lifted in excitement. She stiffened. Five long semis were parked bumper to bumper, blocking her view.

Adrian turned to her. There were no words, only thoughts.

After a minute, she agreed, liking it he would talk to her this way. “You have my word. I won’t discuss it with anyone, not even Charlie or Marc.”

He led her around the trucks.

Angela understood the need for secrecy right away. It looked like a military base. Two dozen sweating men were decked out as if they were training to go to war. Closed on three sides, the huge grassy area was under an enormous green canopy, with dark canvas walls that flapped in the gusting wind. The open side was hidden by the semis, and covered by that single perimeter guard. When Angela saw the rolled tarp on top, she understood if a warning was called, the tarp would be dropped to hide the training.

“Welcome to Fort Haven.”

Angela couldn't keep up with everything she saw at first, eyes drawn to the flag over the doorway. She could feel the power of the place. “This is special to you, to your vision of the future.”

Adrian nodded. “This is the most important part. The camp thinks I'm training a police force back here, but it's really the new world's first army. *My* army.”

Angela felt a shiver of connection.

“We survived because we're strong. I encourage that, but I also teach them honor and strength of mind. They spend two hours a day here, usually a bit at each area, being assessed, guided, taught. I've made it the most respected job for a man again, and only those who believe in what I'm doing are able to climb the ranks.”

“You stack the deck.”

Adrian didn't consider lying. “Of course. I walk a fine line for it, but the good of this camp always comes first. I promised them safety, and the future is part of that. A well-trained group of soldiers is a must-have, especially in a world where the old government could crawl out of their holes at any time and demand control over everything again. Most people wouldn't have a choice, but we will.”

His conviction was clear, as was his belief in himself and these men. She was humbled by how deeply he carried his American spirit. “Show me your army.”

The sun was no longer able to fight its way through the grit as they stepped into the tent. They kept out of the way of the man

running full speed around the edges. Nearby, a guard held a clipboard and a stopwatch.

There were three cubicles set up to the far right that Angela couldn't see into from where they stood. They were also being watched by a guard. In front of them, four men labored on big home gyms, while a fifth man was trying, with some success, to tread the length of a tightrope tied to two low cinder blocks that were the size and shape of ten manhole covers stacked together.

A table sat next to the gym, covered in guns and ammo. The men there were deep in concentration as they speed loaded their weapons at the guard's call. They were blindfolded, like Marc had made her do almost from the start. He said vision was needed in other places during a fight, that hands had to know what to do.

To the far left, walls of straw bales formed a neat barrier all the way up to the roof. *What's in there?*

"We'll watch for a minute, then slip out the back."

Angela noticed none of the men had glanced their way. Were they taught to block everything out? *Is that wise?*

They rounded the cubicle corner. Angela saw monitors and game systems set up, with cords all running under the tent...to where? If it was a generator, it was so quiet she couldn't hear it. To a battery system of some sort? Was it solar? That's what she and Marc had used during the trip here.

"Son of a bitch!"

Angela's hand flew to her gun, startled at the shout.

Adrian put a finger on her arm as men stood, came their way.

"Stand down." His tone said he was pleased by their reactions.

Angela flushed, realizing she was the threat they were responding to. Her cheeks stayed red. She'd underestimated them. They had been aware of her from the second she'd come in.

"Angela is one of us. Resume your sets."

They all returned to what they'd been doing, but they stared, shocked at the implications of his words.

Adrian stopped her from apologizing. "Don't be sorry. It shows me who's serious and who's still learning. Come on. This is the fun side of the room."

The cubicles each held a different game, a different type of training. The first man was using plastic guns to shoot at ducks and clay pigeons—a classic as far as she was concerned. The second man was ambushing the enemy on a strategic game that had been popular before the war; the last cubicle grabbed and held her attention.

The man inside was one of the guards who had responded to her flinch. Tall, he wore no shirt over his swimmer's body. His lean, sweaty hips disappeared into army fatigues. He was beautiful. For a moment, the woman inside was frozen.

The redhead stood on a white mat with colored designs, adjusting mirrors and earpieces as the instructions challenged him to hit the arrow on the mat that corresponded to the ones set to flash on the screen. Angela observed as the round began.

His movements were graceful, sensual arms flexing in the rhythm he was hearing. She wondered what it was as the hunger inside sniffed eagerly.

The man jumped, scoring a bonus. As he turned, hips thrusting provocatively, their eyes met.

He stumbled.

Seth tore his from hers to locate his place in the mirrors.

Angela expected him to turn around so he could concentrate, but the sweaty guard only tried not to make eye contact, body moving in unspoken invitation.

Angela slipped into his thoughts to discover the haunting strains of *Hotel California*. It was one of her favorites.

There was magic in the way he controlled every muscle in his body, not missing a beat of the dance as the tempo increased. Angela felt herself swaying along. Electricity sparked every time he glanced at her.

Adrian could feel the desire rolling off the woman at his side. Seth was responding to her silent pull, though he was trying hard not to. Adrian wondered if the lust in the air came from her or the hunger she'd spoken of.

Adrian's thought sank in. Angela shoved the witch back into her cell.

Seth slid the earpiece out so he could hear them. He already felt as if he knew her.

“You okay?”

Angela nodded at Adrian’s question. “Sorry. Dancing runs in our blood.”

Her tone was rough, sexy. When Seth tripped again, losing the round, Adrian sighed. “You can do it all again.”

Seth stared at the woman. “Whenever she says.”

Adrian rolled his eyes as he stepped by the cubicles. “Kenn has no idea how full his hands are. Come on.”

Angela followed quickly, embarrassed and disappointed in herself. She could feel Adrian’s disapproval as they moved to the far left of the spacious tent area. She could feel Seth still staring at her. It was almost as if she knew him...

Adrian’s frown was drawing notice; he smoothed out his expression, but he would have to talk to her about the men in her life. While he was at it, he would also bring up control of her pull on his army. It would have to be dealt with if she meant to stay and help him.

Adrian heard her sigh.

“That won’t fix it all. It’s drawn to kindred spirits and it’s...famished.”

“Then we’ll have to find a way to feed it that you can tolerate, won’t we?” Adrian soothed her even while telling her what she didn’t want to hear.

Reluctantly nodding, Angela was willing to leave it at that. They slipped out through a rear corner of the tent.

Adrian checked his watch. “To your right.”

Angela spotted her son’s thin frame through the spruce trees. He was leading a beautiful black and white Collie around a series of obstacles, followed by two other teenage boys with similar animals.

“He just became our top dog trainer. He’s good with them.”

The teenagers were working on commands. It pleased them both when the collie obeyed without hesitation. It was clear Charlie had a connection to the dog.

Angela studied her son as he joked with the other boys while teaching them. He had been happy here, cared for. *I owe Kenn for that.* “Do you have all the teens do this, or just certain ones?”

Adrian leaned closer to talk; her scent—sweet, thick vanilla—came to him. It was intoxicating. He let his nose have its fill as he answered. “I try to put everyone to work. There’s so much we need, I can’t waste even one warm body, but things like this matter more than others. I picked him personally.”

Angela frowned. “Charlie’s trying to listen.”

Adrian recognized the moment for what it was, surprised.

Angela lifted a brow, voice cool. “Tell me you didn’t already know what my choice would be.”

He shook his head. “I can’t do that. My offer is amazing. No one says no.”

They were silent for a long moment, both subtly observing the teenager and each other.

“He’s upset.”

“I brought along the person he also least expected.” Angela grunted. “He’ll adjust, once he understands no one has to die.”

“I’ll keep him busy.”

“His dad’s good at stuff like this too.”

Adrian understood the hint. Marc would also need something to do until he settled in. “I’ll keep that in mind.” And he would. She wouldn’t stay without Marc. “You’ll talk to Charlie, try to explain things?”

“He’s not ready to listen yet. When he is, I will.”

They watched the boys groom the dogs.

Adrian was thinking of his good fortune to have them both as eventual members of his army. Charlie had the paler skin of his mother, the full lips of his father, and yet, he had Kenn in him too, in the rounded face and the quicker temper. The teenager had earned an extra day of shit labor last week for fighting with his tent mates. He now had his own next to Kenn’s. Adrian was almost sure it had been on purpose.

“I think one of them said something about Kenny. He felt bound to defend him. It doesn’t feel like he wanted to.” Angela didn’t want Adrian to think Charlie was a troublemaker.

Adrian didn’t. “He’s a good kid. You’ve done an excellent job.”

Angela’s frown wasn’t what he expected; neither were her words.

“He’s got a nasty side, too. He learned it well. At some point, he’ll push for freedom from all of us.” Angela searched for her smokes. “Probably sooner than I think. He has a lot of anger under that obedient demeanor. He’ll find an outlet.”

Adrian smirked. “I suspect we both know who that’ll be.”

“Yeah, his dad.”

They shared a smile of understanding.

“Thank you. It helps me to know he’s had these things. I owe you a great deal.” Angela tested him.

The ground shook under Adrian’s feet as she slid into his mind.  
*I’d pay it any way you want.*

Adrian was a bit winded from the shiver of lust that dove into his balls. “It’s why I’m here. I expect no payment.”

“Thank you.”

He sensed her gratitude had multiple meanings and didn’t ask her to clarify. He would figure it out in time, but Adrian already assumed it was connected to his XO. Everything now depended on Kenn.

### 3

Kenn was in charge of the camp; he was the Eagle on Point. It was a post he usually loved, but not today. He’d watched Adrian and Angela as they moved through camp, upset they were talking so much when she would share nothing with him. People had been tripping over themselves to tell him about Angela’s exploits. Their stories were fanning his flames.

She had flirted, said she wasn’t his wife, turned her back on Adrian while he was talking to her, smoked a joint, had a



confrontation with Tonya, and made Adrian bark at her at least twice. One of those had happened in a training tent full of Eagles, but not one of them could tell Kenn why. The anger was consuming. The camp was already talking about how tense he was now that his woman had arrived. The questions were blunt. Some of them had been outright provocative. It had finally toned down when he'd grabbed Danny and shoved him into a truck. Kenn had walked away by picturing Adrian's reaction, but word had spread faster.

By late afternoon, almost everyone in Safe Haven was nervous or curious about his lack of answers.

## Chapter Forty-Five

# Yes, You Will

### 1

**T**he next hours were a dusty blur for Angela as they talked to curious people whose names she was too nervous to remember. She was astounded by everything Adrian had going on here. There were driving classes, kids and adults in teaching circles, groups of women changing tires, karate and archery near the livestock area, kickball where the football had been earlier. Everywhere, she found healthy, normal people coming and going, talking, laughing, living. It was almost overwhelming to someone who had been alone with one man for six weeks, and by herself for twice that long.

The longer she and Adrian walked, the further the trip here seemed. She was overjoyed to be with her son, but being around so many strangers was hard. She considered telling Adrian she wanted to go to her tent, but she forced herself to hang on. She had figured out these hours were an evaluation. The open nosiness was difficult compared to the quiet privacy she'd had on the way here though; some of the questions were outright nasty. It was harder to keep from saying the wrong thing as the day wore on.

Adrian was pleased with her. She had been politely interested, easily sidestepping questions about Kenn and Marc. She was adept at distracting even the most persistent people, drawing them into discussions of things closest to their hearts. Adrian was certain she would win them over if given enough time, but Kenn was going to have problems. Angela wasn't even close to the weak, inept woman Kenn had hinted couldn't have survived, thus his reason for not undertaking the hazardous trip back to Ohio. The Marine had left her to survive on her own. People would recognize that quickly. At the least, it would cost him respect and leave

unanswered questions, like why didn't he want her here? She was smart, useful. What hadn't he wanted Adrian to know? From there, clues would fill in the blanks if they searched enough. The Eagles were already becoming aware that Kenn had lied to all of them. After watching Angela, it was hard to miss. Adrian felt the anger at Kenn growing with each stop they made. The Angela they were meeting was also more alert minded than the other females here. The only time Adrian saw her hesitate, except when around Kenn, was as they headed to the shooting area.

Dusk came on around 6pm, with heavy rainclouds rolling over the distant South Dakota landscape in a solid wall. The center pool was lit and blazing, along with eight charred garbage cans around the corners of the long camp. It drove away some of the darkness, but not enough. Angela stopped at a feeling of cold danger, hand dropping to her gun.

Adrian took notice of the intense stare she shared with a nearby guard. He wasn't surprised when the radio lit up a second later.

"Permission to double the sentries and roll in the camp?"

Adrian pushed a button on his belt. "Roger, ten and two."

Angela was once again grateful to Marc for all he'd taught her on the way here. "Channel switch?"

"Very good. What did you tell him?"

Angela lit a Marlboro, studying the shadows. "There's someone spying on this camp from one of the houses on that hill."

The hill in sight was at least five miles away. Adrian relaxed visibly. He tapped a message to Kyle, not needing to ask if the spy was bad. He knew from the way she'd reacted.

Adrian got them moving again, wondering if it was coincidence that Seth was who she had alerted first. Did she know Seth was his secret protection, or had they formed a bond this afternoon?

"Both." Angela frowned at him. "Why aren't you keeping me out?"

Adrian returned her frank stare. "I don't feel like I need to. Couldn't if you wanted in anyway, right?"

“There are ways.” She stared at the ground.

“I know some of them.” He shrugged. “I won’t. It’s all or nothing with me. I believe in what I’m doing, and I believe you will too, in time. There will be hardships; I have no doubt of that. Our journey has just begun, but we’ll hold them together with our belief.”

“You’ve seen these things.”

It wasn’t a question. He smiled, sure she would settle in once he had her under his wing. “Every night shows me more. Will you come by my tent in the morning, around 11am?” Adrian felt her tense as a large group walked by, staring and whispering. “Give it time. That feeling will go away.”

She looked at him with a frightened girl’s allure. “You promise?”

Adrian gave it without hesitation. “Yes. I’ll handle it personally.”

A volley of gunshots rang out from the training area, making her twitch.

Adrian gestured. “That will go away too. You’ll end up with nerves of steel and a heart of ice.” *How fast can I settle her in?* Depending on her restlessness, her needs... Less time than it had taken with Kenn.

“I’ll get back to you on that.” They continued toward the loud noise, one Angela was dreading; it was the sound of people. Adrian said when the fires were lit, all but one activity was ended. The fires drew a crowd to the final entertainment of the evening. Laughter echoed, backdropped by voices lifted in conversation and support. They were all sounds she’d been missing for the entire time she was on the way here, but now that she had it, she wanted to be alone again.

Huge spotlights sat on roofs of trucks alongside a lit baseball field. Gunshots echoed almost continuously amid cheers and moans.

The crowd parted to let them through. The breeze was cooling, but Angela forced herself to leave her sweater around her hips

despite the chill, sure it would be viewed as a sign of weakness if she put it on right now.

Adrian leered at Tonya as he stepped by, but he didn't talk to her or any of the others. It had been a good day.

Angela was tense. They were in the thick of over a hundred laughing, talking, whispering, pointing, yelling, staring people now. It was too much...

*Easy, Adrian sent. In time, they'll be like your family.*

Angela was drawn along, hoping he was right.

More shots rang out as they neared the shoulder high, chain-link fence. Angela saw three tall men waiting by a row of bales, aware of more people turning to get a look at her as she came to a stop on Adrian's right. Doug was one of them. He and Neil were chuckling at something Kenn said.

*They really are his men. How can I get them to give Marc a fair chance?* She couldn't. They would have to judge for themselves.

*Maybe you should examine your Marine again,* the witch coaxed. *Be sure you're ready to let him go.*

She did, searching hard. The things she saw were surprising, disconcerting. *He's more relaxed than I've ever seen him.* Also, more attractive despite the anger she could feel. Concentrating on the targets, Kenny was tall, dark, and handsome. Even his small beer belly was gone. The stray curl of lust was an unwelcome reminder of her naivety. She had been attracted to Kenn when they had met. She had assumed that because it had been magical with Marc, it would be that way with any man. It was a reminder of when she'd been young, dumb, and easily fooled.

Her thoughts were interrupted by more gunfire.

It occurred to Angela that she felt safe enough with Adrian next to her that she had gotten lost in her own mind in a large crowd of strangers. Eager to be distracted from the choices she knew were coming, Angela stepped closer to the fence.

She missed the surprise of his men when Adrian followed, assuming the bodyguard's place behind and to her right.

"Bull's-eye!"

The crowd cheered.

Neil groaned, eliminated. As the targets were replaced, he joined Adrian and Angela.

“You remember Neil.”

She noticed Adrian hadn’t reminded her of anyone else’s name. She caught the hint that Neil was someone important here, but she didn’t need it. It was clear by all the attention he got and how he was everywhere, like Kenn, doing a little of everything.

“Now it gets good.” Neil watched Angela. He hadn’t heard all the stories when he’d met her earlier. He wanted to believe Kenn wouldn’t hit a woman, but there were witnesses. Not full members yet, their word wouldn’t matter to the camp, but it would to the Eagles.

“No fair! Kenn’s got his wife here!” Kyle gestured, grinning. “No good luck charms!”

Angela blushed at the mobster’s joke, but before she could respond with a joke of her own or deny the title, Kenn unloaded his mag.

“Eight bull’s-eyes! We have a tie!”

A loud cheer went up.

Adrian gave Neil a motion before climbing the fence. He dropped to the ground with an easy grace that made Angela’s stomach tighten. *Sexy*.

“Too late for another shooter?”

Kenn and Doug groaned as the camp members cheered in approval. Angela could feel them behind her, whispering, staring. She couldn’t help resting her hand on her gun. She could hear the conversations; most of them were about her. Marc and Kenn were being mentioned, but there were also words about the quarantine rule Adrian had broken...and her carrying a gun. Apparently, none of the other females here had passed the class yet. Angela understood she was the first woman he had shown this much interest in because some of them were wondering if it was personal. After a minute of consideration, she decided those few were idiots. Adrian wanted her gifts.

Neil slid closer so she could hear him through the fence. “Those three men outshoot everyone here. Adrian schedules these contests every few weeks. The camp loves it.”

The three remaining contestants lined up—first, second, and fifth in command—and began checking their weapons. As everyone fell silent, she saw how many reasons Adrian had for doing things like this. She was curious if his army knew half of them.

Doug stepped forward. Hoping to rattle Kenn, he waved to Angela.

Angela returned his greeting in embarrassment.

The crowd roared at the big man’s tactics.

Kenn wasn’t amused. He was determined not to miss a single shot. Right now, he knew where to put his anger.

“Bull’s-eye!”

Doug grinned as Kenn moved forward. Before he could tease again, the Marine pulled the trigger...then he emptied the mag.

The crowd muttered in surprise, then quieted as everyone waited for Adrian’s reaction.

“Put Doug’s targets up after the call.” Adrian shrugged at the big man who was now the one rattled. “You started it.”

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

The crowd was boisterous in their approval as Kenn leered at Doug. “I get the title and the girl.”

Doug was chuckling as he took his place.

As Kenn joined Angela along the fence, he gave Neil a nod, but they exchanged nothing else. Angela understood they weren’t friends.

Following orders, Neil stayed close.

When Kenn scowled, Angela caught his attention. “What title?”

“Best gun in camp.”

“Who has it now?”

Kenn was cocky. “You’re looking at him. Doug gets a chance to take it away tomorrow.”

Angela was flooded with bitterness. She had been fighting for her life, struggling to get here, and he'd been in all this safety, shooting for meaningless titles.

Doug took his turn, then studied the new woman while waiting for the call. She seemed upset. Anger hunting for a target, his mind zeroed in on Marc. *That split lip has to be from her new man. Kenn wouldn't break Adrian's rules.*

“Eight bull's-eyes! Tie!”

The crowd quieted as Adrian stepped forward.

Kenn glanced at Angela. “He tell you how things work here?”

Angela didn't look away from Adrian, who was lining himself up to the targets. “Enough.”

Her tone was full of warning. His bluff had been called. Adrian was an ardent supporter of women's rights. Kenn let out a sigh, hoping she would still keep her mouth shut. “Want a better view?”

Angela nodded, but before he could help her, she swung her body up and over, movement almost an exact copy of Adrian's.

Kenn scowled, knowing Neil had understood she didn't want him to touch her.

Angela did stay close to Kenn as they watched the shooting, but Neil sensed it was to soothe his ego, not because she wanted to.

Unlike the rest of his men, Adrian didn't hold and aim. He left his weapon in the holster, long fingers dangling. He drew in a graceful blur. The 9mm thundered, bullets slamming into the targets in rapid succession.

“Eight bull's-eyes!”

The crowd's enthusiasm was catching. Angela let herself be carried away, clapping. When Kenn stepped forward, she wished him luck.

He smiled at her, the first friendly moment they'd exchanged.

“He doesn't need any more!” Doug protested.

They all laughed as the targets were relocated. The tension was gone. Though it was only a brief second, Adrian recognized it.

Kenn pulled the trigger gently, repeatedly.

“Eight bull's-eyes!”



The crowd went wild.

Angela was glad she was now on this side of the fence as the crowd pushed and shoved closer. Neil was right. The people here loved this... Marc could match anything she'd witnessed so far. Would that help him?

Doug limped up to the line, not joking anymore. He wiped an arm across his sweaty face before lifting his gun. Bullets flew.

The immediate slump of his shoulders said Doug knew it wasn't good enough.

"Seven hits. Four bull's-eyes!"

The crowd cheered again, many chanting Kenn's name.

Doug shook his hand, as he'd done the last time he lost to Kenn, though now he didn't feel so bad. Kenn was just better with a gun. There was no changing that. "You're going to win."

Kenn picked out too many of the men glancing at Angela's long curls blowing in the cooling wind. She'd taken it out of the braid. "True that."

Angela winced, slapped by flashes of their past from that hauntingly familiar expression.

Adrian and Neil weren't the only ones who noticed her reaction.

Silence fell as Adrian stepped up, shooting straight from the hip.

"Eight bull's-eyes!"

The noise was deafening. Their worries gone for a small instant, the crowd roared approval. Angela was sure most of them didn't care who won. This shot-for-shot competition was what mattered.

The targets were relocated again.

Kenn returned to Angela's side, grinning at her in the rare, playful way that had never failed to get her to smile at his antics. He added an eye-cross, suddenly wanting to hear her laugh.

When she did, men turned toward her, drawn.

Kenn's scowl reappeared.

Adrian recognized the spark between them. He felt obliged to at least try to help his right hand man. *It would be easier if those*

*two stayed together.* Would a win here help the Marine? Kenn's happiness mattered too, and his loyalty had been steadfast... Adrian didn't think it would be enough to sway anything. Angela knew what she wanted, and it wasn't Marine number one. Still...

Adrian drew, firing. When he stopped, he met Kenn's surprised stare over the crowd.

"Seven bull's-eyes!"

There were cheers and groans.

Adrian shrugged. "Can't be perfect all the time."

Kenn took his place. "Just practice anyway." He blew out a breath and began firing.

"Eight bull's-eyes!"

Kenn locked onto Angela across the short distance. "Boo-yah!"

"Nice shooting." Adrian shook his hand, pulling his attention away.

Angela trembled as nightmares rushed over her. Kenny was always inventive when he won something he really wanted.

Neil had been watching her while pretending he wasn't. He didn't like any of the things he noticed.

"I'm sharing a tent with Charlie?"

Neil gave her a confused stare as the crowd broke up. "We assumed you'd be with Kenn."

Fire flashed in her eyes. "Assumed because he said so?"

"Yes." Neil felt like he'd done something wrong.

Kenn stared at Angela over the men congratulating him. *I'm almost in charge. Do what I say or you'll regret it!*

Angela turned to the frowning guard at her side. "Will you take me to Marc?"

"Yes." Neil's lips were thin as they climbed the fence. He didn't offer her a hand over as he might have with the other women here. He could sense her reluctance to touch or be touched. Time in Adrian's army had made all of them more sensitive to female moods. Neil's scowl grew. *Except for Kenn, apparently.*

Angela was able to feel Neil's disapproval. She leaned closer. "Marc has my medical bag."

“Uh-huh.” Neil had respect for Kenn, though he couldn’t say he liked the arrogant son of a bitch. He wasn’t afraid of him, but he was scared of destroying all Adrian had going, and of losing his second chance. Neil did hope no one would stress to Kenn that he had escorted his wife to another man’s tent. He didn’t need that type of drama.

Angela picked up the thought. She was unable to stay quiet this time. “We’re not married.”

Neil shrugged, not realizing he hadn’t spoken aloud. “It doesn’t matter. Common Law counts.”

“We weren’t that either.”

“That’s the way it appears.”

“Why? Because he says so? They don’t know me.”

“We listen and watch. Kenn introduced you as *his* Angela; you began talking to Adrian with no denial. Kyle even called you his wife tonight; you laughed with the rest of us. It’s how we judge lady or tramp here.”

“It’s not like that and I’m already tired of saying it! I haven’t even been here a full day. They know nothing.”

“What Kenn says, his respectability, gives it credit.” Neil steered them toward the QZ. “If Adrian hadn’t taken you under his wing today, you might have been viewed as a mother trying to get to her son by cheating on her husband.”

She was angry, he could feel it. Neil was sympathetic. He couldn’t wait to see her in the sun and happy, rather than the darkness and fear she was trapped in now. He hoped Adrian handled things faster with her. “Sorry, but I never sugarcoat the truth to people I like. Things are different now. You got a chance to show you can be one of us, and you did well, but your wolfman... It could get ugly for him if people think Kenn’s been reunited with his wife, but she has a boyfriend along. Be careful.”

Angela sighed in frustration, not understanding the rules.

Neil was stopped from further explanation by the tent flap opening.

The wolf padded out, studying the trooper. He crossed under the tape with no signs it existed to him. Angela wasn't sure that was the case, but she would never tell on Dog.

The wolf was followed by his master.

Angela dropped to one knee to greet the animal, lingering when she knew she shouldn't.

After a minute of tense silence, she stood to take the kit Marc had brought out, being careful not to touch him. "Thanks."

"Sure."

Angela tried hard to sound normal, aware of eyes on them in the dim light of the fires. "Guess you'll be out in the morning?"

"Yeah." Marc silently asked what was wrong, but she didn't respond. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't, not with a guard standing behind her. He clamped his lips shut. *Just be cool.*

"I'll see ya, Marc." Angela turned, feeling like this was goodbye for them.

The desperation made Marc open his mouth without knowing what might come out. "I'll wait until you decide, Angie. I'll accept it. If I can't, I'll leave."

Neil saw her freeze mid step, then actually stop herself from responding... From begging him to stay?

Angela forced herself to move, too aware of Neil missing nothing. He and Adrian were right. She would have to be careful.

Following Adrian's pattern from the contest, Neil walked a little behind and a bit to her right as she went to her son's tent, thinking hard about what he had witnessed. Their attraction was strong, undeniable, and it had taken less than a minute to recognize. *Does Kenn love her that way?*

Like his boss, Neil thought women should be happy and treated well. Everyone was wondering about the wound on her lips, especially since the couple had gone all day without speaking to each other though they'd been apart since the war.

Neil wanted to ask questions, but knew he wouldn't get answers from her. He would have a tough time believing anything she might say anyway. It would force him to do something, and a

mere sit down wouldn't be enough. For beating on Angela, Neil wanted Kenn dead.

Neil admitted to himself then that he was attracted to her, that he might even want her. Neil made himself think of the expression on Marc's face when he'd blurted he would wait for her. *Complete devotion*. It was what a woman like Angela needed. He envied the man a little. Marc... *Maybe I can get some answers there*.

## 2

Neil tapped on the tent flap. He had to wait for the wolf to move from the doorway before he could step inside. He immediately noticed the odor of gun oil. Soft, sad music came from a radio near a threadbare, camouflage sleeping bag. The broad shouldered man in the middle of it looked up from a stack of notebooks with a genuine grin.

“Thank God! Company!”

Neil chuckled politely. “I was here before it was a rule, but everyone says being in the Quarantine Zone sucks.” Neil scanned the man, thinking his first impression still held, even when the man was relaxed. It was old west cowboy crossed with modern day soldier. Marc wore it comfortably. The long black coat and faded hat were draped over the cot that Adrian had them put in each tent; everything else was folded or stacked on the end of his bed.

*His rack*, Neil corrected himself, noting the beautiful guns were off the man's hips, but within reach. The new guy seemed like more of a Marine at a moment of ease than Kenn had been when he'd first joined them.

Marc motioned to the empty tent. “Have a seat.”

Handing over one of the two bottles he had squeezed out of the cook, Neil sat. He crossed his legs to the left of the wolf now viewing him with golden eyes from the shadowy corner.

“What can I do for you?”

Neil stared him in the puffy, purple eye. “I've got some free time and thought I'd come meet the man who has Kenn so upset

he didn't miss a single shot even though it was only practice. The real contest isn't until tomorrow."

Marc sat the beer down, unopened. "You saw me earlier."

Neil decided the discolored jaw and scabbing knuckles added to Marc's image. *Is this man the hardass he appears to be?* "I've had time to think."

Marc tried to preempt the coming warning. "She just came to get her doctor bag. She hates to be without it." Marc knew it was more than that. Something had upset her, and he had been unable to help.

Neil didn't fall for it. "Bullshit. She was fine until Kenn looked at her after he won. Then she got scared and asked to be brought to you. The bag was the excuse most convenient to her."

Marc didn't answer. Kenn was already testing her new nerves. *Lovely.*

"What's going on between you two?"

Marc delivered a cool glare. "Nothing. Don't ruin her chances here over a reaction you probably imagined. You don't know them, not really. Kenn isn't the saint you all think he is."

Clearly, he'd spoken to people despite being in quarantine. Neil asked the question he desperately wanted an answer to. "Did he give her that split lip?"

"Ask her."

Neil frowned at the quick, curt answer. "She won't talk to me yet. Right now, I'm on his side as far as she's concerned."

Marc was glad to hear genuine distaste in the guard's tone. "It's her business. If she wanted it known, she'd tell you."

Neil gestured. "Why are you protecting him? Adrian will punish him. He'll lose his *place*."

Marc blew out a frustrated sigh. "So I've heard, and like I've told the others, it would just make things harder for her. She hasn't made up her mind about what she wants, and I won't force her hand on it."

Neil took a moment to think it over, respecting him. These two new people didn't seem to be eager to cause trouble. In the silence, he gave the orderly tent another scan, searching for clues. Gear

stowed, boots at attention, even his sleeping bag was neat. Marc was a lifer, unlike Kenn, who never talked about his past, something most people here did, a lot. Marc was in love with a woman he couldn't have. Neil felt a connection to him beyond his own dislike for Kenn. "He really hit her?"

"She didn't fall or run into anything, no matter what she says later." It was the first time Marc had caved and told that secret, but he already liked Neil. He sensed they could be friends, and Marc was very aware that he didn't have any here. He also refused to let them believe whatever excuse Angela had invented.

Neil was full of disappointment for Adrian's dream. Deep down though, he could see the abusive nature Kenn had hidden. It came through in the flashes of arrogance and possessiveness.

Noises came to them. When the muffled sounds cleared into laughter and excited voices, Neil relaxed.

Marc's heart kept thumping. *She's out there, alone.* He heeded the instinct saying Neil was one of the good guys. "Will you help her? Show her how things work here?"

"I already have been; she just doesn't know it yet. She's important to Adrian."

Marc hoped that would be enough. He was an outsider. He wouldn't be able to get close to her again for a while.

"You'll try to keep your distance?"

Marc's expression betrayed nothing. "Yes, even if she chooses him. I won't stand in the way of what she wants."

Neil got up and held out a hand. "I'm Todd O'Neil. You'll be busy for a bit, I imagine, but I might be able to pass an occasional hello. You'll have a lot to prove if you hope for a chance here."

Marc shook with him. The last three people he had talked to hadn't cared at all about the truth. Marc was relieved at least one person was offering friendship rather than cleverly worded threats "Marc Brady. You say there's a shooting match tomorrow?"

"You'll be out in time for it." Neil lifted a brow. "You any good?"

Marc ran a throbbing hand over his swollen jaw. "I usually hit what I'm aiming at."

Neil grinned, thinking he would take the man under his wing the way Adrian had done with Angela, just more aggressively. His amusement increased. Doug flirting with Angie hadn't rattled Kenn, but Marc surprising him might. Especially if the man really was good. For some reason, Neil liked the idea of Marc and Angie together. It was wrong of Kenn to keep them apart if they loved each other. "Appearances mean a lot here. You'll never be accepted if you chase her."

Marc gave him open honesty. "I'll stay back, and I'll follow the rules, but the minute she wants or needs me, I'm going, and I won't be stopped."

Neil felt his respect grow. It took courage and self-belief to say something like that to a complete stranger. "You want someone to hang with tomorrow, to show you around?"

"Absolutely." Marc was curious where Neil was in Safe Haven's chain of command. He had no doubt that the trooper was.

The wolf watched Neil with his tinted ears perked. Neil wondered how Marc had earned loyalty from a wild animal, but didn't ask. Stories like that were shared with friends and they weren't that yet. They would be though; Neil was sure of it and anxious to hear the tale. "I'll see ya in the morning."

"Yes, you will."

It was an odd response. Neil could tell from the tone it meant something, but again, he didn't question, sensing it also required real friendship to share. He left Marc alone with his thoughts.

Marc wasn't bitter that Angela hadn't been quarantined. He just wished he was out there too, watching over her. It hurt his heart not to be able to protect her now, when she was surrounded by strangers and facing old dangers.



Chapter Forty-Six  
**Dark Revelations**

Night One

1

**W**hen Angela stepped from Charlie's tent, he was waiting for her. She grabbed him for a quick hug that he tolerated with flushed cheeks. "Sorry, boy, but I missed you!"

Charlie felt the same way. He snickered. "Couldn't tell. Come on."

The mess lines were short. Most of the tables were empty. Angela only saw twenty or so people eating and staring at her as they arrived. "We're late?"

"By about fifteen minutes. You'll get used to the schedule."

She nodded as they got in line. Charlie sounded older than he was. She wanted to talk to him, to find out how he'd been, but the eyes on them were constant, persistent. For a brief second, she wished Kenn hadn't found them yet so she could have one more quiet night alone with Marc.

*You can!* Charlie shoved the words at her. *You can leave anytime!*

Angela said nothing. Later, when they were alone, they had a lot to discuss.

The sullen boy took two trays, handed her one. He grabbed a pair of green cans from the icy cooler. "Come on. Adrian saved you a seat."

Whispers followed their progress, then increased in volume when Adrian slid over to clear the place on his right. *Again.*

Kenn's even mood vanished.

Angela sat, feeling like a fish in a glass bowl. *Don't they have anyone else to gape at?*

“I have to deliver trays.”

Charlie’s tone was agitated. They all sensed it was directed at her.

Angela smiled at him. “See you in a while.”

Charlie sighed. “Yes, you will.”

The men felt some of his anger go away. Neil and Adrian both recognized the words, and understood it was a bond.

“He’s a good kid. He does a lot here.”

Angela smiled again at Adrian’s words. Charlie would have to adjust. She opened her pop. “He’s so grown up now, so responsible.” Angela gave Kenn a warm glance most of them were glad to see. “Thank you. I meant to say that right away. I’d be lost without him.”

“He’s my boy, too.” Kenn managed to sound uncomfortable and arrogant at the same time.

Fire flared in her heart. Angela took a long drink to keep from asking when that had started.

Neil and Adrian noticed her reaction. Both men thought it was too bad she had passed up the perfect opportunity to get free. They respected her for not wanting to cause Kenn embarrassment, but a public breakup was the only kind that would free her. He said-she said, didn’t exist here.

As the men talked, Angela ate and wondered if Marc had been fed yet, if he was okay, if he missed her as much as she missed him. Angela knew her sadness would draw too much attention from these men. She forced herself to pay attention. The sooner she figured out how things worked here, the sooner she would know how to handle the future.

“Jeremy found everything on his list, says he has pictures of an entire town that’s undamaged. Cherry Creek. It’s deserted, but the stores are intact. He figures the whole town evacuated in a neat, orderly fashion.”

Adrian snorted. “Be the first one of those we’ve run across. Okay, that’s it.” He closed his notebook. “You’ll put the dogs out?”

“Yes.” Kenn stored his book. “Chris says Star’s gonna have another litter come May.”

Kyle smiled. He loved animals. “That’s great. We need all the babies we can get.” He glanced at Kenn, speaking before he thought about it. “Didn’t you tell us you had one on the way?”

Angela froze, heart ripping open.

Kenn flushed, turning her way to find out.

Every man at the table scowled. He hadn’t asked yet? They’d been alone in his truck for hours!

*My baby!* Angela couldn’t hide the awful pain that dug into her chest. “I lost my other son.”

Her voice was like broken glass. No one was surprised when she stood up.

“Excuse me.”

The entire mess came alive with condemning mutters.

Kenn knew they were all thinking he’d been too busy giving her a split lip to ask about their baby. He got up. *There it is. The first blow to my ship and she didn’t even fire it.* A few more of those and he would go under.

Angela knew Kenn would follow. He’d been waiting all day for the chance to be nasty to her. She chose a public place, heading for the bathroom. Only one woman was in line for the restrooms; the tall brunette went in as Kenn stopped at her side.

Angela braced.

“I’m sorry. I should have asked.”

She was shocked.

Kenn shrugged bitterly. “Things have changed. I’m not the same man here. It’s not allowed.”

Angela said nothing; her eyes screamed vile profanities.

Kenn reddened further, embarrassed gaze on her split lip. “We can work it out. I’d never do that here.”

Silence.

Kenn blew out a sigh. “We’ll make a new deal.”

Angela lifted a brow, thinking she’d won the second battle before it had started. She chose her answer carefully. “No more deals. If we stay together, it will be because I want to build a future with you.”

Familiar rage came back into Kenn's expression. "You can't end it. I won't let you do that!"

Angela wanted to get away from him, but she knew it would be a mistake to run. Her only option was counting on the sense of fairness and justice she'd felt in this camp. She braced to take a hit. "You don't own me anymore!"

Kenn came forward, big body blocking most of the camp view.

Angela's hand slid to her gun. *I hope they don't hang me for this. If they do, please don't let Charlie see it.*

The brunette coming out of the restroom recognized the situation for what it was. She gestured to the nearest guard and got out of the line of fire.

"You belong to me for another five years. Do what you're told, or your boy will get hurt, come up missing!"

Angela knew he was barely in control of himself. He only needed one little push now to become violent. She tried to step by him.

Kenn grabbed her arm, spinning her around and drawing a lot of attention. Kenn sucked in air...control. "Don't make me kill you!"

He let go and marched toward the tents, fury on his face for everyone to see.

Kenn felt the displeasure of the Eagles. Some of those men, he'd just shared a meal with. He knew he was causing a lot of unrest. The camp was questioning him about her lip and all he could say was *I don't know*. It was an answer the camp never heard from him, but Kenn couldn't fight the rage of the past. *I have five years left to get her power or break her. Either will do.*

## 2

"Coming in with dinner." Charlie ducked into the dim tent.

Marc saw the boy's first quick glance went to the wolf. He took the opening. "That's Dog."

Charlie set the tray down, keeping his attention on his target. He'd decided to use the techniques he'd witnessed Adrian and

Kenn employ on men they weren't sure about—silence and a cool stare.

Marc waited patiently, impressed when the teenager didn't fidget. Charlie didn't resemble the small boy Marc had viewed in the pictures. The male in front of him was approaching maturity.

“Why are you here?”

Marc blinked at the adult tone despite what he'd been thinking, impressed again. “Your mom needs me.”

“You want her.”

When Marc nodded but said nothing else, Charlie's anger deepened. “Adrian and Kenn will take care of her. You can't stay here.”

*He has his mom's courage.* “Only she can get rid of me.”

“You don't know these people. If they want you gone, you are.” Charlie waved. “I've seen them do it.”

The teen's smirk was a good copy of Kenn's. Marc instantly hated it. He shoved brutal truth into the moment. “They're already trying. I had hoped you would be on my side, but hear me and be clear. Only your mom can get me to go away. Not another person on this planet can do it. They'll have to kill me.” Hoping it wouldn't come to that, but not so sure now that they were here, Marc stood up to get his tray.

Charlie cringed.

Marc froze, mind slamming the obvious clue into place. It was the same reaction he'd seen in Angela during the first weeks of their cross-country journey, and sometimes even now, when she was startled. “He hit you too?”

Charlie shoved the tray at him and ran from the tent.

### 3

Angela flipped the radio off and lit a smoke. She was waiting now, writing in her journal while killing time until Kenn would be on duty. She hated it that Charlie's tent was next to his. She had her gun resting under her thigh. She planned to sleep with it in

reach in case he came for her during the night. She was glad he'd walked away this time, but it wasn't over.

Voices went by. She identified them as Adrian and Doug. Angela mulled over the fast kinship she felt, worried over what the leader would want from her later...and what he already wanted.

She sighed. Two questions had been answered, at least. It was just Kenn she feared, not all men, and it wasn't just Marc she could respond to. Both Adrian and Seth had drawn reactions.

Angela let out another sound of frustration. It was good here. She had found things she could help with, but Kenn was high up, with serious responsibilities. He was different from the man who'd kept her so upset during her pregnancy that she had been having pains long before the war. Even now, he still hadn't cared enough to ask what had happened. She knew it was a side of him these people didn't often witness, but that would change; it was already starting. Kenn had been normal all day, then morphed into a nasty SOB while they were in plain view of everyone. Was he really fighting old demons, or was he putting on the act of a lifetime?

Marc's worried words came to her.

*He's headed your way. He's upset. Sorry.*

Angela tensed, lifting her gun.

She was relieved when her son came in and not Kenn. She slid the weapon back under her leg before Charlie saw it. "You okay?"

"No! Why did you bring him here? This will get you in big trouble!" Charlie was crying.

She went to him, held him as much as he would allow. "I have some things to tell you." It would still be a censored version of the truth. There couldn't be more until she made her final choice.

"About...my dad?"

"Yes, and about you."

Adrian studied Kenn's approach through the open tent flap; awkwardness invaded the cool night air. *He thinks she told me everything.*

Adrian chose to encourage that idea while staying as neutral as he could. He needed Kenn. Angela didn't.

Kenn put the envelopes on the table and dropped into the empty chair with a grunt. He didn't meet Adrian's eyes as he got right to business. "We're short on—"

"We have something else to discuss." Adrian's voice was like stone.

Kenn wasn't sure if he would lie when Adrian asked if he had put his hands on Angela. He wasn't sure that he could.

"Are you mine or hers?"

Kenn's head flew up, mouth opening, hesitating. "Sir?"

Adrian pointed. "You can't serve two masters. You were the first one here, the first member of my command, and you have the most active part in everything I do. You're my right hand. What happens to a man if you cut that off?"

"He'll bleed to death."

Adrian nodded at Kenn's mutter. "He, and all his dreams. The death of Safe Haven alone would be unforgivable, but worse, what else would we lose?"

Kenn's reason warred with his anger. He struggled to find the right words. "Our last chance. Our way of life... America." Kenn felt genuine regret.

Adrian was satisfied for the moment. He studied Kenn before speaking, no longer staring at his even-tempered XO, but the short-fused, mean mouthed, second-in-command that people were already starting to avoid after just one day. He needed to get this under control if he could. Adrian suspected it had already gone too far. Kenn didn't believe Angela and Marc were just friends either. "Because she asked me not to, unless someone comes to me, we won't discuss this after tonight. So long as it never, *ever* happens again."

Kenn was shocked...stunned that Adrian would protect him. It went against everything they were trying to build here. Kenn was filled with guilty gratitude.

Adrian, however, was furious. "The war changed life for every living thing on this planet, including her. She has the right to pick her own future. You will back off."

Kenn was humiliated. Adrian knew who he was now. He no longer had a reason to lie. "We were happy. She'll settle back in with me."

"No! She doesn't want that, and the rules here are for everyone. She knows it now."

"She and that boy are all I've got left." Kenn gestured in frustration. "I can't just let him have them."

"Give me a yes to this question and you'll have my support." Adrian laid the trap. "Ready?"

Kenn already knew, but he nodded anyway.

"It's easy to see that Marc would do about anything for her, maybe even die. Would you? Do you love her enough to give your life for hers?"

Kenn didn't respond.

Adrian frowned. "Then let her go."

"I don't think I can."

"You have to. We all know you gave her up for dead. That gives her the right to end things. And so what? You have a good life, a good place here. You're admired, treated well, and a certain redhead is sniffing around, giving out samples. That's always fun."

Adrian's words worried Kenn. He hadn't thought the boss knew about his trysts with Tonya.

"Think on it, but understand me, Kenn. You can't make it work. You can try, and you can destroy a lot of lives, but you cannot have this position and that woman. I've met her. No man could balance the two." Adrian ignored the male heart insisting that he could. "Let her go, Marine. I need you so much more than she does."



Kenn desperately wanted this conversation to be finished. “I’ll try to do what’s right. I will.”

“Good. Let’s move on. Schedules first. Put her with John; add her to Neil’s class. Can she use the .357 on her hip?”

Kenn nodded reluctantly, humiliated mind flashing to the ride here. “Probably the least of what he taught her.”

Adrian ignored the bitter tone, but he responded to the impression that Kenn knew Marc. He set another trap. “Tell me about him.”

Kenn lit a smoke, thoughts chaotic. *I can’t tell the truth without giving all of it, can I?* “We served together. Same platoon for a few years. He’s a good Marine. I don’t know him personally.”

Adrian lifted a brow, waiting for the details he knew were there. The anger at Kenn for withholding that information until now was stored for later examination.

Kenn couldn’t refuse Adrian’s need to hear the observations he had stored over the years. It was part of the job, and he knew Marc better than he knew any of the people he’d reported on since getting this position. “He’s quiet, likes to work alone. He’s a stickler for the rules during regular business hours, but I’ve seen him get drunk and beat the hell out of men off base. He wasn’t close to any of us that I know of. He usually wanted a corner table alone, but he always supported us in brawls. When we lost two members of our team in Iraq, he retrieved both bodies, then helped the widows financially out of his own pocket.” Kenn let out a sigh, hating the truth. *Damn Boy Scout!* “He’s one of the good guys.”

Adrian reached into the cooler. “So are you. The past is dead. Try to leave it there.”

The Marine nodded, but Adrian was sure he had wasted his breath as he handed Kenn a beer from the cooler. “You have things for me?”

Grateful, Kenn opened his notebook. By all rights, he should be on the way to a dark road where one of Kyle’s bullets waited for his brain.

When Kenn left Adrian's tent, he was calmer, but the ball of anger remained, waiting to be reignited. It flared to life once again when he got to his tent and found it empty. *Did Angela break our truce and sneak out to Marc?*

No. He could hear the soft murmur of voices nearby. She was in Charlie's tent, and he couldn't just jerk her out of there by her long hair like the rage was demanding. What to do?

*Find a release.*

## 5

Tonya moaned, wrapping her arms around Danny's narrow shoulders as he pushed her against the boxes. Images of her night with Adrian flashed through her mind, increasing the heat.

Danny thrust against her, shoving her into the corner. "Yeah...ohh...yeah!"

Danny's bare hips flashed in the dim lantern light.

Tonya arched up to meet his wild thrusts, already knowing he was going to blow before she could. *What a waste of time.*

The man dipped his mouth to her ample chest, nearing the edge.

Tonya froze as a menacing shadow stepped up into the semi and closed the door.

"What?...uhhh!"

A cold draft hit Danny's twitching flesh as he was spun around. Milky white splatters sprayed the truck floor, boxes, and Kenn's boots.

Danny, caught in the moment of climax, didn't even try to avoid the meaty fist that flew toward him. He hit the metal floor with a loud thud, fading.

Tonya cowered in the corner.

Kenn stepped over Danny's limp body toward her. "I see you found someone to do in my short absence."

Tonya kept her mouth shut. When his big hands slid to the buckle of his jeans, heat and relief flooded her.

Kenn grabbed her arm and shoved her over the boxes she'd been leaning on.

Tonya, unsure about him at this moment, felt a tremor of fear and an earthquake of lust. She had written him off after seeing his woman. She knew her limits, but apparently, things weren't peachy in their world.

The angry Marine kept a hand on her arm, holding her as he nudged her thighs open. When he rocked forward, sinking deep, Tonya pushed back against him in pleasure, body clenching around his. This was what she'd wanted when she'd found Danny alone by the fire.

Needing her to know who was boss, Kenn pulled out of her hot heat and pushed into the next opening, wrapping a hand around her mouth to stop the scream from following the surprised breath she'd sucked in.

Tonya moaned against his hand, sounding a lot like the man coming to at their feet.

Kenn pushed deeper, her gasp swelling him, and then he pulled out, spinning. He hissed in satisfaction, seed falling on Danny's bruising cheek.

Kenn delivered a nasty kick to the moaning man's ribs. "Find your own whore!"

He glowered at Tonya as he fastened his jeans. "Get this shit cleaned up and get back to your tent. We're not done."

Tonya giggled. "You got it."

## 6

By 10pm, most people were inside. Safe Haven was quiet.

Angela slipped out, eager to get a shower without standing in line and being stared at. She scanned, finding Adrian and a group of guards at the center mess table. His words of knowing everything that went on rolled through her mind. He was a man to take at face value for sure, but there were wells in him deep enough to get lost in.

Angela was thrilled to have the shower camper to herself. She chose the farthest stall.

Gun in reach, Angela quickly got in and let the hot water beat on her. She hadn't had a real shower in hot water since December, and it hadn't felt this good. She soaped her hair twice, humming as some of the stink from her journey washed off and went down the drain. *I made it. I'm really here.*

Angela was frowning by the time she flipped off the water, wondering if Marc had gotten a shower yet. She hated being away from him, but she didn't call out like she wanted to. They would have to be careful or leave, but every time Angela thought of that, of being alone with just Marc and their son, the witch whispered of death. She knew better than to ignore the warning. She had Charlie, and some of her freedom. Plus, there was that sense of being in the right place. It all made her want to stay. She would unless Kenn forced her hand.

As Angela left the camper, she lingered on the dusty top step, gentle breeze cooling her skin. She swept the camp. *Safe Haven. Is it really? "Show me."*

The flickering flames in the nearest can fire formed movies, revealing dangerous rescues, defenses, and...secrets, lies. It made her frown as she swept the mostly darkened tents again. Black clad shadows patrolled the well-lit group of weary travelers, but they were surrounded by a violent, unknown world.

*He'll protect them with all he has.* The witch rattled doors in her mind—forbidden, locked doors to the future. *We could open them with his help. The future waits.*

As if called, Angela turned around to find the object of her thoughts nearby.

Adrian joined her, trying not to stare. He gave her a polite glance, the scent of vanilla thickening in his nose. "You have everything you need?"

Her heart went straight to spending the night without Marc.

Adrian stored her wild need. "I'll rephrase. Do you have everything you need that I can give you?"

“Everything’s fine.” Angela was sorry she wasn’t hiding it better.

Adrian grunted. “So, have you chosen to stay and help me?”

Angela shrugged. “Kenn will get in the way of anything I try to build here. My dreams don’t mean shit to him.”

Adrian’s tone deepened. “But, he does believe in mine. He’ll see the benefits of having you here.”

“Only if you send away my protection.”

Her voice held a desperate plea in that last word, a cry for reassurance. Adrian gave it firmly. “Never. Marc belongs here too. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Neither do I.”

“You will. Give it time; give *me* time.”

Angela sighed, looking over the peacefully settled people. “I’ll need to keep busy.”

Adrian kept control of his triumph. “I have work for you.”

Angela’s heart leapt at the offer, needing something to replace her time with Marc. If she waited, if she thought about all the trouble it would cause, she’d never do it. But right now, with Adrian’s patient attention on her, she felt this was her chance, her place in time to change the world. She wouldn’t get another. “Yes, I’ll stay, but give me real work, something that matters.” She unknowingly mirrored her son’s words to him. “I don’t want smoke blown up my ass, but if you can make me feel needed, wanted, then maybe I too can follow where you lead.”

Chapter Forty-Seven  
**Smoke And Mirrors**

1

**“I**’d like to talk, if you have a minute.”

Samantha spun around to find Adrian standing by the camper she’d just come from. She had been hoping the intimidating leader would have other fish to fry right now.

“Sorry. Busy?”

Flinching again at a trio of loud, curious people moving by, Samantha shook her head.

“Good.” Adrian motioned toward his tent. “Let’s chat.”

Sam went slowly. She wasn’t ready to have this conversation with frayed nerves and a sleep hangover from the sedatives. When they walked in silence, she was glad for the moment to collect her thoughts.

Adrian left the flap open, but she was reminded of her time in Cesar’s camp—of José’s attack. Samantha’s stomach twisted.

Adrian gestured to the small table and chairs. “Have a seat while I get us a drink. Soda, water, or tea?”

Picking the one hardest to tamper with came automatically as she sat in the chair closest to the exit. “Soda.”

Adrian observed as he poured himself a cup of tea. She was too worried for someone who’d found safety. He joined her at the table, hating her flinch when he set his cup down too hard. He suspected she and Angela had a lot in common, but where Marc had been there to help Angie, this woman had been alone. She’d survived as best she could. “We have rules here, and you’ll learn them, but one is more important than any of the others. We have no violence against women or children. The penalties are too high. I know you’ll feel better with this, but you don’t need it.” Butt first, slowly, Adrian extended the .45 from his boot.

Sam took it. She didn't want to offend him, but she was eager for the comfort it would provide tonight while she was sleeping alone. No one could take away what the boss had given her. "Thank you."

"Keep it close until you feel you don't need it anymore, then give it back for the next abused woman who comes here."

She slid the weapon into her pocket.

"What did you do before the war?"

Sam froze at his unexpected change of subject.

"Your career? What did you contribute to society?"

Samantha sighed. "I was a storm tracker."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"I chased the wind, played with the equipment, and tried not to get myself killed."

Adrian's tone cooled. "If you have a gift, Samantha, now's the time for using it. We need you."

His chiding tone sank into her loneliness. Some of the truth was out before she knew she was going to tell him. "I can sometimes predict them, from the data. I had a pass to the Essex compound. My chopper crashed."

Hiding his pleasure, Adrian leaned forward. "We would have a place for you even if you only babysit, but I have one question. Are you a spy?"

Sam shook her head, frowning. "No. Never."

"What about the man you came in with?"

She looked away. "I don't know...maybe."

Adrian was surprised; he had expected a firm denial. They were both already under watch.

"Can I have a smoke?"

Adrian slid his lighter and full pack toward her. "Keep those. Why don't you think he's good, like you?"

Sam felt better, as he had intended. She recognized the ploy, but it succeeded. "Because he was a slave too. We never should have been able to ride out. It was too easy, as if he was waiting for me to suggest escaping." She drew in a lungful of smoke that shot out as she spoke. "I told Kenn everything I could remember. Rick

got me out, but I wonder what he used to buy our freedom. There's no way we escaped, and the only currency Cesar takes is blood. I have no proof...but I think Rick is risking his life as an inside man. They made a deal. I fell for it."

"We have good security here. He's already being watched." Adrian's words betrayed none of his increasing worry. "We'll catch him in the act if he is a spy, but for now, we wait and watch—myself and the Eagles, not you. It's my job."

Sam knew she was being manipulated but she agreed without hesitation. It would keep her from being responsible. A heavy weight faded from her shoulders. She was giving that job up to this man. "Will you have me watched too?"

"Do I need to?"

"No, of course not, but I would if I were you."

The calm, reasonable tone made Adrian crack a real smile; he changed the subject again without giving her an answer. "Tell me more about your job, Sam. What exactly is a storm tracker and why did that earn you a pass?"

## 2

Rick paced his tent, nervous and confused. He had spent all day in here. It was well into the evening now, and he was still being quarantined by the elderly doctor who had taken his time coming, then had left as fast as he could.

The disapproving healer had given evasive answers to even normal questions. Rick was tense. He hadn't handled this level of alertness before, but someone should have been by to talk to him, wanting the information Samantha didn't have. He'd expected her, some guards, Kenn, and their leader, but no one had come.

*Why not? A trick? Improbable. Maybe they didn't recognize the threat, even with all the alertness?* Most of the people he had viewed so far were prey. The fear was obvious to Rick after surviving the slavers all this time, but there were also men here who were as dangerous as Cesar. Rick already had an idea of how shift changes worked but gathering more information had to wait.



Suspicious glares returned to him repeatedly whenever he opened the flap.

He would have to be more careful here than in the other places where he'd helped Cesar gain control. He also couldn't contact the Mexican on time. He would have to lie low for a while and blend in. This was a large, well-organized group, and judging from the almost constant gunfire, they were learning to defend themselves. He would have to find their weakest point or Cesar and his nasty men might not be enough for these people.

*These are good people, Rick. We have to warn them about Cesar.*

Samantha had told him that from the passenger seat of the Blazer, saying she knew he'd made a deal, but it wasn't too late to do the right thing. It was, of course. Rick didn't like fearing for his life because of the color of his skin, but he did like Cesar's way of life. He had no intentions of backing out. He would give the Mexican this camp, then he and Samantha would go away for a while. She was never far from his thoughts now, body crying out to him from two tents over.

Even if she reneged on their deal, and he already knew she would, he'd get her in the end. If he treaded lightly. The leader here had a warden's coolness that watched and waited, knowing his convicts would offend again if given the chance. Rick planned to stay out of Adrian's line of sight for the duration of his stay. He had received a copy of the rules within his first hour of being here; he understood the warning. If he was caught, he would pay with his life.

### 3

Back in her tent, Samantha laid on her sleeping bag, tired but unable to drift off. The sedative hadn't faded until her shower. Now, she was wide awake. The shrewd doctor or his sweet wife would have given her a sleeping pill, but she hadn't asked. There were things going on in Safe Haven that she needed a clear head for.

Sam wasn't sure if this was another slaver camp, just with prettier edges. Some of the people here were bad, like Kenn. He beat his woman. She suspected Kenn was a lot like Cesar on the inside. The difference was these people didn't know that side of him existed. Or at least they hadn't until his woman had shown up. There was no way they could have known, because Kenn was Adrian's right hand.

Sam frowned. There was something familiar about the leader, something that made her think of Washington. *Did I see him there? A flash of a man getting out of a cab in the rain?* It didn't matter to her who he'd been before, so long as he was a good man now, but she was curious.

Sam curled an arm over her cheek, other hand caressing the gun under the blanket. She felt better with its cold comfort, and she was glad to have found people who were decent, but Rick was dangerous. She wished she had more experience with guns, other than knowing they were now the difference between being free and being a slave.

They'd traveled hard and fast; he hadn't talked to her at all unless he had to; he hadn't answered any of her questions, not even about where he was from or what he had done for a living before the war. He'd kept moving them northeast by day and crawled between her legs at night. The fact they hadn't made a single detour told her Rick had known these people were here. He had wanted Angela too, but he'd noticed the men with her too late. His actions were not those of someone searching for good people to join. Rick was infiltrating them.

*Has*, she corrected herself. She had no proof, but she knew it. She had to distance herself from him, publicly, so it would get to Adrian. Rick had taken advantage of her; she never wanted him to touch her again.

*Really?* her body challenged. *What a liar.*

She was hit by erotic images of them on the way here: bent over the hood of a limo, pushing against each other in his sleeping bag, straddling him on the horse as it thundered under them. His touch had been like fire to her. She felt her body responding to

thoughts, followed by a familiar ache that eased her mind a bit. At least she hadn't gotten pregnant. Samantha had worried over it a little in the last week, not quite sure if she was late. It was a relief to know she wasn't.

Sam rolled over, cradling the gun. He hadn't forced her; he hadn't abused her. Deep down, she hoped she was wrong. *I'll rebuild my life, either way. I will survive.*

She was finally able to sleep, but in her dreams, the voices whispered she and everyone else was in danger because of her lover's loyalty to a vicious killer.

#### 4

Adrian began his nightly rounds in the small sea of sleeping tents that surrounded his. He frowned when he saw one hadn't been put up for Angela. Kenn's doing? *Probably.* He went to the perimeter men first.

His stops were brief and full of comments about Kenn's behavior. The only place he lingered was the QZ, where Neil was pulling extra hours to cover the doubled sentry posts. Tomorrow night Neil would sleep like a baby, but tonight, the trooper was their eyes and ears. Adrian went to him for information. He'd witnessed the cop ducking into Marc's tent. Neil wasn't one to break his rules lightly. Adrian wanted to know what had happened, what he had missed.

Adrian advanced through the darkness beyond the perimeter tape, realizing Neil's post was the one without a second man. *That explains the extra man two stops back.* "What happened to your help?"

"He got on my nerves."

Adrian was almost certain Zack's words about unfaithful women had almost caused a fight. Zack was a notorious woman hater. It didn't matter who she was. *Makes sense now. A perfect right hand for Kenn.* "Broadcasting again when he should have been tuning in?"

Neil chuckled as he swept the dark landscape around their sleeping people. “Been one of those days.”

“Yes, it has. Put a twenty-four hour watch on Danny. He’s our thief.”

Neil’s thoughts went straight to Angela. *Did she tell him that? Does it matter?* “I’d love to be the guard on him at the trial.”

Adrian knew there wouldn’t be one if the thief were caught in the act. Another problem with the clogged legal system, fixed. If there was absolute proof, why have a trial? Guilty didn’t change just because someone forgot to sign a paper or read them their rights. They were criminals. They didn’t have any.

The chilly wind gusted by, bringing drizzle. Neil swept the landscape again. He drew in a breath. “What’s our penalty for hitting a woman?”

Adrian chose his words carefully. This was Neil’s chance to get rid of Kenn, but it would destroy Safe Haven. “A trial. If found guilty, the camp votes on a second chance with harsh punishments or for the person to be branded and banished.”

“What if it’s one of *your* circle doing the hitting?” Neil gestured angrily. “Do the same rules apply?”

Adrian’s stomach twisted. “Yes. Our laws are for all of us. Is there something I should know?” *Did Neil see something? What else did Kenn do?*

“Just suspicions.” Neil didn’t want to say more.

Adrian pinned one of his most trusted men with a hard look. “Your instincts are part of why you’re here, Neil. If you know something, especially if it concerns a woman, I expect you to tell me. Even when you know I don’t want to hear it.”

Neil sighed, torn. He understood what was at stake. “I didn’t witness it. I don’t know those who say they did, but I believe it.” He gave Adrian a brief run through of the encounters he’d had today, lingering on the scene between her and Marc. “He does love her. Marc will let her go if that’s what she wants, I’m sure of it. He’s already following our rules, and he doesn’t even know what they are! Then, there’s Kenn, trying to force her back into a relationship she doesn’t want. He didn’t give her a tent—told

Charlie not to put it up, that she would spend her nights in his bed where she belongs. He plans to put her in all his classes and activities—so he can keep an eye on her is my guess—and he’s telling people that Charlie is his biological son.”

Adrian remembered Kenn’s words to him when they first met. He had asked if that was his son. Kenn had said... “*He might as well be.*” They had all assumed he was caring for a child that wasn’t his. It had impressed them.

*As he knew it would.* More than just the Eagles would be pissed over this. Either Kenn had lied then, or he was lying now. “We’re going to give them a chance to settle in, but I won’t let either of them force her into anything.” Adrian ignored his own guilt. He was about to herd her in a way, and though it was for the greater good, that didn’t make it right.

Neil kept his voice low. “Good, because I don’t think there’s many left like her.”

“Pretty, isn’t she?”

“Beautiful, but it’s more than that.” Neil thought of the way she had read his mind to start their conversation. “She’s special, more than just because she’s a doctor. You know?”

Adrian did. He wasn’t surprised the trooper had noticed too. Neil wasn’t as quick as Kyle in most areas of their training, but about people, he was quicker.

“I’m going to look after her when I can, maybe ask a couple of the Eagles to do the same.” Neil didn’t need to see Adrian’s frown to know it was there.

“Got hopes, Neil?” Adrian was relieved when the cop shook his head.

“No. Marc asked me to, but I had already decided I would before I talked to him. She’s got a strong pull, a gift we need. A lot of men will want her, not just those two.”

Adrian didn’t betray how much those words pleased and bothered him because they were true. He was glad Neil planned to take Marc under his wing. The trooper hadn’t said so, but Adrian had spent months getting to know Neil. It was encouraging that at least one of his circle was willing to give the man and his wolf a

chance. Almost everyone else was talking about making Marc's life rough if he got between Kenn and his wife. Marc was now cleared, but he'd been told not to roam until morning.

These people wouldn't accept him easily. To stay and have a chance at building a life, Marc would have to prove himself. Neil could help him with that. The guard was popular. There would have been serious trouble if he had taken a stand against Kenn in the beginning and made Adrian pick. "You'll let me know how your day with him goes?"

"You know it."

Adrian was almost smiling as their long day ended. "Yes, I do."

It hit Neil again how grateful he was for Adrian. Anyone else would be using it all to their advantage, or things would always have to be spelled out. With Adrian, he saw it before it became a problem, then handled it quickly and quietly. Considering what they had done to the old world, Neil thought Adrian was more than they deserved.

Chapter Forty-Eight  
**A Trooper's Welcome**  
Day 2

1

**K**enn strode through the camp to the heavily guarded quarantined zone. It was 5am. He was hoping to catch the man unprepared and be able to give him what he clearly deserved.

Rick's eyes flew open when the crunching steps stopped in front of his flap. His grip tightened on the gun he always slept with.

"Hello in the tent."

The voice was hard, as was the rapping on the flap. Rick grunted, rolling off the cot. He slipped on his boots, but waited for a second tap and call to convince whoever it was they had woken him up.

"Yeah! Hang on!" Rick didn't bother buttoning his shirt. He shoved the gun into his waistband and fished for his smokes. "Come in."

Kenn moved quickly, letting in a blast of wind that cleared a little of the reek. The Marine scanned the messy floor and even messier man, then flashed a sympathetic smile he didn't care if Rick saw through. The man had only been here one day, but he'd already filled a tent with trash. It said a lot. "I know it's early, but I'll be busy later."

Rick lit a smoke, and dropped into the chair. He lifted a brow as he adjusted the dirty bandana around his throat. He was glad the leader wasn't coming. "Thought someone would be by sooner with all the security you guys got here."

"Big camp, lot of shit to handle."

Rick blew a disrespectful cloud of smoke in Kenn's direction. If this dog tag wearing putz was all he had to deal with, he'd gotten

lucky. “Is this the part where I get warned to follow the rules or hit the road?”

Kenn didn’t like Rick at all in that instant. “Yes. We always check out the new people, but you came from a known group of killers, so yes, we have questions to ask and things to say.”

Rick picked up a half full can of pop from the dirty floor. “Samantha told you everything we know.”

Kenn’s lips thinned at the flippant tone.

Rick cautioned himself to ease off a bit. There was a reason this man was second in command here, and it wasn’t because he liked to hit women. Though, in Cesar’s camp that might have earned him a high place too.

“We need to know other things, like where you hail from, what your career was, and why not one Caucasian male has been spared by that group. Except you.”

Rick tensed even though he was expecting it. “I was a janitor at a minimum security jail in southern Arizona.” Rick knew how to make Cesar appear less of a threat. He’d done this before. “When the power went off, the generators didn’t come on, and there was a riot. The guards were outnumbered. It was during exercise time, when most of the men were out of their cells.”

Kenn believed that. It had been the same across the country. Almost none of America’s prisons had held. Those that had were filled with bodies. “Where were you?”

“Hiding in the basement at first. Then I figured out I could get out if I could start the generators.”

Kenn’s words were sharp. “Yeah, you could go, after setting all the killers loose.”

Rick didn’t flinch at the accusing tone. He’d heard it too many times before. “Their crimes were minor. I wasn’t going to die for them. I had to get out, and I did.”

“You were caught?”

Rick’s chin lifted. “They let me live because I set them free. They *owed* me that.”

Kenn tried to pierce him with the hard stare Adrian used.



Rick finished his soda, not impressed. “I was the leader’s slave from there. If I had insisted on leaving, he would have killed me.”

Kenn was able to see the truth of that. “How did you two get away?”

Rick dropped his butt into the soda can and set it on the filthy canvas floor, controlling the nervous tremor. Instinct said they already knew. Why not use it? “His men think we escaped, but Cesar knows where we are. I gave him this camp for our freedom.”

Kenn’s gun came out of the holster as he stepped forward, anger blazing.

Rick fell over his cot in his haste to get away. He landed with a loud thump, hitting his shoulder hard. He held up a hand as the angry Marine came toward him. “That’s just what I told him to get away!”

Kenn hesitated.

Rick let fear bleed through his voice, knowing it was expected. “Come on man! I’m an American too! I said what I had to so we could get out of there.”

Kenn took a minute to pick the right response, but he didn’t relax or put away his gun. When he spoke, Adrian’s words flew out of his mouth. “A real American would have died before releasing them. Every life they’ve taken is on your hands!”

Rick flinched. He hadn’t heard that one before. It echoed in his head, even though he already knew he was damned.

“Will they follow you? What was the plan?”

Rick grunted. “Already on the way, I would think. He told me how to get here and to report to him in two weeks. When I don’t, he’ll know I betrayed him.”

“Don’t leave this tent for anything except the bathroom.” Kenn glared. “You already know to use the ones in here. If you need something, tell one of the guards, not the doctor or the people who bring your food. They won’t talk to you. Leave the quarantine zone for any reason and I’ll shoot you myself!” Kenn ducked out before Rick could respond. He marched straight through the sleeping people to Adrian. This guy was no good—from his pack of half lies to his insolent, smug eyes. Kenn would make it clear

to the boss, but also to the guards. When Rick left that tent, he would have a dozen eyes on him at all times.

## 2

Angela headed to the livestock area as the dim sun began to rise behind the gritty sky. She nodded greetings to the surprising number of people also out and about so early. Inside, she was still fighting the urge to hide in her tent. Intimidated or not, these people wouldn't see it. Not with so much at stake.

Angela had woken to a note on Charlie's pillow saying he had to deliver trays. She understood he was giving her a teenager's coldness because she had refused to make Marc leave. Charlie was afraid of what Kenny might do. So was she, but she couldn't back down now, not when she was already making real progress. One day, they might both be free of him.

The rift between her and her son so soon after being reunited bothered Angela, but she knew it would take time for him to come around. She wasn't going to push, and she wasn't going to hide. She was building a new life. That meant showing she could do the dirty chores and work her way up. Her plan was to help the vet today and be close to her son. Hopefully, they would be too busy to talk, and she would be asleep tonight as soon as she hit the pillow.

Angela didn't glance at the QZ or Marc's tent as she went by, but she knew he was there and awake. It was a comfort.

She entered the dark animal area and went to the small tent in the far corner. The vet was sitting at a folding table just outside the flap. "I guess I'm all yours today."

The vet glanced up from his lantern-lit papers, grunting. *New girl got in trouble already. Doesn't surprise me.*

"I brought you a cup of—"

"Don't drink coffee!" He went back to his paper.

Angela slammed the mug onto the metal table. "Good. I brought tea." She dropped onto the damp ground nearby and lit a cigarette without saying anything else. She smoked and sipped her

coffee. Her time with Marc had been everything she needed to handle being around people again, no matter how uncomfortable she felt. Whether this cool shield held all day though, was another story.

Angela hid a snicker when the vet put the paper down, anchoring it with his glasses.

“You just going to sit there? You’re supposed to work.”

Angela snorted. “You going to give me something to do? You’re supposed to teach.”

Chris blinked; he stood up with a wider scowl. “Come on.” He stomped into the shadows of the small zoo.

Angela noticed he took the mug.

They worked mostly in silence, watering and then moving the animals to different pens so those could be cleaned. She didn’t hesitate to get dirty, eager to lose herself in the labor. She was glad to be isolated as she listened to the sounds of the sprawling camp behind them. Pots banged, dogs barked, tents flapped and zipped. They were all sounds she’d missed, needed, and they were a comfort as she did what the sullen vet told her to, but they were also a source of tension. Marc was out there somewhere now; so was Kenn.

Charlie arrived not long after they started. Angela greeted his surprise with an eye-cross that got him to snicker. *I love you. We’ll make it work somehow. I promise.*

Charlie shrugged. *How? He gets angrier every second you let that man stay here.*

Angela sighed. There was nothing she could do about that. In fact, now that Marc was out of quarantine, the tension was only going to get worse. *Try to hang on, for me, but also for yourself.*

Charlie’s face tightened, but he didn’t reply with his first thought.

Angela knew, but he would see it in time. Marc would never hit her, and he would never hit Charlie. When they were finally free, her son would understand this mess had needed to be cleaned up so something beautiful could take its place.

Neil was at Marc's tent at 6:30am, ready to wake him up. Marc's lantern had still been on well after midnight, but there was no sign of him or the wolf in the foggy morning dimness.

Neil scanned for the nearest guard, then motioned toward the empty tent.

The Eagle pointed to an area outside the caution tape, where Adrian had netted off a bathing and laundry area.

Neil turned that way, uneasy. The forest was covered in a blanket of knee high, gray fog that he jogged through once he was out of sight of the main camp. *Who passes up a hot shower for a frigid and maybe dangerous dunk in the open?* Neil increased his pace. *A man with something to prove.*

Marine or not, Marc would need help today. He was about to learn... Neil crested the small hill of thick pines and stopped.

Danny, one eye a nasty shade of purple, along with two of his lazy friends, were huddled behind a mossy spruce tree. Wearing only boxers, all three men were shivering in the morning chill.

The trio heard his steps and looked up, but none of them moved.

The wolf sat a few feet away, while Marc, Seth, and Billy enjoyed a swim.

Neil burst out laughing. They'd meant to rough Marc up, and the wolf had made them into fools.

Dog's rigid ears twitched at the cop's arrival, but his eyes didn't leave his targets.

Neil thought they were lucky not to have been bitten or worse.

"Tell him to call it off, O'Neil. We're late for duty."

"Yeah. It's not funny. He's getting us in trouble."

Neil pushed his cover up to reveal amused scorn. "First, I think I want to hear how you got like that." Neil wondered who'd beat on Danny yesterday. He knew from the coloring it had been at least eight to ten hours ago, and Marc had been in the QZ then.

"All right, Dog. Let 'em go."

At Marc's order, the wolf advanced on the tree instead.

The men behind it jumped, tripping over each other. They all flushed in embarrassment when the animal hiked a leg and let go of a long stream of urine.

"Dog says piss on you."

Neil and the men in the water laughed at Marc's translation.

Dog, who had been waiting for his turn to enjoy the water when trouble had started, trotted to the bank and jumped in.

He paddled toward Marc, who splashed him and swam away. They began to chase each other, diving around the two men in the creek with them.

Neil kept an eye on the sullen males dressing and casting furious glares at the animal in the water. Kenn had gained three weak allies. Hopefully Marc would do better than that today. "No one's going to tell me what happened here?"

The tone of command was clear, even to Marc.

The three men gave the answer Neil had expected—silence. They obviously regretted it and just wanted to slink away but they couldn't. His place here was too high to be ignored. "Get out of here, children. Try to play nice next time."

The bored sarcasm made them move faster.

Neil stepped to the muddy bank, where lush green ferns and brambles lined the steep sides of the clear creek. "Well, you've met the welcoming party. Ready to discover how the other half's been living?"

Marc slapped water toward Dog, who obligingly ducked it and slapped his own paws down, drenching his human.

Marc shook his head, cold water flying as the guards laughed again. "They gonna play any nicer?"

Neil snorted, watching the animal in pleasant surprise. "I wouldn't count on it." He exchanged a glance with Seth and Billy as Marc climbed out. He turned in time to see the tattoo on Marc's hip as he stripped off his boxers and used his shirt to dry himself. Kenn had one like it on his arm. Except... *Does that say Angie?*

Marc slid on his jeans and guns, aware that the savvy cop had just discovered a vital clue. He waited for the questions with a cool facade.

“How long were you Recon?” Neil watched the wolf pad into waist high sticker bushes on the opposite bank, then disappear into the thick fog.

“Eight in Recon. Fifteen in the service.” Marc pulled on his socks and boots in seconds. When he knelt to tie, he was ready for the bigger questions he saw coming.

“You’ve been in longer than Kenn. You guys served together, right? Same unit?”

Marc used the lines he’d drawn last night—honesty as much as possible. “I was his team leader. We didn’t see eye-to-eye on most things, but he followed my orders, so it worked out.”

“You were his boss?” Neil gasped, mental alarms blaring. Kenn hadn’t told Adrian that, and even lying by omission was forbidden when it came to their leader.

The two men in the water were also staring in shock. Seth and Billy immediately made plans to pass the word.

“Just for the last four years.” Marc slung his wet shirt around his neck like a towel.

Neil added the clues quicker than anyone in camp might have given him credit for. “Kenn was your second?”

“Yep.” Marc adjusted his gun belts with practiced movements. “He was communications, explosives, organizing. He was the go-to guy. Like him or not, he always got the job done.”

Neil was a little surprised to hear Marc say something good about his rival. “He does the same here. All our CBs and radios have been installed or upgraded by him. He trained all of us on this new hands-free system.”

That was child’s play compared to the temperamental explosives Kenn had manipulated before the war. Marc volunteered nothing else, asking about their first stop instead.

Neil thought it was interesting to see Marc in the daylight without the long gunfighter coat, but those matching .45s slung low on his hips said not to be fooled by how normal he seemed in

jeans and a camouflage shirt. Neil chuckled. “Self-defense class is next. You’ll need it while the wolf’s out roaming.”

Marc snickered as they strode back up the muddy path, giving eye contact and casual nods, but no conversation to the few souls also coming to brave the frigid water.

Neil led them through the cover of the thick trees and swirling fog, preferring to work behind the direct view of the camp for as long as possible. He was glad to only see six people at the defense ring when they arrived.

The large circle was made from double-stacked bales of straw and set up at a distance from the main camp to distort the noise and sometimes hide the intense training that took place here. Neil often wondered how many of the Eagles realized Adrian would lose command of Safe Haven if his secrets were exposed. The higher levels were very aware of it.

As the dim orange sun began to brighten the area, the two men settled on overturned water buckets to watch. Marc understood this was the teaching staff, gathered to practice before the students came.

Three men, all stocky and dressed in black, were lined up across from a hulking, redheaded man in a dirty vest. Towering over them by at least six inches, the giant wore dusty jeans and a black Harley Davidson shirt under his red vest. The big man appeared eager. Marc hoped they didn’t plan to use body shots. *I’ve driven softer trucks.*

The trio of men moved together, working as a team; they all threw solid punches that landed and had no effect.

The huge man nailed the center fighter in the neck. He dropped like a stone, struggling to breathe as the giant’s arm flew out again.

The big man spun.

The other two joined the first on the ground, blood dripping.

“You’re done. Get out.” The big Irishman wasn’t winded.

The two men picked themselves up and exited. The third was already back on his feet despite the hit to his throat.

The waiting challengers took their injured colleague’s places.

“That’s a rule here.” Neil explained things to Marc quietly, not wanting to interrupt the practice. “There is no shame in bleeding, only in not following the rules—especially against Doug. We want people to learn to defend themselves. When he’s the teacher, you’re all right, but only men with a death wish or something to prove will challenge or accept one from Doug. He’s brutal. *Few* here are better.”

Marc stored the information, automatically putting Adrian, Kenn, and Neil into that category of *few*. There was something about the way the cop carried himself that said he could be deadly.

“Maybe 4-1 next time, eh, boys?” The big man laughed as he stepped over them and left the ring. Doug had spotted Marc when they emerged from the trees. He went toward them now, frowning darkly. *Why did Neil bring him here?* “Did you come by for a lesson?”

Thunder cracked in the distance, as if in response to the menace in Doug’s voice.

Neil shook his head, surprised. “I’m showing the newbie around. Marc, this is Doug, unofficial fifth in command. Doug, this is Marc. He came in yesterday.”

“Yeah, with Kenn’s *wife*.” This had to be the man who’d hit her. Doug couldn’t accept that Kenn would do such a thing.

“Her name is Angela and she’s not his wife.” Marc didn’t back down from the giant’s glare.

The two men shook hands.

Doug lit up when Marc didn’t flinch or pull away from the harsh grip. “You may not need a lesson, Neil, but your friend does.”

Neil shook his head again, aware of the sudden tension and the five men watching. Even those who were injured didn’t want to miss what might happen. “New people get a few days to settle in, you know that.”

Doug smirked. “Yeah. The boss doesn’t wanna scare off the new sheep.” Doug gave Marc another glare. “I think home-wreckers shouldn’t be allowed in Safe Haven!”



There were murmurs of agreement from the others, but Neil was shocked at the hostility from the war vet, who was usually hard to rile. He and Doug were friends, but Neil wasn't sure how to handle the situation.

Marc was. His first encounters in Safe Haven had been bad. *Why should this one be any different?* It was what he would spend the coming days and weeks doing—proving himself. Marc stepped forward suddenly, so the big man was forced to retreat a step. “What are the rules?”

Doug's anticipation faltered a bit as he noticed the dog tag and recon emblem on Marc's arm as he unstrapped his guns. The new guy was a Marine.

“Rules?” Marc was eager.

Doug felt he had to follow through. “It's normally over when someone bleeds, but for you, Jody, it's done when you agree to leave Kenn's bitch alone and get out!”

“Deal.”

Lightning flashed again, closer this time. Marc handed his gun belts to Neil, ignoring his protest.

Neil was worried about the hard looks the two men were exchanging. Hadn't Marc heard him say only men with a death wish or something to prove...? Neil snapped his mouth shut, almost certain Marc was in over his head.

Marc entered the ring. “What happens when I win?”

Doug snorted, trying to pretend Marc's lack of hesitation didn't bother him. Only one guy here had that kind of sand: Adrian, who had been able to bring him down. Even Kenn had been leery of the match. “Don't worry about that, wife stealer.”

Marc's fury was a hard pit of ice as he swept his opponent. He evaluated, chose, and got set as Doug joined him.

“Get ready, *boy*.”

Marc felt his violent streak flare up. He let it burn, vaguely aware of rain sprinkles evaporating on his hot skin.

Doug's confidence faltered as Marc's expression filled with the need for blood, but it was too late to withdraw the challenge. The big man lunged forward, making Marc jump out of his reach.

Doug sneered, confidence restored. "Leave now. Last chance."

Marc's response was calculated. "You talk a lot of shit, big man. Where's the action?"

Doug's advance was fast. Marc jerked his fist up as he sidestepped, catching Doug's nose. He leaned his weight into it, but didn't give the final, killing shove like he wanted to.

Marc felt the bone give way under his hand as the Irishman's heavy hit glanced off his wounded shoulder in a painful thud.

Doug screamed as blood sprayed. He dropped to his knees, cradling his nose in his hands; he struggled not to cry out again or puke from the pain.

Marc leaned down.

Doug flinched back, unable to stop from moaning.

"Don't ever call her a bitch again or I'll finish this." Marc straightened. "Kenn doesn't own her. She'll make her own choices."

"She can't if you keep hitting her!" Doug braced to be hurt again.

Marc stared in shock. "You all think I hit her?" He laughed, loud and hard.

Everyone who'd thought it immediately knew they were wrong. Doug wanted to apologize and then go kill Kenn, but the pain!

"Now that we have that clear, let's get the rest of it out of the way. We are not sleeping together; she is not a whore. She needs protection. She wants to stay here. She won't if she doesn't feel safe." Marc stepped out of the ring. He didn't feel bad for telling them these things and creating more sympathy for her with the truth. *If I can't watch Angie's back, at least these men will be there.*

Neil handed Marc his gun belts back as the other men gathered around Doug.

Marc lit a smoke as he waited for someone to call Adrian or just throw him out.

Neil was thrilled. Even Adrian had taken a vicious hit from Doug, and he'd had to use both fists to win. The state trooper let out a cheer the other men wanted to echo but didn't out of respect

for Doug. That kind of skill was admired here. “Did you break his nose?”

Marc was relieved, but still pissed. “Probably. Angie can tell him for sure. Unless she finds out what he said, and then she might add to it.”

Thunder boomed, but the storm was missing them as it raced by.

Neil snorted. “You sure aren’t what you seem.”

“Neither is she. I hope she isn’t being treated to this kind of welcome. She doesn’t deserve it.”

“Adrian won’t allow it here among the females, but until she makes a public choice...” Neil let the words trail off.

“Until she chooses, they’ll try to get me to leave.”

Neil was sympathetic. “It’s a close group here, and most people like Kenn almost as much as they do Adrian. They view you as a threat to the only security they’ve had since the war.”

“All I want is her happiness. No matter who she’s with.”

“People will see that.”

Marc hoped Neil was right. His anger faded into frustration. One thing was for sure; it was all going to be just as hard as he’d thought.

Neil turned to the men who were helping a dazed Doug to his feet while listening. “Two of you get him to John. The rest of you finish setting up. Students will start arriving soon. Alex, you’re in charge.” Neil lifted a brow at Marc, knowing this story would spread like fire. “Ready?”

“You know it.”

As they walked through the woods, Neil made a mental note for his nightly report. Marc would be considered deadly with his hands. It was a classification only five men here had, and Marc had just dropped one of those with only a single hit.

“I’m going to ask a dumb question now.”

“Shoot.”

“How do so many people know so much? I was in quarantine, and I know Angie isn’t saying anything, so how do they know?”

“Kenn.” Neil shrugged. “His behavior changed. It says something’s different, and of course, there’s his mouth.”

“Damn. He didn’t waste any time.”

“Can’t blame him. I’d put up a fight too.”

Marc didn’t take offense. “She’s even prettier on the inside.” He lifted a brow. “So, what’s next?”

Neil grinned. “Single women and guns.”

“Sounds dangerous.” Marc laughed. “I’m in.”

They walked a short distance through the trees to a softball field. Men dressed like police were setting things up on home plate inside the fenced area. The guards were putting up targets and sharing smirks, but they kept their attention on each other and not the females lining the bleachers.

Except...*they are making subtle eye contact.* Marc realized Adrian only picked nice guys to teach this class. Probably everyone wanted to do it because the students were women and, Marc was guessing, all single. No need of a dating service here. Even the setting was ideal. Towering mountains and thick green trees surrounded Safe Haven. Marc realized it was that way through the entire camp. Not one remnant of the war was visible. He understood it was intentional, but he didn’t agree. The truth was always better. *Right?*

“Come on. We’ll talk to Billy first. He’s running the class this week. Then I want a seat next to little Becky.” Neil leered. “Her smell drives me nuts.”

Marc chuckled, matching Neil’s confident stride.

“Hey, Neil! Who’s your friend?”

The question came from a cute teenager with a firm, young body.

Neil threw a smile over his shoulder and kept walking. “We’ll stop by.”

The girl went back to her conversation with the other females near her, but Marc could feel her keeping track of them. As they headed toward the ponytailed man he had briefly met at the creek, Marc wondered if Neil knew how badly the teenage girl wanted his attention.

“Hey, Billy, got time for a level test?”

“Sure, Neil...” Billy grinned. “Yours?”

Neil snorted. “Funny. This is Marc. You guys met this morning.”

Their handshake was short, civil. Marc waited as the guard scanned him from head to boots before looking back to Neil.

“What level?”

Neil considered, letting Doug’s injury influence him a little. He had planned on a two. “Level four.”

There were murmurs from the women close enough to hear. Six was the highest level they had so far.

“You got it. Come on over here.” Billy gestured. “Marc, right?” They hadn’t spoken at all earlier. Everyone had been too busy watching the wolf corner Danny and his friends.

“Yes.” Marc followed, not sure what to expect as they stepped over to a small stack of hay bales littered with guns, ammo, hand wipes, and first aid kits. Smart, organized... It made him uneasy.

“First, take your gun apart as fast—”

Marc was already moving, hands almost a blur. Seconds later, he slapped the magazine back in and held it out, butt first, for inspection.

Billy hit the timer. “New record, though it won’t make the books without enough witnesses. Pass.”

Billy handed Neil a black handkerchief, still speaking to Marc. “We do one simple test for this level. You have thirty seconds to hit as many bull’s-eyes as you can, blind. Seven or more to pass to level four; a bulls-eye in the farthest target is an automatic go.”

Marc lined himself up with the roller-bound boards, then motioned Neil to tie the blindfold.

In his element if only for this moment, Marc fired once from where he stood. He gave his gun a single twirl, unable to resist. He could have made it from twice that distance with only a brief glance.

“Bull’s-eye! Farthest target!”

The women cheered loudly, now taking an interest in the new man.

Marc reloaded and holstered in smooth movements that drew more respect.

“Man, Kenn’s going to hate you being here.” Billy snickered. “Pass. Give him his paperwork, Neil.” Billy peered at the sheet on his clipboard. “All right. Class has started. Samantha, please. Adrian said you go first every day until you can hit seven of nine targets with one magazine.”

Neil was all smiles as Marc joined him. They stayed on the bottom row of the sturdy bleachers as the tall, skinny blonde moved toward the targets. She barely resembled the woman who had stumbled from a dying horse and asked them for a gun. She had cleaned up nicely.

*Great eyes.* Neil stared. Not like Angela’s, which were softer and changed color, but strong and attractive.

“Hey, Neil. Where ya been? Me and the girls looked for you at breakfast.”

Becky drew Neil’s attention back to her, automatically marking the new woman as an enemy.

Neil reddened. He waved at Marc as the women whispered and giggled. “I’ve been showing the new guy around.”

There were a dozen women here, all between thirty and forty-five, except for little Becky. They wore short shorts or tight jeans, bows, and flowery perfumes that made it clear they had come to snag a man. In Marc’s book, that made it time to go.

“This is Marc. He has trouble making friends.” Neil ignored Marc’s embarrassed protest. “Anything we can do about that?”

Becky glanced at an older woman Marc thought would fit into a Nazi documentary. “Hilda?”

Neil gave Marc a nudge. “*Stop glowering.*” He struggled not to ogle the bare thigh of the teenager in cutoffs next to him. Like the rest of their people, she was enjoying the warmer weather, but the sight of bare flesh was an instant draw in this camp.

Everyone was quiet, waiting for the older woman to speak. She reminded Marc of Adrian as she scanned him. *That deeply evaluating look is going to wear thin.*

“Is he useful?” Hilda paused, cracking a toothless grin. “Single?”

Neil was glad he’d thought to include her as everyone snickered. The old woman didn’t have any official authority, but when a better cook had come, Adrian had made Hilda a den mother to the new women. Those she had helped now followed her lead. If he hadn’t included her, she could have caused trouble. Neil knew she wouldn’t have, though. She was a Kenn-hater and not quiet about it. Still, with her support, Marc would have a better chance at winning over the rest of the camp. Keeping the females happy was a priority in Safe Haven. “He’ll be one of Adrian’s circle, I’d wager, and he keeps company with a wild wolf. As for the single part...” Neil shrugged. “That’s undecided, I think.”

“Then it’s true. He lusts for Kenn’s wife.”

Neil held up a hand, interrupting Marc’s anger. “They aren’t married. Kenn lied. Marc loves her. You know we don’t get to choose that.” Neil’s gaze flicked to Becky and back. “It chooses us.”

Hilda’s expression was hard. “You speak truth, but if they are already sleeping together—”

“That’s none of your business!” Marc broke in hotly. “What the hell gives you the right to ...” He stopped at Neil’s horrified expression.

Most of the women were disappointed, sure he had just blown it.

Hilda waved it off. “Must be love. He is too tense to have been laid.”

Marc’s mouth dropped open as surprised laughter rang out; he was unable to keep from chuckling with them. Several of the females around the old woman were now silently offering to help him with that problem. He looked away, cheeks scarlet.

Hilda shifted on the hard seat. “The females will not follow Kenn’s lead on this. The man will be judged by his actions here.”

“Thank you.” Neil enjoyed Becky’s body heat as she subtly shifted closer. “Anything I should tell the boss?”

Hilda gave Marc another once over. “Tell our guardian he is not seeing the true value.” The woman lifted her voice to include the guards, who had come closer to listen. “When does this class end? *Accidentally* shot Kenn’s tire, my ass! Making me do this again is cruel and unusual punishment!”

“For the men running it.” Neil laughed with them. He leaned toward Marc as the women chattered and stared. “We’re done here unless you want to stay for the show. It will probably be funny. She’s in good form today.”

Marc shrugged, uncomfortable. “It’s your call. You are my agent.”

Neil didn’t deny it. “We’ll go. She doesn’t need a bigger audience to play for.”

Marc noted the satisfied glint in the old woman’s expression as they stood up; he knew he’d pleased her somehow. Because she saw Kenn for what he was and she was glad someone had finally come who could give him a run for his money? Marc sighed, nodding a polite goodbye. He saw Becky, while facing Hilda, hold up a hand to pass Neil a small note that he betrayed no sign of receiving. *Ah. So that’s how it is.*

“It’s been a pleasure, ladies.” Neil bowed, making them all laugh again. “We’ll see you at the contest?”

There were promises and more giggles. Marc was glad when they were out of sight of the hot, female stares burning holes into him. *Angie won’t like this.* He grinned suddenly, wondering if she would be jealous. “That was fun.”

Neil shrugged. “You’ll learn to use things to your advantage too, but first, you need a foundation here. That only comes from one of three ways. Adrian’s attention is the quickest. Working hard and fitting in are good, but slow. The last option is FND. Foot in the door. Add the women’s approval to any of them and it’s an almost indestructible place.”

Marc was a little confused, but he had no problem with what Neil was trying to do. He was glad he had a friend in the guard, who clearly had a lot of pull here.



“The parking area is next. I need to find out if Kenn got the other refer truck running. Adrian plans to butcher today, so we need to get a rig ready.”

They neared the area quickly. Marc hated to admit he was nervous as the lake of vehicles came into sight. He wasn't afraid of Kenn, but with the exception of a few, these were definitely Kenn's people. Everything that had happened so far confirmed it. The fighter inside didn't like not knowing what to expect.

The wide area was filled with rusty, dusty steel. Almost every driver door sported a flag, with some cars covered in red, white, and blue. It gave the area a feeling of sad honor. It only took a few seconds for Marc to understand the vehicles weren't randomly parked. Some were being shielded. It was hard to steal or destroy what you didn't know was there.

Marc drew in a steadying breath as they neared the group of eight men standing around the front end of a faded blue semi with an open hood and two men sitting half inside the engine compartment. He hated being nervous, but this wasn't like fighting the enemy. He needed to maintain his cold strength and still make friends—that was so much harder.

“Hey, guys. Any luck yet?”

Marc hung back as heads turned to Neil. Marc already knew anything he had to offer wasn't welcome.

Cold attitudes slapped him. Kenn was one of the men under the truck's greasy hood; the mood was already aggravated.

Seth was the second man inside the truck. Marc took a chance by nodding hello. Seth had protested when Danny started on him at the creek, but Dog had handled the problem before anyone else could.

Marc was relieved when the guard returned the gesture, then looked around for the wolf.

Marc shook his head, shrugging.

“Compressor's shot on the trailer, and there's a short in the engine wiring. We'll have to strip it down.” Kenn answered Neil in short tones, glaring. *What the hell is Neil doing with him?*

Marc was a bit surprised at the responding challenge in Neil's expression. The trooper knew Kenn was on edge. It looked like Neil was trying to push him over it. *Adrian missed Kenn's evil, but this man didn't?* It was hard for Marc to swallow.

"We'll help."

Kenn couldn't refuse Neil's offer. He wiped a greasy hand down his dirty jeans so he could light a smoke and suck in enough air to sound normal. "Cris is bringing the truck around. Adrian wants a count." The Marine bent back over the engine, pretending Marc wasn't there. Giving Tonya a workout had settled him a bit.

Seven of the other men tried to do the same while listening for every word the new man might utter.

Neil spoke to Marc. "Keep track of how many boxes and crates you carry. You'll be asked for totals when we're done."

"Should I count each one out loud so no one can bitch when my numbers are good?"

Neil continued as if he hadn't heard, but he liked it that Marc was telling them he was also irritated. Neil was hoping Kenn might be goaded into doing something that would get him in trouble, but he honestly agreed with Marc. She loved him and he loved her. It was simple. "We're moving food. Crates of bread dough mostly, but we have some potatoes, cheese, and oranges. Adrian got most of it at big factories right after the war. A lot of what we find now went bad without refrigeration."

Marc nodded. "It was smart to check the warehouses and plants. Most people wouldn't."

"That's Adrian."

"So you need more refrigerated trucks?"

"Yeah. The dust clogs everything up. We go through a lot of compressors, but we haven't found a big enough auto store that hasn't been destroyed or too looted to have what we need."

Marc knew where one was. He and Angie had spent a night there a week ago, doing tune-ups. It was a small solution to one of this camp's many minor issues, but Marc wasn't sure yet who he would give his ideas to.

“You don’t happen to know anything about wiring or compressors, do you?”

The question came from Zack, Kenn’s right-hand man according to scuttlebutt. Marc hesitated before shrugging, aware that none of them, Neil included, wanted him to fix this right in front of Kenn.

“Very little.” Marc was already sure the loyal ally wasn’t going to let it go. Zack was hoping for an opening to a fight and he’d just given him one.

Neil tried to move on. “Okay, then. We’ll—”

“He didn’t say no.” One of the other men interrupted Neil before Zack could.

Neil shook his head, aware of camp members stopping to observe. Tension was noticed a lot faster now. “Don’t start shit, Jeff.”

The level two Eagle gave him a cold glare. “Shit started when *he* came here.”

The stocky man glared at Neil in a way that said he wanted Adrian to get involved. Neil understood he couldn’t stop it. Marc would have to handle this one on his own.

“So, how about it, *Wolfman*? Kenn won’t mind this time because it’s not behind his back.”

There were murmurs of agreement to Jeff’s taunt.

Marc snorted. “I’m sure he can take care of it on his own in either case.”

Jeff hesitated at the cold tone of warning, thinking of Doug’s nose, but Kenn was listening, waiting. Jeff pushed harder, eager to be the one Kenn thanked, not Zack, when the new man was made to leave. “Come on. What’s a truck compared to a wife?”

Marc kept his tone cold, but calm. “Once you turn your back on something for so long that you’ve created a whole new life, it no longer belongs to you but to the one who cared for it while you were gone.” Marc knew. He’d done the same thing to her all those years ago. It gave his voice a tone of regret the men were surprised to hear. “As for the truck, if Kenn says it’s done, then it is. No one was better at shit like this on *my* team.”

Marc lit a smoke, heart thumping with awareness that he was bringing to light realities Kenn didn't want known. He waited for the Marine's reaction with steady, ready hands.

"You guys talk more than women." Kenn gestured. "Here comes Asswipe with the truck. Let's get it done."

Kenn's tone betrayed none of his anger or embarrassment, but his red cheeks did. A few of the men began to wonder more than they already had been. They wanted to be loyal to Adrian's XO, but only if he was worthy of it. Except for Zack, who didn't have much of a moral line yet, but even he was forced to admit that Kenn had been keeping secrets and then telling lies to keep those secrets. If all that stuff wasn't true, Kenn would have argued, right? *In a heartbeat.*

While the others went to the truck as it came to a jarring stop, Marc waited for Kenn to climb down, letting them get out of earshot.

The two men stared at each other in cool dislike.

Marc didn't want to deal with the fight he saw in Kenn's expression, not unless they could end it all right here. "Her choice, not ours. I won't influence her."

Thunder swept over Kenn's face. "You already have. She's changed."

"You're the one who changed her. This is how she should have been." He shook his head when Kenn's eyes narrowed with more questions. "I saw an undamaged AutoZone in Lincoln, Nebraska. It's a super center, even still had glass in most of the windows. It should have some of what you need."

Marc stepped by him. He was surprised when Kenn wrote it in a small, glossy black notebook with lettering on the front cover he couldn't read. He hadn't expected the sullen Marine to listen. He'd assumed he would have to tell Neil later, but he had to try to show these men he could follow the chain of command too.

The group of quiet, tense men began unloading bags, crates, and boxes. Marc was silent, shut out of their occasional jokes and taunts. As he kept pace, he wondered what Angie was doing and

if she knew the price that he would pay every day he stayed here waiting for her.

## Chapter Forty-Nine

# FND

### 1

**I**t took a lot longer than Marc had expected. They stripped the entire rig from gas to brake pads and headlights, packing and marking everything. When it was done, all of them were greasy and sweaty. They split up with little talk.

“We’ve got a few minutes if you want to put up your tent now.” Neil led them in the opposite direction Kenn had gone.

“Sure. Where?”

“See the two big tents in the middle?” Neil pointed. “Male and female. Now, see the empty corner on the left? That’s where mine was. Put yours there. I’m now in the tent on your right.”

Not understanding but almost sure Neil hadn’t gotten permission first, Marc frowned. “Is this going to get you in trouble?”

Neil shrugged. “Those are defense slots; they can only be assigned by Adrian and a couple other people. Angela is across the bonfire from you, next to the tent the women are putting up for the new blonde... Samantha, I think.” Neil studied the rippling waves of corn silk being blown around by the cool wind. *She’s kinda cute.*

“Won’t it cause problems for you?”

Neil kept staring. *She needs to gain some weight. I’ll talk to Hilda about it.*

“Neil?”

Neil blinked. “Uh, yeah, so...trouble. Maybe with Kenn, but it will tell the camp you have support. As long as Adrian doesn’t overrule it, you’ll get more respect.”

Marc met Neil’s eye at the confirmation of his earlier suspicions. His friend did have a high place. “It’s a blow to your authority here, right, if he says to put it somewhere else?”

“He won’t.” Neil waved. “Let’s get your new home up.”

As they carried things from both Blazers, his and Angie’s personal stuff was mixed up, Marc wondered what Kenn had thought about the identical vehicles. He knew it wasn’t coincidence. Marc believed it was fate that a second match to hers had been there at all. He and Angie had always been alike. All those years apart had faded for him the minute his lips had touched hers.

They were finished quickly; Marc had been putting up tents for decades. He was glad the area had stayed mostly empty because the guards covering the inside of the camp were anything but accepting. The people who walked by were also frowning and whispering as they stared. He hoped Neil didn’t get into trouble with them too.

Marc glanced at his watch.

Neil caught the movement. “You won’t be late.”

Marc kept his tone even. “He must find you handy to have around.”

Neil got them moving. “That’s the idea.”

“Where do I fit? What do you get for helping me settle in?”

Neil’s answer was honest. “Exactly what I have now—more of Adrian’s respect. He asked me a long time ago to watch for people like him. I might have overlooked you if not for Kenn’s behavior. Not many men here can compete with all he does for Adrian. Even I can’t rattle his cage very often. If Kenn considers you a serious rival, and he clearly does, then you must be one of those special people the boss needs.” Neil pointed. “Wait here.” He slid into the shadows behind the tent and vanished before Marc could respond.

Marc waited patiently outside Adrian’s tent, able to smell himself. He hated it, but he had to give them credit. The men had dealt him a tough couple of hours with the heaviest boxes, the weakest bags, the crates that were cracked, the leaking cans of gas. But they had all worked hard and felt like it when they were done. The difference was that he would smell himself longer since his boots had gotten most of the pungent drips.

“Penny for one of those thoughts?”

Marc rotated to find the breeze flirting with a high hemline of a red dress covering a sexy woman with spiteful green eyes and too much makeup. He remained silent, willing himself to feel something, anything, for the redhead. He'd noticed her around; the bright clothing was an instant intentional lure.

Tonya smiled at him. "Like what ya see?"

Nothing. *Damn it!* "You're pleasing to look at." Marc was familiar with the hollow ping of comparing other women to the one who haunted his dreams. Polite was the best he could do.

Tonya's smile faltered at his disappointed tone. "Only ta look at?"

Marc trusted his first impressions. "Beauty is skin deep comes to mind. I wonder why?"

Not expecting that response, Tonya wrinkled her nose as the heavy smell of fuel came to her on the stiff breeze.

"Because it's never been truer than with Tonya." Adrian ducked into his tent, leaving her to wonder how much he'd heard.

"She's trouble. Untrustworthy...the bottom rung of Safe Haven life." Adrian enjoyed her sputtered protests. "Come on in, Marc. The whore will keep."

Tonya stomped away, muttering.

"You probably shouldn't turn your back on her." Marc stepped into complete organization and the light smell of smoke. He sat in the chair Adrian motioned to. The table between them was covered in small, perfectly aligned stacks of paperwork.

Adrian removed a little brown box from the long footlocker by his made-up cot. "Good instincts. Tonya is as dangerous as the slavers, maybe more so. When they attack, I'll have a small chance of seeing it come. She'll try hard to blindside me."

Marc grinned uneasily. She was the only one he'd met so far who wasn't happy with Adrian's leadership. "What's her problem?"

Adrian rolled a thick, neat joint from the green buds in the box. "Power. She wants it and can't find a better way to get it than by spreading her legs."



Marc thought the mirrors sewn into the tops of the canvas walls were a clever way to illuminate the tent. “Neither you or Kenn are interested, so she’s pissed?”

It was an observant question that would give a confirmation if answered honestly. Adrian called those word traps. He shrugged, listening for the calm footsteps of guards walking their posts outside. “I can’t speak for Kenn, but me, no.” Adrian lowered his voice and began the bonding process that had never failed. “At least, not anymore.”

Marc chuckled, understanding the boss man had been there and hadn’t been impressed.

Adrian lit the joint, inhaling deeply. He met Marc’s eye as he got things started. “Before we talk about anything else, I have a question. A lie will get you an invitation to leave. Ready?”

“Shoot.”

“Are you sleeping with Kenn’s wife?”

Marc went cold. The Marine inside sat up and began storing information. “She’s not his wife and no, not that it’s any of your business. Angie isn’t like that.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me it’s just friendship.”

“I won’t. I’m not a liar or a Jody.”

“Sex, then. You just want to sleep with her.”

Marc snorted at the obvious. “You’ve seen her. What man wouldn’t? She’s beautiful, inside and out.”

Adrian groaned. “Oh, God. It’s worse than sex. It’s love.”

Marc said nothing.

Adrian leaned in, passing the joint. “You brought her here and you’ll stay close, even though you’ve already begun to realize you may never have more.”

“I’m not the only one with good instincts.” Marc’s expression darkened. “When it gets too bad, I’ll go.”

Adrian leaned back. “Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

Marc inhaled. “It’s the only thing left to me now that she has her man back.”

Adrian thought he would probably end up liking Marc despite the unwelcome tension that had come with him. He was miserable. Angie was right. Marc would need to be kept busy if he was going to settle in. They needed him, even if he did have an ache for another Marine's woman. "Backing off is the right choice. They were together a long time before the war." Adrian took the smoldering weed back as the tent flap rustled in the wind.

Marc gestured. "What if I told you I knew her before he did? That I grew up with her? Would that help me here at all?"

Adrian's stomach tightened. *That explains Charlie.* "If people knew, yes. Childhood sweethearts?"

"Something like that." Marc didn't hold back on the bitterness. "I was the first hands under her shirt, the first blowjob she ever gave. I taught her to use a hammer, to swing on a tire, to smile. The first love letter she ever wrote was to me and I still have it. It almost killed us both when we were...split up."

The two men finished the joint in silence as Adrian put the rest of the pieces together. He had thought Kenn had the clear claim, but Marc had been her first love. When the war came, Marc had found her, protected her...while Kenn hadn't searched at all. *What a mess.* "Kenn know any of that?"

"No. She doesn't think he can handle it. I agree."

"I don't."

"You don't really know him."

Adrian took offense. "Let me tell you what these people know. She's his. He's been telling us that all along. We've had no reason to doubt him. She was on her way to him when he found her."

Adrian's look was hard. The note-taking Marine inside Marc wanted to answer it. "If she was coming to him, then why is she avoiding being alone with him? She spent the night in *Charlie's* tent. She came for her son and she was hoping to find people she could build a life with. She hates Kenn."

Adrian knew it. He also knew Angela longed for a place with people who could accept her for what she was—special. But he also needed more of the past, more of the truth. He waited to see if Marc would reveal it to get his point across.

Marc gave the leader what he wanted. “She spent a lot of years unhappy. She deserves the chance to start over, the chance to be loved and protected. None of those are things your heavy-handed pet can give her.”

Adrian’s face turned to stone.

Marc blew out an angry breath. “I apologize. No matter what it looks like, I shouldn’t have said that, but you don’t know how special she is.”

“Yes, I do. She’ll help me more than either of the men who want her.”

Marc shook his head. “Not with Kenn. She can’t go back under his control. *I won’t allow it.*”

Adrian didn’t doubt the man would do something drastic if it was called for. “The females have power here. She can do what she wants if she can settle in and be accepted.”

“With Kenn.”

Adrian blew out smoke. “The camp would be calmed faster, but I mean it when I say female choice matters. We need them happy and spreading around all the good things that come with them.”

Marc almost believed him. If not for Kenn having such a high place here, he would probably be sold. The things he’d stored suggested Adrian was obsessive, territorial, and maybe even dangerous, but he was also one of the good guys. “You’ll look out for her?”

“Yes.” Adrian almost wished he were getting her with the responsibility. “As will others.”

Marc wasn’t sure what kind of place they had come to, but he was willing to give them the chance that most of this camp was already denying him.

“And her gifts?”

Marc tensed, dangerous anger rising to the surface. “She’s gifted with a gun.”

Adrian understood Marc wasn’t going to discuss magic at all; he respected it even as it annoyed him. “So what’s the plan for

claiming her?” Adrian handed him a soda from the cooler at his feet.

Marc opened it. “Nothing. It’s her choice.”

“And if she chooses him?”

Marc was full of pain he didn’t bother to hide. “Try to make a life here, I guess. For a while.”

“So you can stay close to her?”

“It’ll be hard to leave either of them.”

Adrian leaned in again. “My next question is all about you. What does Marc need to be content?”

Marc snorted. “Beyond getting her here, I hadn’t thought much about it. I wouldn’t let myself.”

“The life you want is here, but you’ll have to fight for it.”

Marc stared coldly. “You have no idea what I want.”

“Don’t I?”

“You may think so, but you’d be wrong. I’m a loner. I don’t fit.”

“That won’t get you what you want. I assume Neil told you about FND work?”

Marc sighed, annoyed and yet impressed by the ambush. Adrian knew how to accomplish his goals.

“If you have something to prove, I’m offering you my support.”

“Why?”

The tone demanded honesty. Adrian gave it. “Because she doesn’t want him; she wants you. That tells me you’re one of us, even if you don’t know it.”

Marc liked the words, but he only shrugged. “You talk sweet and make a lot of promises.”

Adrian nodded seriously. “Yes, and I deliver. Ask any of these people. All you have to do is what you already have been. Be patient, pay attention, and react to each situation as it deserves.” He paused pointedly. “And be useful to me, of course.”

Marc had expected it. “I can do that.”

“Good. FND is the hardest and most respected way to earn a place here.”

“I don’t understand all of it yet, but after this morning, I’m pretty sure I owe Neil a case of beer.”

Adrian crushed out his smoke, buzzing pleasantly. “Neil is a good guy. He has a cement place here. You couldn’t have a better reference.”

Marc stared. “Except yours.”

Adrian leaned down to pick up a manila envelope from his open footlocker. “You’ll have that when you need it. I have to ask you to stay away from her until she makes the official choice. I have great and shitty work for you, though a lot of it will be behind-the-scenes things you won’t get much credit for.”

The decision was an easy one for Marc. There had to be something to take the place of his time with Angie. “Like being a Marine. Shut up when someone asks a question they shouldn’t have, and fight until you win or die. Been doing it for a long time. No reason why that should change here.”

Adrian was pleased. “Good. We’ll start with the FND.”

Marc took the twin of Kenn’s notebook when it was held out to him, reading the word *Eagle* in glossy print on the front. Kenn would be pissed about this too. “Let me guess. You need someone to shovel dog shit?”

The observant leader snorted. “Close enough. I need a complete inventory and organization system for the supply trucks; maybe an alarm of some kind.”

“How many trucks and do I count supplies?”

“Just the semis for now. I also need to know what’s being used, a sign out system or something. Until it’s ready, Kenn, the cook, and the doctor will give you their lists.”

“Kenn?”

Adrian nodded. “He’s above you in rank, but on some things, you’ll report directly to me. This is one of them.”

“Sounds like fun.” Marc wasn’t anxious for all the awkward moments.

Adrian shrugged ruefully. “Highly improbable.”

“Start in the morning?”

“Yes, the earlier the better. Now, the no credit labor. I need a lethal defensive plan.”

Marc caught the tone. “You’re worried about being attacked.”

Adrian sighed. “Yes. We have food, water, fuel, women. Someone will eventually try to take them. I intend to be ready. But I don’t want a battle plan to trigger or escalate a war...”

Images stirred in Marc’s tactical mind. “You want a plan to *end* one.”

“Yes.”

Marc knew Adrian was thinking of someone specifically. Did Safe Haven have enemies? *Is that why undercover guards lurk in the shadows? I’ve been on bases with less security.*

“I want to catch them by surprise, then kill as many as I can.”

*Ah, the slavers. Adrian has big ambitions* Marc nodded. “Give me a few days.”

“My eyes only.”

“Not even Kenn’s?”

“No, but he did give me the idea to talk to you about it. He said you were good at shit like this.”

Marc shrugged. “We worked well together, but we were never friends.”

“It’s too bad you both want the same woman. You guys probably would have been great here together.”

“It’s more like ironic.” Marc stood, understanding the meeting was over. “Can’t wait to see how fate screws with us next.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Sergeant.” Adrian held out a hand.

Marc didn’t hesitate to shake. “You know it.”

Marc wasn’t surprised to find Neil waiting for him as he came from Adrian’s orderly tent. “What’s next? Roof jumping? A visit to the lion’s den?”

Neil chuckled. “We have time for one more stop before we get a shower and lunch.”

Marc snorted as they passed clusters of people going to the mess, none of them friendly. “You must enjoy your days off.”

“This is it for the week.” Neil shrugged. “I can’t sit on my ass when there’s so much to be done.”

“Point taken.” Marc’s good feeling about Neil increased. “So what’s next?”

Neil leered. “My tent for a beer and guy talk.”

Marc laughed, relieved. *Finally, something I can enjoy!* “You lead, I’ll follow.”

Neil gave him a long, searching stare. “It will probably be the other way around before long. Come on. Let’s get to know each other.”

## 2

When Neil and Marc stepped into the short mess line a while later, they were cleaned up, buzzed, and talking comfortably while ignoring the cold and curious stares.

The wind had died down, removing the chill. Neil saw Marc scan their surroundings, then sweep the forty or so people having lunch. *He’s searching for Angie.*

They got their trays. When Neil led them around Adrian’s crowded center table, the number of frowning people doubled.

Marc noticed. “You usually sit with Adrian?”

Neil nodded as they sat side-by-side, backs to the truck wall. “First time I haven’t since the day he changed my life.” Neil squirted a gob of ketchup onto his fries.

Marc frowned. “Changed your life how?”

Neil was aware of how many hostile glares he was getting, not just from Kenn, but also from the camp and the Eagles. “The day he asked for the help I’d been waiting all my life to give. For you, that’s today. You just don’t realize it yet.”

Marc acted as if he understood; he almost did. Adrian had handpicked these men, given them authority and respect. That kind of bond ran deep. “So shouldn’t you be over there?” Marc groaned as the crisp fish melted in his mouth. “Mmm... I haven’t had fish since December. This is great.”

Neil salted his messy fries. “We found a farm back in Utah and spent three days cleaning and freezing. We also kept some live tanks for when we settle down somewhere.”

Marc was impressed again. He was surrounded by order and efficiency, and like Angela had been, he was a bit overwhelmed. There were women wearing fake nails and too much perfume; dogs with bright collars walked between the trucks. Picnic baskets and coolers were being filled and noises echoed from every direction—voices, barking, dishes rattling, engines revving. But there were other signs too, like the heavy security that said it hadn’t always been this way. There were tables of men dressed as construction workers and elderly sitting at nearly every table, but it was the office types that Marc hadn’t expected. These different people were tolerating each other, bonding, finding friendships. It was amazing. How had Adrian managed it?

“You okay?”

Marc snapped out of his thoughts. “Just checking things out. Won’t Adrian be upset that you’re not eating over there?”

“I’d be surprised.” Neil dipped and dripped ketchup. “He knows I won’t tell you anything that you shouldn’t hear, but I tell him everything. You should know that now. I’m more Adrian’s than I ever was my mother’s.”

Marc heard the warning, but he was an open book. “What about Kenn? He has a lot of friends here.”

Neil tried not to frown. “He didn’t at first. It was what Adrian saw in him. He’s been in the thick of things since we found him; he got close to Adrian as fast as he could. Some of us grumbled when he became the boss’s shadow, but when we understood how much Adrian needs him, we learned to get along.” Neil sighed. He and Kyle had to pin their hopes on somebody. “To be fair, Kenn’s earned his place here. He worked hard, and as soon as these people benefited from it, he had plenty of pals. Though I doubt he knows why. He probably thinks he’s popular because of his winning personality.”

Marc snickered. “It’s really because he’s so helpful to Adrian?”



“Yes. He frees Adrian’s time, keeps him from being overloaded, keeps him content with the progress we’re making. Anything that keeps Adrian in charge, this camp will agree to. He’s our strength, and no one, except Tonya, wants him to leave.”

Marc’s brows went up. “Would he? This is a great set up.”

Neil shrugged, watching people for problems the way Adrian did. “He threatened to once, back in the beginning. He said if we didn’t pull ourselves together and do things his way, he’d go. No one wants to take the chance.”

Marc leaned in, keeping his voice low. “Sounds a bit like a dictatorship.”

Neil wasn’t offended. “With any other man it might be, and we wouldn’t care if he left, but Adrian’s a true patriot. He loves this country. As long as he keeps giving back what was taken from us, we’ll follow him anywhere.” Neil paused, gaze going to where Kenn sat on Adrian’s right. “That’s Adrian. Kenn, well, some of us have always suspected there’s something wrong with him. You already have allies here because of your rivalry. When you can tell right off who they are—the allies, not the friends—talk to me again about Kenn and his secure place here.”

Marc was already able to guess where this was leading. “I don’t want it.”

Neil didn’t call Marc’s bluff. “You’ll have more friends that way, but not what you really want.”

Marc was heartened to think he would even make friends. He was able to give a cheerful welcome to Seth when the man sat down across from them, mug in hand.

Seth smiled. “Ain’t fish great?”

The murmur of the voices lifted another notch.

Neil shook his head at the redhead’s mischievous tone. “You’re going to piss Kenn off. He’s sure you’re his.”

“Guess it’s time he knew better.” Seth’s disgust was clear.

“He’ll make you pay.”

Seth snorted at Neil’s warning. “Kinda hopin’ so. It will take some of the heat off our friend here. Besides, it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve stung his pride.”

Neil shrugged. “No, but being sent to babysitting class had to suck.”

Seth leaned forward, leering. “Not that teacher, though I did try. Yummy, yummy, Miss Peggy!”

They all burst out laughing, drawing attention to how well the new man was fitting in.

It took the trio a moment to realize total silence was coming from the tables around them.

Marc found their leader in the tensing crowd, unaware of the connection that had already been made but responding to it. He followed Adrian’s line of sight.

Dog padded through the tables, following the exact route he and Neil had taken.

“Is he hungry?”

Marc nodded at Adrian’s question, shoving the fighter inside back to his place. “Probably. I have what he likes in the Blazer.”

Adrian was impressed when the beautiful wolf passed fingers holding scraps without even sniffing.

Dog sat at Marc’s feet and stared at him with reproachful golden eyes.

“We feed our animals at night, so they gain more weight. Stop by the vet today and pick up a collar so he doesn’t get shot.”

“We’ll do that as soon as we leave here.” Neil wrote down Adrian’s order anyway, just because it was an order.

Adrian stood and moved their way, much to Kenn’s displeasure. The center table had gotten tense when Seth revealed what most of them had already known. Adrian was almost glad to be away from the simmering man. “Okay to touch?”

Marc shrugged, not lighting the smoke he wanted in case he needed his hands free. “Dog loves Angie. She could ride him like a horse, but he tried to eat some of your guys earlier.”

“Our guys.” Adrian didn’t need to look to know Kenn was getting up, storming away from the mess. “You’re one of us now.”

Adrian let that ring as he sat on the bench across from Marc, extending his hand.

Marc slid his own toward his gun, knowing he would have to shoot his friend if Dog bit Safe Haven's beloved leader. The camp would demand it. He tried to tell Dog that silently, but he wasn't sure it had gotten through without Angie nearby to direct things.

Adrian also understood the risk, but he had to show them he approved of both man and beast. They would fall in line where they belonged.

Dog flinched as Adrian tried to touch him; the skin around his teeth drew back.

Adrian understood. Like its owner, the wolf wanted things on his own terms. Adrian put his hands on his knees, palms up.

Almost immediately, Dog advanced to nudge his fingers with a cold nose.

The witnesses were able to breathe again.

Adrian glanced up as his hands caressed the softest fur he'd ever felt. "Tell Chris at least purple."

Marc knew Neil would fill him in.

Adrian's next words were sharp and clear in the watchful silence of the mess. "Do you plan to let him roam free? Not worried he won't return?"

The double meaning was obvious. Marc chose his words carefully, aware of the wolf placing himself between Adrian and the rest of the camp. *What is this feeling, this need to serve Adrian that everyone else feels except me and Tonya?* "You're the boss, so his roaming free is up to you, but no, I don't worry. I've never chained him. Who am I to keep him if he doesn't want to be with me?"

Adrian liked the answer. So did everyone else who heard it. Kenn was right about this one. Marc was definitely fast on his feet. Adrian stood slowly, sweeping the curious mess as the wolf stayed by him. At least he'd converted one of the two targets today. The man would take more effort. "Level tests tonight, then the poker tournament."

Earning scowls from Kenn's allies, Adrian included Marc by jerking a thumb toward Dog. "Bring the wolf. We'll see if we can get him drunk."

Marc laughed with everyone else, but the minute Adrian was out of sight, the mood of the emptying mess became cold again.

“They’ll come around.” Neil grunted. “What you should worry about is that collar. Red is the most dangerous, with purple right below that. Only four dogs here have made it that far. If the wolf doesn’t pass, you’ll have to chain him up when you’re not with him.”

Marc blew out a sigh as he patted Dog’s chest. “Sorry, boy. Looks like I’m not the only one doing tricks.”

Marc noticed Seth scanning the shadows of the camp. *Is he checking in with an undercover guard? Yes.* Marc stored it. “Wanna come along?”

Seth nodded as he stood up. “Yeah, but I have a shift right now.” He stared at Neil for a brief second. Marc read an agreement on something.

“I’ll hear about it; heard a lot already.” Seth faded into the shadows near the path Adrian had taken.

*He’s Adrian’s guard. Damn. He’s good, coming right into the mess like that. I bet the camp people don’t know.* Marc was happy with his powers of observation, and his progress with a few people. He’d made two friends here, and that could be all the difference between sticking it out for a while and running in two weeks or a month.

Marc sighed, cleaning up his mess like Neil was doing. If he wanted to settle in with these people, he needed to earn a place by Adrian, that was clear. Marc didn’t actually want it. He longed to be alone with Angie and their son, who was avoiding him so far. But he already knew Angie wasn’t leaving. This was a good place, with good people. Safe Haven held strong survivors who needed what she had to offer; she would be stupid to go now that she knew there was a place for her.

*What about you?* his selfish side asked. *Doesn’t your happiness matter?*

Marc pushed it away. *I’m not Kenn. My needs and wants don’t come before hers anymore. I’ve already made that mistake. I’m not doing it again.*



Chapter Fifty  
**Testing...**

1

“**I** have to go.” Angela pulled off her gloves.

The surly vet didn’t look up from his tray. “Shift’s done. Whatever mistake you made, it’s okay now.”

Angela wiped at the sweat rolling down her neck as Charlie gathered their trash. “I wasn’t sent here. I’m on my own time. I’ll be back.”

Angela enjoyed the vet’s surprise. For some reason, she was determined to show him that not all females were useless, the same way not all men were.

When Angela arrived at Adrian’s tent, he was sitting inside the open flap at a small card table with an empty chair across from him. Angela hoped she didn’t smell like what she’d been doing all morning.

“You’re late.” Adrian was aware of how much attention followed her. Tonya was sexy, but Angela had taken the top spot in that category even when she’d been covered in months of travel. Now that she’d cleaned up, Tonya had been forgotten.

“Sorry.” Angela unbuttoned the filthy white overcoat, leaving it outside.

Adrian saw her careful look around before coming in. *Checking for threats? An escape route? Would Marc have taught her things like that? How much does she already know?*

“We were worming the pigs. I lost track of time.”

“Kenn has you on a schedule already?”

Adrian’s displeasure was obvious; she hurried to explain. “No, I volunteered. Chris needs help.”

Distracted, Adrian observed her jeans and tank top. It was what the other women here wore, but on Angela, it was so

attractive that *obscene* came to mind. “That’s one of the best excuses I’ve heard. Have a seat.”

She did, noticing his tent was impeccable. He preferred things to be in their proper place. So did she, but not to this extreme. There were no personal items in sight, not a speck of dust or trash, but there were two guns on his pillow. *What a contradiction Adrian is.*

“How’s the first day on your own been?” Adrian was guessing it hadn’t been great.

Angela shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

Adrian lit a smoke.

Their eyes met over the dancing flame of the flag-wrapped lighter; Angela could feel doors rattling and voices whispering.

Adrian didn’t want to let go of the connection. He could feel something trying to happen, but the sounds of people moving by outside said everyone could see them. He leaned back, setting the hot lighter upright on the small table.

Angela blinked. The witch was telling her about new doors that had just appeared and then vanished again. Doors to the future. “Sorry. I didn’t get much sleep.”

“I won’t keep you long.”

She smiled, a genuine one this time. “It’s okay. You’re better company than Chris.”

Adrian noted her occasional glance toward the flap. It reminded him of Neil and Kyle. She was very alert for a female. “I’ve heard that. It’s why he has no help.”

“I’d mention it to him, but I’m pretty sure he already knows.”

Adrian snorted. “He should. We’ve all talked to him about it.”  
Something banged outside.

Angela tensed, but didn’t draw her gun. She flashed a quick look of apology. “I haven’t settled in with all the noises yet.”

Adrian lifted a brow. “That sounded military.”

“Marc taught me a few things.”

Her tone was almost hostile. Adrian changed the subject. “Are you and Chris getting along?”

Angela shrugged. “He ignores me until he needs something. I roll my eyes a lot. Does that count?”

Adrian chuckled. “Most people take a few days to settle in, but we can start your schedule tomorrow if you’d rather stay busy.”

She nodded right away, aware that he’d recognized her need and saved her from asking. “Yes, please.”

“Good. You’ll be with John for a while, but you’ll move up to our second doctor soon. It will help the women here come to us with their problems. On top of all the other benefits, of course, but females are a priority for me. I’d like you to encourage them to tell you about any issues they’re having, medical or otherwise.”

“Sure.” Angela understood he also expected to be told what those were. He was smart to do it that way, and above most men because he knew it would work. He understood females more than even Marc did.

“You’ll pull four shifts a week with John, a self-defense or gun class twice a week, and eventually you’ll teach something, probably first aid. After that, if you have energy to burn, you’re free to volunteer for anything you want. Does that work for you?”

Thoughts of what those classes and interactions might be like came to her. Angela was again grateful to Marc that she could do more than hold her own. “Yes.”

“If you find something that fits, a certain shift or day off, tell me or Kenn, and we’ll put it on your schedule permanently.” Adrian already knew she would come to him, not Kenn. “Anything else you need?”

“Yes. I have a tent I’d like to put up. Does it matter where?”

“I had that taken care of a little while ago.” Adrian changed the subject again. “You’re welcome to sit with us at mess.”

Angela bobbed her head in acceptance, storing that. She’d needed two things upon waking this morning. Adrian had handled them both. “Thanks. What are we having?”

“Tuna helper today. Beans and ham tomorrow.”

Angela lifted a brow. “Real ham? With cornbread?”

“Yes.”



Angela sensed he wanted her to stay longer, but he also didn't want to push her like he had yesterday. Adrian was a complicated man. "Happy butchering." She paused. "You have one?"

Adrian nodded. "Says he was for twenty years. We'll find out."

She waited for more. When there was only silence, she took the hint. "Well, I guess I'll go find out if Chris has any fingers left to flip off people with."

Adrian chuckled, wanting more, wanting to talk, but he'd pushed her yesterday—too hard, upon hindsight. He had chosen not to bring it up today despite asking her here to talk. She needed time. He was impressed that she'd already been helping, though.

He had expected her to hide in her tent or at least join Neil and Marc, whose adventures this morning were already providing stories. Adrian was sure the level of those escapades was a bit more than even Neil had expected. Three camp members had come by to express their displeasure at Doug being hurt, but they had conveniently forgotten that Kenn had done the same thing when he first joined. Adrian had reminded them of it.

Angela paused at the flap, drawing his attention. "You okay?"

Surprised by the question, Adrian nodded. "5-by."

The witch jumped forward. *Less stress. Your heart needs a break.*

Adrian blinked, caught off guard.

Angela left before he could respond.

## 2

Neil and Marc were in the animal area shortly after leaving the mess, walking by animals that grazed and dozed. Marc picked out sheep, goats, a small herd of cows, deer, chickens. In the corner of the small farm was a pup tent with a big desk in front of it. A large metal examining table was attached to the side of the mud-splattered vinyl. Surrounded by a thick green forest, the area had the feel of a petting zoo. There were moos, clucks, meows, barks,

and under it all, the voices and footsteps of Eagles and camp members moving by.

In the center ring of this circus, a tall, angry looking man in a dirty white coat was wrestling with a big, orange cat on the metal table. He was trying to examine its bloody ears and getting nowhere.

Marc automatically came forward to help, holding the tom while soothing, rubbing. The husky cat calmed, letting the vet smear a thick, yellow salve over its wounds.

In response, Chris walked away, leaving him to keep the restless feline on the table.

Marc shot Neil a scowl as the vet disappeared into the tent without a word. "A little help?"

"That's what you get for jumping in without asking first." Neil snickered. "Besides, it's just a little pussy."

Marc laughed with him, trying not to get scratched when the cat bushed up. It had spotted the wolf.

Marc blocked its view, wincing as a sharp claw pierced his wrist like a needle, then another. Before the next one could, he followed his instinct. "No. Stop. Stay."

Dog dropped to his haunches; the cat withdrew its claws from Marc's stinging skin.

"Is he full blooded?" Chris had come from the tent with a syringe and a thin blue collar.

"No. At least, I don't think so. He looks the part, but sometimes he acts exactly like a dog."

The vet's hands were gentle and quick on the cat as he relieved Marc of the purring feline. "You're good with animals."

Marc saw Neil's surprise at the compliment. "They're easier to make friends with."

The vet didn't respond to the hint. He took the cat to a small stack of carriers and put him inside. "You'll have to register the wolf or one of the camp's young guns will shoot him by accident."

"That must be why we're here." Neil used the same level of sarcasm they were getting. "Do you have time?"

"Sure. I was about to take a break anyway."

The words carried annoyance. Marc wished Angie were here to tell him what the man's problem was.

"I had to leave for a while, and even though I told him I would, he didn't think I was coming back." Angela flashed a smile as she joined them, heart thumping when Marc said a silent hello.

Only Marc saw the vet's expression brighten before it was quickly hidden away.

Angela went to the vet. "Sorry. Long lines."

"I'm used to not having help."

Marc frowned at the bitter tone.

Angela pulled her dirty overcoat back on. "I mentioned that to Adrian. So what's next?"

The vet snorted. "Next was the cats I did while you were gone." The vet pretended he didn't care that she had spoken to Adrian on his behalf. It was something Kenn or Neil should have done. "Now is the wolf. We'll draw blood and give the same vaccinations as the dogs. It's all in the tent. Think you can find it?"

Angela moved that way without answering, aware of Marc glaring.

His scowl grew when Chris stole a quick peek at her retreating rear.

"I'll do the physical exam first."

Before Marc could tell him anything, the vet bent down and got busy, fingers gentle, knowledgeable.

Dog stayed still, not growling but tense, until the man's hands slid between his legs. Then he jerked back, baring his teeth.

"Easy, boy." Marc rubbed Dog's rigid ears and hoped the vet hurried.

"He's in good shape." Chris examined the sturdy neck and the muzzle. He didn't bat a lash when the wolf nipped at his fingers. Instead of fear, the vet flicked the animal on the nose, drawing a small, surprised yelp. "No. Stay."

The vet continued the exam.

Marc was impressed when Dog relaxed.

The vet looked up. "Stud or worker?"

"What's the difference?"

Neil spoke up. “We don’t have pets here. Animals are either food or security unless they’re breeders. Studding means being chained up.”

Marc frowned. “And the workers?”

“He passes an obedience course and gets put to work. He can do both, but workers are harder to breed for some reason.” Chris turned to go get what he needed from the tent.

Angela was there to hand him the syringe and a long, plastic tube with a blue ring on the end. “Very organized system you’ve got in there. Even an idiot can find what he needs.”

Chris sniggered, but said nothing as he drew blood from the wolf’s leg.

Neil was surprised when the big animal didn’t budge. He didn’t seem to feel it.

The vaccinations did draw a reaction. All done at the same time, it caused Dog to bare his teeth, but he didn’t snap or bite.

Neil wondered if Angela’s glazed eyes had anything to do with that.

“What’s the course he has to pass?” Marc fought to keep his eyes from Angie as she took the tubes of blood to the tent while writing on them.

“Commands first.” Chris gestured. “Have him do the basics. I may add some.”

Marc pointed at the wolf. “Heel, Dog.”

The animal came to his side.

Marc threw an arm out. “Up and over, by three.”

The wolf leapt almost straight up, clearing Marc’s arm. Upon landing, he repeated the exact movement twice more before returning to his master’s side.

“Pass.” The vet studied the alert animal for a moment, then turned toward the tent.

Neil blew out a frustrated breath at the man’s rudeness.

Marc nodded his agreement.

A few minutes later, they both stepped closer to the tent at the sounds of rustling clothing and grunting.

“Pull on the damn thing! It doesn’t bite!”

“I’m trying not to rip it off. It’s old.”

“That sucked! Next time, I’ll do myself!” The vet stomped from the tent.

Angela came out behind him, snickering at Marc and Neil.

Chris was wearing a padded training suit. He suddenly swung around toward Angela.

All three men saw her flinch, hand going for her gun, then the wolf flew by them, responding to her need without a single word spoken.

Those who had stopped to watch gasped in alarm at the quick blur Dog became as he streaked toward the vet.

Dog jumped for the throat and got a padded arm instead. He let go and lunged upward, latching onto small soft padding; then skin as his teeth broke through.

When Chris dropped to his knees, struggling to push him away, Marc gave a sharp whistle.

The wolf let go and backed up a couple feet. They all saw the blood on his muzzle, and on the outfit as Angela began helping Chris pull it off.

“So, we’re done?” Neil was almost glad when the vet shrugged away from Angela’s doctoring touch. Marc didn’t like it.

Angela frowned. “I hope so. He already needs stitches.” Angela handed him a large gauze pad to hold over his shoulder.

The vet’s face tightened. He retreated from her smell. “Not the first time.”

He approached the wolf without fear, something Marc respected and would remember.

“Good boy.” Chris gave the wolf a solid pat to his chest and a quick rub of its tense neck, then went to the desk to write in a thick notebook while holding the gauze in place.

The bystanders began to move again, murmuring and muttering.

Chris waved at Angela. “Red collar. Adrian will want him classified as a worker, but I’d like to try breeding too.”

Angela pulled a scarlet collar from her pocket. She handed it to Marc with careful fingers, not meeting his eyes but wanting to. She turned to the vet instead. “Next?”

Neil grinned. *She sounds like Marc.*

Chris grunted. “A real bandage maybe?”

She went to get one from his tent.

Chris turned to Neil. “What’s her story? I’ve been busy. I haven’t heard anything yet.”

Neil and Marc both frowned at him.

Neil tried to be cautious. “She’s going to be our doctor.”

The vet snorted. “I already knew that. Is she single?”

Marc rotated toward the path, scowling.

“You’ll have to ask her.” Neil followed Marc. “Thanks. Catch ya later.”

Marc paused and pointed to where Angela was coming from the tent. “Stay. Guard her.”

Dog padded to her side.

Chris understood this man was someone to her. He recognized the sharp tone of command and bowed to it. “She’ll be safe here. It’s *you* we’ll hate.” The vet turned away before Marc could respond.

Marc walked with Neil, not sure about this place, these people. Angie would be good here, he knew that already, and the wolf could defend himself. As for Marc, he had spent most of his life taking care of number one. These sheep may need a shepherd, but he didn’t. Just because he had agreed to help with some things, and do some quiet work for Adrian, that didn’t mean their boss had his loyalty. So far, that honor belonged solely to Angela.

Marc sighed, trying not to stay mad. The sour vet hadn’t told him anything he hadn’t already known.

Neil pointed. “I thought we’d join a game next. Right now, there’s soccer, cornhole, and darts.”

“Darts?”

Neil took them toward the yells and thuds coming from the opposite end of the sprawling camp. They both ignored the hard,

unhappy glares of those they passed. “Adrian likes to have something on hand for everyone. Tomorrow is football.”

The field was spacious, freshly mowed, and almost empty. Twelve men were there, with no referee and even fewer spectators, giving them one corner of the area to themselves. The field was surrounded by thick trees and ankle tall grass. There were real goal nets at each end, outlined in painted white.

Marc waited eagerly as the game restarted. He had played as a kid.

“New soccer is fun.” Neil wondered if Marc had a weakness other than Angie. If he did, these men could find it.

Marc watched as the teams—one side with their shirts off—yelled and charged the ball as a group. They taunted and screamed, cheeks red as they tripped each other and traded serious blows.

Marc’s heart picked up as he followed the violent game. *Neil brought me here to prove I can take a hit.*

“You can’t touch the ball with your hands, but you can do whatever it takes to get it. First team to ten wins.” Neil thought it would be interesting to have Marc and Kenn on the field at the same time.

The wind gusted, blowing a cloud of dust over the dim field. A group of men rushing for the ball got tangled up and fell hard, drawing blood.

Three of them left the game.

Neil lifted a brow in challenge at Marc as both teams waved toward them. “We can just go play darts. Hilda’s probably there.”

The men exchanged a snicker.

Marc pulled his shirt off and led the way onto the field. *No sense ruining a perfectly good shirt.*

Other players came from the sidelines. Marc noticed they automatically adjusted the teams. Not for the first time, he was curious as to how high in the chain of command Neil was.

There were no greetings as they lined up, no chatter. Marc also wondered how much these particular men disliked him.

Someone blew a whistle.

Marc was immediately forced to concentrate on staying on his feet. He was hit hard, and not just when he got to the ball. He ducked punches and jumped over outstretched arms and legs, but he didn't retaliate the way he had with Doug. He made contact, but he tried to be neutral about it even though the men brought him down every time they could. There were big hits, as well as a couple of dazzling steals that caused men to yell, point, cheer. The small crowd along the sidelines started to grow.

Neil hung back for the first half hour, letting Marc continue to do what he'd done all day—prove he belonged.

### 3

“Out!” The ref examined the newest injury. “That needs stitches.”

The score was now five to one, with Marc's team losing. The crowd had grown to about thirty. When play resumed, Neil was at his side again.

“You're back.” Marc was sweaty and bloody. He had scratches and bruises on his arms, back, and chest.

Neil nodded. “You've shown 'em you can hold your own alone. Now, we'll show 'em you're also a team player. Stick close.”

Marc wasn't sure what Neil had in mind until he slammed into the first guy to challenge their progress with the ball, sending him out of the game with a nose gushing blood. From there, they were unstoppable, alternating as they traveled the field, one moving, the other protecting from as many sides as possible. When the game ended, ten to seven, Marc wasn't ashamed of the loss. They had played hard and he'd loved it. His teammates hadn't protected him, but they had been impressed when he defended them.

When they reformed for game two, Neil and Marc had more men on their side than they needed.

“I'm in for this one.” Seth joined them, removing his shirt.



Marc saw the other men adjust teams again. *Seth is someone important here too.* It appeared he had lucked into two powerful friends. “Threesome?”

Seth nodded as the wind gusted, bringing the scent of rain and decay. “Neil and I have been hoping for someone who can keep up. Too bad they won’t let the wolf play.”

They all shared a laugh.

“Stick close, gentlemen. I’m in the mood.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “That means he’s set to piss people off. Get ready to be hit.”

Marc’s grin widened, thinking he’d been hit already. Then the whistle blew.

They ran together, shoving through the pack that included some of their own men.

Neil kicked the guy with the ball in the leg, knocking him out of contention so Seth could get it. He and Marc ran block, taking and giving nasty hits. Losing their worries in the competition, they scored repeatedly.

Each time, a roar echoed from the crowd that was now yelling, betting, and enjoying time away from thinking about all the hell they’d survived.

#### 4

“Preparing your own meat, class one. Today, we’re slaughtering a pig and a cow. We’ll put ropes around the hind legs, pull them up, then slit their throats so the blood will drain. Tomorrow we’ll skin the carcasses, clean them, cut them, and freeze it all. First, is equipment and preparing the area. We need rope. Measure it by the weight of the animal. For a cow, the rope should be how thick, XO?”

Kenn grunted, digging strong, yellowish coils from the various boxes stacked in front of the trees they were about to use. “At least three inches. Measure it with your three middle fingers side by side, like this.” Kenn held his hand up.

“And for a pig?”

“The same. Pigs are smaller, but not lighter.” Kenn kept digging out gear. “It’s mostly fat and fat is heavy.”

Men were sitting on truck bumpers, hoods, and the ground, listening intently. Adrian’s classes always had an energy their other instructors lacked. He was always the first one to start new things, to try a new setup. When he taught a class, everyone wanted to be there, no matter the lesson.

Adrian waved. “Tell us what’s first, Doug.”

“Canopy over the top.” The big, bruised, bandaged man was embarrassed but determined not to let it interfere with his normal job.

“Protecting your food supply begins by protecting the area where it’s processed.” Adrian dug out a large green tarp and two staple guns as he talked. “We’ll have to refine this, like we do everything else now. Two important things are bird shit and predators that will be drawn by the smell of blood. Who knows why the shit is more important than the predators?”

“Because of E. coli?” one of the rookies asked.

“Exactly. No shit of any kind near any food. One piece of infected meat will kill everyone in this camp.” Adrian let that sit for a moment. This was his newest group of rookies, but after tonight, a fresh level would take their place. He had no doubts about their passing. This was one of the strongest groups he’d put together since Seth’s team.

Adrian scanned his camp.

The short bathroom and shower lines told him people were missing. The faint, excited voices said something was happening *in* his camp, not outside of it. Adrian tried not to worry. Kyle would handle things or call for assistance. “Who can tell me how we’ll put the tarp over that first limb? Without climbing.”

The fourteen men considered, exchanging ideas, and again, Kevin had an answer. “We’ll staple ropes to each side and shoot it over with arrows.”

Kevin was among the few men he was considering for leadership. Adrian was pleased. It was exactly what Kenn had come up with. “Any other ideas?”

There were, of course, but none as simple. No one spoke.

Adrian looked around. “Best shooter here?”

Everyone glanced at Kenn.

Adrian gestured him forward. “Who else?”

Logan, a tall, bald, private investigator from Utah stood up nervously. “I’m next, I think. Kenn got me by one shot on the last test.”

Adrian nodded as another roar echoed from the camp behind them. Louder this time, it made his guts tighten. “One miss is all it takes. Okay. Let’s do this.”

It went about as smoothly as the taking of a life by amateurs can: Adrian’s cut was deep enough to kill; the steadiers were a little squeamish but willing. The pulling was a little too rough, but the branch held and the tarp directed the pungent mess. Less than ten minutes had gone by, and the pig carcass was staked three feet off the ground, draining; fires had been lit in the corner cans to keep the bugs away.

Adrian and his men took a minute, being careful not to put bloody fingers on their lips while they smoked.

“We’ll have two guards here tonight, and motion detectors, so remember that when you come for your tests.” Adrian was eased by the motion he got from Kyle, who had come to the edge of the caution tape. Everything was under control. “All right. This time, Jeremy and I will supervise. Who’s cutting and who’s steadying?”

It didn’t go as smoothly with the cow, or nearly as fast. The crew had to fight to get the ropes around the animal’s stomping hooves. The mess was considerable, but they did finally get the job done.

“Class is dismissed. We’ll resume at dawn.” Adrian signaled Kyle over while the team washed up and repacked the gear.

Both men frowned when Kenn left without a word to any of the blood-splattered Eagles.

Kyle blew out a frustrated breath. *Where did this Kenn come from?* He was nothing like the helpful, resourceful XO they were used to.

Adrian stared at Kenn's stiff shoulders. "Where do you think he's going?"

"Where he shouldn't be." Kyle caught the attention of the nearest Eagle on duty; he followed the angry Marine.

"Observe only?" Adrian turned to avoid a strong gust of wind as he lit a smoke.

"Not anymore. Kenn's been over there three times today, watching while she doesn't know. I changed the order on my last round. If there's a problem, the Eagle will interrupt and say you want him, but not why."

Adrian thought Kyle was wrong about Angela not knowing Kenn was there. "I don't want the Eagles to oppose him openly if we can help it, but pass the word among the higher levels. She's under my direct protection. I want her to be treated as if she's my heir and doesn't know it. Stress the secrecy part. If it gets out too soon..."

Kyle shook his head, mind racing. "It won't. You can trust us."

Adrian filled with pride. "I do, most of them. I trust *you* completely."

Kyle didn't need to ask if the story was true. He was reading it in Adrian's face. "Kenn thinks he has that honor sewn up."

Adrian watched clouds gathering in the west. For a change, they appeared to be moving below the thinning layer of smog instead of through it. "Right-hand man. No higher for Kenn. Ever."

Kyle felt a heavy weight roll from his shoulders. It had been a single, short conversation with Neil during one foggy morning shift, but he had felt terrible since then—like their pact to challenge Kenn for leadership if anything happened to Adrian made them traitors.

"I always knew." Adrian's tone was compassionate, approving. "You have great instincts, like Neil, but your secret isn't one, and it wouldn't be a betrayal anyway. The natural order

is already in chaos. Kenn in charge would tilt us over the edge. He's already where he belongs. He just hasn't realized it yet." Adrian sighed at another loud roar from the gaming area, sure Neil and Marc were involved. "Did everyone check in? Where are the other new people?"

## 5

"Mom?" Charlie tapped on the tent. "Kenn is waiting for you at the parking area. He said to hurry up." Charlie stuck his head in.

Angela tensed, causing the pregnant orange cat to sink a claw deep into her wrist. Chris was taking its temperature.

"He said you'll go to dinner with him after that."

Angela hated hearing Kenn's orders coming from her son's mouth. "I'd rather stay. Do I have to go to the contest?"

"No." Charlie stared at her, eyes saying *yes*.

"I can grab a sandwich later?"

Charlie nodded, not wanting to be the one to tell Kenn.

"Bring a double tray." Chris didn't look up from the clipboard. "She'll eat here."

"Deep six that!" Kenn marched into the large, smelly tent, glowering at Angela. "You've been in here long enough. It's time to go."

The dogs started barking, reading the tension. The vet wasn't the only one who noticed, though he thought he was.

Angela sucked in a breath. "I'll eat here. We're about to start with the kittens."

Kenn pointed at the flap. "Leave now, and maybe you'll come back later."

Angela tried not to shake. "I'm not ready to go."

The vet frowned. *Who is Kenn to her? I thought Marc was her owner.*

Kenn glowered harder. "You'll do what you're told!"

“I’ll stay as long as I want!” Angela hated him as much as she ever had. When she’d told Marc that she didn’t want Kenn dead, she had lied. She just didn’t want to be responsible for it.

Kenn’s hands curled into fists before diving into his jacket. “Angela.”

It was an ugly tone, hinting at violence. Charlie retreated a step.

Chris saw Angela’s hand sliding for the gun on her hip; he stood up, drawing attention as the dogs continued to bark and transfer their unease to the other animals around them. *It will bring the guards soon.* The vet didn’t wait for backup. He didn’t need it. He knew how to handle this. “I wonder what Adrian would say?”

Kenn’s face was a surprised mask of anger as he glared at the annoyed doctor. “Stay out of this! It’s none of your business!”

Chris shrugged, sensing the Eagle now in the doorway. He always knew when he was being watched. It was an effect of being in a POW camp for seven years. “You brought it in here, not me. She said she’s staying. Get lost!”

The vet wasn’t afraid of him. Kenn knew if he pushed any further, the doctor would put it in his report to Adrian. Kenn stomped out of the tent, furious profile promising retribution.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. He had been checking up on her all day, sending hostile waves of warning. She’d known she would have to face him eventually, but she hadn’t expected the woman-hating veterinarian to defend her.

Before she could thank him, Chris shoved another pregnant cat into her gloved hands, taking the orange one. “When it’s time, bring a double tray here for your mom and do it openly so he can’t hassle you.”

Charlie was pale. “You sure?”

Angela gave him a tight smile and reinforced the choice. “Yes.”

Charlie left with worry still burning in his heart.

Angela knew he was right to feel that way. Kenny was a dangerous foe who never forgot a transgression. In case all this self-control was play acting, she would avoid being alone with

him. So would Charlie. Kenn was on the edge. She pitied the person who finally sent him over. They probably wouldn't survive the encounter.

Chapter Fifty-One  
**Right On Target**  
Night Two

1

Neil and Marc's team won the second match. As the dim sun started to sink below the grit, they left the third match, up by two points. Invitations to join their teammates for the meal were accepted.

As they walked toward the shooting area, Marc lifted a brow at Neil. "Did you plan all these encounters?" He paused to adjust his gun belts. "Or, did you get just lucky it turned out so well?"

Neil met the eye of a nearby guard for a check in and got a nod in return. *Clear*. "Both, I guess. I set up the hands. You played 'em perfectly."

Marc grinned. "Thanks. I need all the help I can get."

"That's what Adrian said. Come on. Let's see how you handle yourself under pressure."

Marc fell in step, tired, sore, and not nearly as wound up as he had been. "Today wasn't pressure?"

They laughed together, moving with the thickening crowd toward where he had taken his gun test. The sound of a large crowd floated on the cool breeze.

Marc dropped back into cool and ready when the mob came in sight, noting guns, hostile attitudes, and hard bodies wanting to back up the glares. On the outside, these people were nice and normal in their jeans, jackets, and pain-lined expressions, but underneath, they had a glint of madness that Adrian hadn't been able to erase yet. The leader still had a lot of work to do.

Wishing there had been time for a shower, Marc was a bit self-conscious as they merged into the first constantly shifting group of about a hundred. Marc was careful not to bump anyone, but he



didn't shy from those who intentionally got in his way. He scanned. There were blondes, brunettes, balds, redheads, and older, slower blue hairs everywhere, but no Angie.

The second crowd of people relaxed in lawn chairs and on blankets around two sets of packed bleachers. In this group, Marc and Neil were stopped repeatedly for congratulations on the games or for introductions to those who had heard about it or about Doug. They were only a little friendlier though, and a lot nosier. Marc could hear them whispering about him and Angie, and about Kenn.

Neil gave him a sympathetic look. He gestured at home plate, where bales of hay were stacked two deep in a neat half circle. "We have to sign in."

Marc felt an immediate change in the atmosphere as they went around the chain-link fence, especially from these front rows of camp members. These were the people who had been here for hours to get good seats—the real fans of Kenn and Adrian, and every other shooter except him. They let out a cheer as he and Neil got into line, eager to see him beaten.

Marc tried not to be upset that most of the people here would be happy if Kenn just shot him instead of the targets, eliminating the problem. As it was, Kenn was now talking angrily to Adrian while casting furious glowers at Neil.

Marc dug for his paper as Neil held out a hand for it.

Neil leered. "Wonder how red he'll get this time?"

Marc chuckled. Kenn had definitely rubbed the trooper the wrong way.

Neil handed the green sheet to Adrian, locking glares with Kenn.

Marc was impressed by Neil's sand. It made him try harder to conceal his own anxiety. *Being alone hasn't been healthy for me. I've become skittish around people...again.*

"He's good. Get signed up." Adrian handed the paper back, waving off Kenn's protests.

The furious Marine stomped to the far end of the line, face thunderous.

Marc put the paper in his pocket. "If he didn't hate you before, he does now."

Neil nodded, both of them turning toward the field as four spotlights came on. "He already did. Kenn thinks I'm after his place at Adrian's side."

Marc tested their new bond a bit. "Are you?"

Neil grinned across the line of shooters, silently taunting Kenn. "Negative, but since it bothers him to think it, why should I say different?"

Marc laughed. "I knew I liked you."

The men signed up and got in line. While they waited, Marc noticed a lot of space between them and the other shooters. He was glad Neil stayed by him. There were several hard stares from the other end of the line, but especially from those surrounding Kenn. Zack's glares were bordering on dangerous. *I might have to watch out for that one.*

Seth was a few spots down, talking with Doug, whose taped nose and discolored face was drawing a lot of attention from the camp people who hadn't heard about it yet. Marc met Seth's eye; he nodded to him.

Marc's gut tightened when both Seth and the burly man next to him stepped out of line and strolled his way.

Marc's hand tensed; he knew a little more of how Angie felt when he had to fight not to draw on the pair. He really had lost some of his edge.

The first few rows of people went still. Marc could feel them waiting to be avenged, as if he was a part of the old world that still needed to be punished.

Tension rolled over the crowd, drawing more of the rear groups forward. The practice fire from the contestants stopped as Doug locked glares with him. The big man's eyes bored into his as he and Seth stopped a few feet away.

"This time, no flinching," Marc warned. "I'll finish it."

Doug held out a hand. "Welcome to Safe Haven."

Marc shook, just as surprised as the disappointed and muttering crowd.

“Good luck. You’ll need it.”

“Thanks. You, too.” It wasn’t much, not in the grand scheme of things, but it was significant to these people. Marc could tell by the fresh fury on Kenn’s face. He’d thought Doug was one of his too, especially after hearing Doug had tried to stand up for him.

Seth stayed by Marc and Neil as Doug went back to his place in line; all of them openly enjoyed Kenn’s anger.

Kenn spat toward the big man.

Doug flipped him off.

Everyone laughed.

*It’s been an interesting day with Angie’s man out of the QZ.* Neil gestured. “Doug’s never been knocked down with a single hit. Only two men have brought him down at all, and some think Kenn cheated with the kick to the balls.”

Marc was able to imagine Kenn doing it that way. He would have been declared the winner when Doug couldn’t get up, but Marc was almost sure Adrian hadn’t liked the way he’d accomplished it. Adrian also probably didn’t like how his men were now deserting Kenn, but Marc loved it. Let the Marine suffer a little of what he’d dealt out over the years. How many new recruits had Kenn sent packing with stupid jokes and extra labor? How many female Marines had he harassed until they’d transferred out? *What does Adrian see in Kenn that outweighs all he’s done?*

Marc couldn’t think of a single thing.

Kenn was having another difficult day. Though he’d managed to avoid putting his hands on anyone, he had a sinking feeling the teetering edge was about to fall. That feeling of doom had arrived when Marc stepped into the shooting line; he glared at his former team leader, bitter. *I should have sniped them both through the window.*

Marc didn’t see it. He had spotted Charlie threading his way through the crowd. He locked gazes with the boy who was clearly surprised to find him in the contest. Charlie looked older than fourteen. His face carried the same lines of horror as the rest of these people. His jeans and black jacket couldn’t hide the pain

he'd suffered while away from his mother...and father. *How's your mom?*

Charlie stiffened, stopping well away from Marc.

Marc sighed. It was so unfair he'd never gotten the chance to be Charlie's dad. It was years they would never get back. *I'm sorry. You're the only one I can ask.* Marc could feel the battle raging inside the teenager. He let his pain bleed through their connection. *I love her. I always have. Does he?*

The other shooters were warming up now.

Marc lit a smoke, waiting, hoping...

*She's tired and lonely and in danger, and I hate it. Let her go so he'll stop being mad!* Charlie glared. *He'll hurt her. You have to leave!*

Marc didn't answer. When the MC asked Marc if he wanted a few warmup shots, eager to see what he could do, Marc refused. Knowing Angie was unhappy, *in danger*, had put him on edge again. Marc surveyed the set up activities, nerves gone. This was when he was at his best.

Adrian stood on the pitchers' mound and faced his people. Slowly, everyone quieted to a low murmur backdropped by tents flapping in the cool breeze. He was calm, reassuring, happy with the way things were progressing. His pleasure was their light in the apocalyptic darkness; they always responded to it.

Adrian lifted the mike. "Who will your winner be?!"

The crowd roared in answer. Kenn's name was the loudest.

"Well, let's find out. We'll eliminate one person from each round until level five with a single shot each, then it's two shooters gone each level until we have a winner or need a duel." Adrian gestured at Kenn. "Our previous winner will go first. Kenn Harrison, best gun in camp!"

The crowd let out another loud cheer as Kenn strode out to home plate.

Marc could hear betting going on behind the fence now. "Can I use my own weapon?"

Neil swept the shadows at the edges of the tape. *Crowds and noise often draw trouble—rookie lesson four.* "Most of us do. Any

piece is okay as long as it fires. Adrian keeps extras on the bales for those who don't have their own."

Kenn pulled the trigger once, arm barely moving.

"Bull's-eye!"

Kenn flashed a peace sign.

The camp roared again in response.

The Eagles waited to see if Marc could match him; they wanted him to beat Kenn. The title didn't matter.

The next man up was someone Marc hadn't met yet—a sandy haired man with the feel of a worker.

He couldn't match Kenn's shot. Almost none of them did. When Doug took his place, only Seth, Neil, and Marc were left to shoot in round one and no one had matched Kenn yet.

Doug found Marc again and gave him a nod of recognition, doing it for the camp's view. He'd been wrong. He wanted to show everyone that Marc had his support now.

Doug drew in a tight breath and fired. His shoulders slumped.

"Out of bounds! No hit!"

The crowd groaned and cheered as the big man came to stand with Neil and Marc.

Seth went to take his turn.

"Vision's a little blurred." Doug was amazed someone smaller than Kenn had brought him down with one hit. He had considered Kenn to be his only real match here. He had too much respect for Adrian to even compare. The leader would always come out on top.

Neil scanned the bleachers of happy people. "What did John say?"

Doug frowned, then grimaced in pain. "He said next time I think about talking to Marc, I should just shut up."

Neil laughed.

Marc silently agreed, watched Seth pull the trigger.

"Bull's-eye!"

The crowd voiced their approval as Neil took his place. He smirked at Kenn's open glare.

Neil counted to three, blowing out a calming breath. He wanted to still be in it when Marc and Kenn went head-to-head.

Neil pulled the trigger.

Marc knew it was good.

“Bull’s-eye!”

The noise was deafening. The crowd was louder for Neil than anyone else, even Kenn.

Neil blew on the barrel of his gun for their amusement.

Marc realized Neil was more a favorite than Kenn. Neil was high up here. Fourth or better, because Doug was fifth, and Marc had already met both first and second. *Who else here is in Adrian’s service?*

“Is there another shooter?”

Doug gave him a firm nudge.

Marc stepped toward Adrian. As he handed his weapon to the boss for inspection, he was aware of how many men tensed at his action, seeing it as a threat.

Adrian checked the Colt, then held it out to Kenn, who did the same, but much slower.

Kenn gave it back, barrel first, to its owner.

The crowd quieted, leaning forward.

Marc took it without hesitation, not responding to the silent threat.

Adrian waved them on.

Marc rechecked his weapon as he approached home plate, unwilling to pretend he trusted Kenn.

His actions drew frowns from those who understood what was going on, but it also said he was used to keeping himself alive. He was a survivor, like them, whether they wanted him to be or not.

Stewing about Charlie’s words, Marc saw the bullet slam into the center of the target. He drew and fired in a fast, smooth motion.

“Bull’s-eye!”

The response of the crowd wasn’t a cheer, but a mix of surprise and disapproval. The men in front, Kenn’s men, exchanged uneasy glances. So far, the new guy was a match for him in every way.

The Eagles exchanged the same uneasy looks, but they all hoped it wasn't a fluke.

Marc smirked at Kenn's unhappy glare the same way Neil had, then he joined the chuckling trooper.

Adrian held up a hand for quiet. "Doug is eliminated. Move the targets."

Marc listened to the people betting chores, shifts, guns, and luxuries. He didn't hear his name yet, at least not with any support, but he didn't let it bother him. There was plenty of time to become popular. First, he had to show them that he could hold his own if he chose to stay.

"What's the duel?" Marc followed Neil as they all lined up again.

The crowd continued to mutter and murmur.

"Just that. Adrian picks the target, but the shooters can challenge each other to something more specific, like plates or cans. They go until someone misses." Neil reloaded, smirking. "I have a feeling we could see one tonight."

At the start of round two, Kenn got another bull's-eye.

Marc didn't care. He forced himself not to scan the crowd. He wasn't sure whether Angie was out there, but he knew any contact between them was forbidden. He could feel their son's attention, but he wasn't sure if Charlie might be rooting for Kenn too. It made Marc more determined to drive in the point he'd been making all day. If he decided to stay, he would *not* live in Kenn's shadow.

The rounds went quickly. By the fifth turn, it was clear that Kenn, Seth, Neil, Marc, and Kyle were the best. All but the trooper had scored perfect on every shot.

The watching camp was stunned. The Eagles were thrilled.

"We'll eliminate two each round now, and every bullet in the magazine counts. First shooter will go last, last shooter goes first."

Marc blinked at Adrian's words, caught off guard. As he moved to the plate, he was aware of Kenn's gloating glare. *Shouldn't he be mad to go last?*

*He doesn't care so long as it rattles you enough to miss.*

Charlie's message was thrown in a hesitant blur of hope and confusion. Marc also picked up the unspoken plea. *Be good. Be what we need.*

Marc got set. *I am both of those, son.* He drew in the same easy blur.

Adrian and every member of his command knew it was good before the call came.

"Eight bull's-eyes!"

A small cheer came from parts of the crowd this time.

Marc didn't look at Kenn as he switched places with Neil. The Marine was ready to pick a fight, and do it openly.

Adrian also felt it. He glared at Kenn.

Kenn glanced away, ashamed. Good sportsmanship was high on Adrian's list.

"Eight bull's-eyes!"

The crowd let out a roar of approval as Neil and Seth traded places.

Marc ignored it all and wished he was alone with Angie and Charlie.

## 2

As the tenth round came, it was down to the five of them; Kenn, Kyle, Neil, Seth, and Marc.

Adrian was pleased when all five men again scored perfect. They were good. *What a force we'll make against the slavers!* "We're having a duel!"

The crowd cheered.

Marc listened as Adrian explained.

"We'll do saucers first, five in ten seconds, then five in five if needed."

Seth stepped forward to begin the round, guns crashing. Marc watched him struggle to hit the small white plates as Adrian tossed them up.



“Three hits.” Adrian noticed his bodyguard rejoined Neil and Marc. “Who’s our next shooter?”

Realizing they could go in any order, Marc stepped forward.

Everyone fell silent. Not as many hostile gazes were on him now. He motioned to Adrian that he was ready.

Marc shot the plates out of the dark sky. He didn’t struggle, didn’t miss. His Colt cracked rhythmically as he aimed and fired, fired, fired. He pulled the trigger twice more; china exploded.

Marc gave his gun a twirl before holstering. He was pleased with the small cheer he got in response. Now he heard his name being bet on.

Marc rejoined Neil and Seth. This part of Safe Haven he could come to *need*.

“Five hits. Next shooter?” There was deep pleasure in Adrian’s voice, the kind each of them longed to be the cause of.

Neil stepped forward. He wouldn’t be able to match that kind of shooting. He hoped Kenn couldn’t either. Marc was better than good.

Neil was ready for the first two plates, but the third fell too fast. He missed it, along with the fourth. He got the last one before it hit the ground. Ceramic dug into the dirt as it shattered.

When Kyle came up, Marc narrowed in on him. The stocky guard had been quiet all during the contest, not hanging out with Kenn’s or any other group, but mingling among all of them. As Marc watched, the mobster picked off four of five plates. Marc placed it. *That’s Adrian’s other officer*. Kyle was the missing link in the chain of command.

Everyone fell silent as Kenn prepared to shoot. The contest was Marc’s if the Marine missed even one.

He didn’t.

“Five hits!”

The crowd pushed against the gate and each other, screaming, red-faced.

Marc wondered how Adrian would calm them down.

The spotlights went off, throwing them all into darkness.

Marc dropped low as panic swept through the crowd.

The lights flashed on, showing Adrian in the center of the field, cords in his hands. He unplugged them once more to make sure he had gotten his point across, then lit them back up. His demeanor said to settle down.

They all read it, moving back, helping those who had been knocked down.

Adrian jerked a hand toward Kenn and Marc. Both men were in the same crouched, ready position—as were most of the other shooters, none of whom had left yet despite being eliminated. “We’ll do five in five now.” The leader took a half dollar from his pocket. “Reigning champ picks. Call it in the air.” Adrian flipped the coin up.

“Heads.” Adrian picked it up. “Heads, it is!”

Kenn took his place as Marc watched from his small group of allies. Instead of pushing the jealousy from his mind, Kenn stared at the four of them, recognizing the friendships he’d been fighting for but hadn’t earned. He had thought differently with Seth and Doug.

When Kenn turned to Adrian, his hands weren’t steady enough for this task and he knew it. Kenn was unable to think of a delay; the plates began to fly.

The throwing was smooth, one each second.

Kenn nailed the first three. The fourth shattered when it hit the ground.

He picked off the fifth with slumped shoulders. *Marc’s better than that after half a bottle of Jack. Damn it!*

“Four hits.”

The crowd’s cheer wasn’t subdued.

Marc knew he should let Kenn win, but the thought of all the taunts he would have to endure, and the renewed respect everyone would have for Kenn, wrapped a cold band of determination around his choice. If he wanted to make a life here, one he could tolerate, he would have to show them he wasn’t second to Kenn. He needed to win.

Marc motioned as he came forward. He let his hands take control. When the plates went up, he blew them out of the air

almost as soon as Adrian tossed them. He spun, fired, fired, fired. The last slug took out the final plate as Adrian let go, making the leader retreat to avoid the shrapnel.

“Five hits! New Champion! Marc Brady!”

The crowd exploded again.

Kenn advanced with his hand out and his rage held in. They shook quickly.

Kenn and Zack pushed their way through the mob of people who had rushed the field.

They congratulated Marc, yelling and patting. The three elated Eagles with him protected Marc from all the hands.

Adrian finally relaxed about Marc. One day out of the QZ and he had already made a name for himself. Things would start happening now. Those moments would be hard and dangerous, but worth every risk. Adrian wondered how high Marc would climb. Based on what he’d observed today, that was unknown. Settling in and expanding his goals from Angela to this camp would be the turning point. When that happened, Marc might go higher than anyone expected.

Until then, he would be worked into the ground.

## Chapter Fifty-Two

# Ft. Haven

### 1

**M**arc pushed away his tray, yawning.

“Don’t wimp out yet.” Neil grinned. “You have two stops left on this introduction tour.”

“Why?” Marc scanned the crowded mess. *No Angie*. “Is there someone we haven’t pissed off yet?” He met cold stares and threatening glares as his gaze traveled the bright dining area. He swallowed a sigh. Winning the contest meant little to these hardened survivors now that they were off the field.

Neil snickered. “We’ll attend the bonfire party for a few minutes, then spend some time in the far south corner of camp. That should get the last of ‘em.”

Marc had begun to frown as he spotted Rick in line, a few places behind Samantha. That was another problem Adrian had. Marc understood there wasn’t proof, but he didn’t agree with the saying about keeping your enemies close. “The south end. Isn’t that area off-limits to me?”

Neil was glad Marc had paid attention to the map and rules he’d been given. Neil met Adrian’s stare across the crowded, noisy mess. “You need to be a part of everything he’s got going on here. Your first day with us will be the one we remember clearest. We’ll hang at the bonfire, then watch the rookies take their level test.”

Marc swept the perimeter. He found guards searching him with speculative expressions. Marc nodded to them.

As if on cue, the men all faded back into the shadows at the same time, vanishing without a response. *What the hell was that?* “You include the beer and joint in there somewhere?”

Neil laughed. “Right after we’re done here. Hurry up, will ya? I need a buzz.”

Marc chuckled. He let Seth draw him into a conversation about the wolf at their feet. Seth's welcoming wave when they arrived had caused Kenn to grit his teeth and pass the mess instead of joining Adrian's loud center table.

The picnic table Neil and Marc were at was a double; they were surrounded by the men they'd played soccer with and against. The females from the gun class were in the seats next to them. Samantha was sandwiched in the middle and looked like Marc felt—uncomfortable.

There was a lot of flirting between the two tables. Marc saw little Becky's gaze go to Neil repeatedly. *Something about the note*, he thought. Marc couldn't stop himself from scanning again for black hair and blue eyes.

"She's not coming." Kyle sat on the bench by Neil. He put his back to their table as he studied the one that he'd just left. "She's with the vet. Said there's a lot to be done."

Marc heard the approval, the admiration. "Let me guess. Kenn said she couldn't, so she stayed all day to prove she could?"

Kyle's lips twitched as he scanned the sentries, doing a check in. *Clear*. "That's the story. I'm sure it's true to a point, but really, I think she's just avoiding all of us."

Marc sighed. That was his Angie. She wouldn't rock the boat unless she had to.

"Congrats by the way. You've made it to the top of his list." Kyle assessed the new man ruthlessly. This was Angela's chosen mate if he was reading things right. *Is Marc worthy of her, of that honor?*

Marc frowned. "What list?"

"Kenn's death list." Neil shrugged. "When he snaps, we'll know it first."

Kyle slapped the trooper on the shoulder. "Neil here made it to second after today, and Seth now has third locked up, so at least you're in good company."

They all laughed as Kyle moved toward the line for a refill. It drew more attention to Kenn's complaints and warnings. It was clear that he'd lied.

## 2

Adrian was pleased. It had been a good day. Marc had made real progress; Angela had shown she wasn't afraid of labor, and his people had come through another momentous change together. They had realized his choice for second in command had serious flaws. Now, it was up to Kenn to prove he could control the things that had broken him in the old world. He would either accept Marc and Angela had a place here or he would endanger his own.

Lingering over a third cup of coffee as the mess emptied and the camp went about their nightly rituals, Adrian was glad when it was only the cleaning crew left. Quiet minutes to think were hard to come by.

Adrian hated it that Kenn hadn't come to the table for the evening meal, but it was great that Marc was handling himself so well. He now had friends in high places. Adrian couldn't help but ask himself if maybe it wasn't too late to remove...

No. Marc would never give him the total commitment that Kenn already did. The Marine was born to be his right hand; Adrian had to believe that. When Angela made her final choice, Kenn would deal with it and things would settle down. Until then, he had plenty of work for all of them.

Cold wind spun through the mess, carrying a thick chill. Adrian was suddenly exhausted, but a bonfire party, a level test, a poker game, and rounds still waited. He sighed, draining the last dregs of cool coffee from his mug. Then, there was the gleam in Neil's eye that had warned he wasn't done getting Marc noticed. Adrian opened his notebook and started searching for anything he might have missed.

## 3

"Tell me more about how things work here." Both men kept an eye out for Kenn and Zack in the shadows as they headed to Neil's tent.

“What would you like answered first?” Neil was curious what was at the top of Marc’s need-to-know list.

“How often do you travel, where are you going, who decides what?”

Neil liked that. It was exactly the order he would have chosen. “We’re on the road three or four days a week, sometimes more. We have camp meetings every month to decide where we search next. As for the decisions, that’s all Adrian. Where he leads, we’ll follow.”

Marc nodded. *That, I get.* “When are you on the road again?”

“We’ll be moving out at 9am, day after next to collect food supplies one of the scouting missions found.”

Marc kept his voice low. “Is it a secret, where you’re going? Is that why you avoided my question?”

Neil wanted to celebrate. Kenn had a lot more competition than he knew, and not just for Angie. Marc was beyond sharp. He was the edge of a well-tended razor. Definitely a better match for Adrian’s right. “It’s more unknown than secret. We search, we vote, we search some more.”

“But...”

Neil frowned. “We don’t know. He hasn’t made a final choice.”

Marc realized Neil was uneasy about that. “You guys have been traveling since...February?” Marc was trying to give the file in his mind a creation date.

Neil finished his Mountain Dew and hooked it into one of the two flaming cans they were passing. “Kyle and I have been with Adrian since almost the beginning. Doug came in January. Seth was the first week in February. We’ve been traveling the entire time. We average a month in each state, picking up supplies and survivors. We’ve come to trust Adrian’s instincts as much as you do Angela’s. If he says we go on, we do.”

Marc scowled. It bothered him that people were noticing her strangeness.

Neil felt his new friend’s sudden worry and guessed at the cause. “Adrian hasn’t picked a final destination yet because we

haven't found one he thinks we can live in for long. It's one of the things he has us watching for. Adrian is building a future for us where one doesn't exist, but he can't do it alone. He needs strong help who will support him even when the unpopular choices are made."

"You mean like going into the caves."

Neil blinked. *There's that razor again.* "Yes. He loathes the idea, the same as the rest of these men, but there will be a bad winter this year, whether it comes in August or January. If we can't locate a place and get it ready, we won't survive until spring, no matter how well he cares for us. The first winter will be hard, and maybe even longer than we're used to. He's teaching us as fast as he can, but there are nights he doesn't sleep. Can't, I think. He wanders, thinks, hunts."

Marc didn't meet Neil's eye as they stopped by his dark tent. "I can help. I have ideas, things I've noticed since I came in." He paused, reluctant. "Should I give them to Kenn and keep proving I can follow the chain of command?"

Neil motioned Marc to follow as he ducked inside and flipped on the dome light. "Give it to Kenn if it's small shit that you can't believe he missed. Otherwise, always Adrian. Have a seat."

The tent was a copy of their fearless leader's, but Marc was glad to see jeans on the floor and papers scattered about. Adrian's neat canvas bothered him, especially the lined-up change. *Who spends time doing that when money is no good now?* "Why not give them to you?"

Neil handed him a dripping beer from the cooler, with a paper towel. "Because I'm really not trying to climb those ranks. I can't fill Kenn's shoes. Adrian knows it. I suspect you could, though."

Marc shook his head.

Neil waved it off. "You don't want it right now. Our understanding came quicker. The things we loved the way you love Angie were gone, and he was exactly what we needed, always full of hope to balance our grief. Once he helps you find happiness, the need to repay him, to serve him, will overwhelm you the same as it did the rest of us."



Marc shrugged. *Unlikely. The leader here is hinky. I don't know how yet, but I'm sure he's hiding something huge. I hope I don't have to dig in and find out what it is...because I will.*

#### 4

Kenn had ditched his pals and spent evening mess in his tent, breaking in the new punching bag he'd put up but hadn't used yet. He didn't bother with the gloves or tape, though he had both in his duffel bag. Kenn cast fast, furious shadows on the canvas walls as he let out the humiliation, anger, guilt.

*If only I hadn't hit her!*

That's why the Eagles were turning on him. He shouldn't have corrected her physically, no matter how much she needed it. His old temperament fought with the new man he was becoming, driving his fists. When Kenn finally headed for the showers, his breathing was hard; he was dripping sweat. Kenn saw two new tents up on the female side, one of them across from where Marc's had been placed.

Fresh rage churned in his gut. People would suspect she had done it because she was scared. *Are they right? Is she?* Then how could she keep resisting? She had avoided him for the two days she'd been here, but the whispers were still awful. Waves were sloshing over all sides of his rocking boat.

Kenn brushed off those who wanted to offer condolences or support, ignoring questions and hard stares. He went to the showers, stewing. He had five days before Angela confirmed what everyone was thinking. Five days to keep it all from blowing up.

How? What will it take to get her back under control?

*Nothing*, his mind insisted flatly. *She might not tell them, but in return, you'd have to let them become a couple.*

Kenn flinched, letting the cool water beat on him. He couldn't do that.

His icy heart spoke up. *Lie? Tell her she's free and try to win her back. Use her son. She owes you.* The voice was ruthless. *Release her, then beg her not to split up the family you have. Don't*

*say she owes you for keeping Charlie alive, but think it so she'll hear it.*

Kenn's mind kept talking; he began to feel better, putting the right words together. He could do that. He'd been playing roles all his life. While he wore her down, he would keep Marc busy with nasty chores designed to at least make him complain and become known as a whiner. Kenn hoped it would run Marc off, but deep down, he knew it wouldn't. The only one who could get the bastard to leave was Adrian, and that wasn't happening.

Kenn sighed, drying off. He would help with the level tests like he always did, then he'd spend a couple hours on schedules while waiting for Angela to hit the showers or bathrooms. He would be able to see both of those from a dim corner of the mess. She would expect him to be on duty again, like last night.

First, he would suck it up and do rounds, along with anything else he could think of to earn back points. Adrian was also a wild card, as well as an ace in this deck. He had to be careful not to make the boss think about giving his place to Neil or Marc. Both men were definite rivals now as far as Kenn was concerned. He was glad there would only be one of them around for the next two hours, but he was still dreading them all being together in Adrian's tent later for the poker game he wasn't sure he had been invited to. *Man, life sure changed fast for me.*

## 5

“This might get ugly. More people will support Kenn right now, but Adrian has the final say.” Neil felt he had to add another warning. He didn't want Marc blindsided this time. “There is a chance he'll side with Kenn.”

“Shouldn't you ask him first?” The two men stood in the darkest shadows behind the row of semis that hid Adrian's fort. Marc didn't really want to be here. He was unable to keep from comparing all this tension to recent nights spent by a fire, alone with the only woman he'd ever loved. “We don't have to keep

doing this. I've been a loner all my life. Why should now be any different?"

Neil rounded on him. "Because of the war! Why else? Our country needs us." Neil studied him. "Don't you feel a sense of duty anymore? The one that kept you in the Marines for so long?"

Marc didn't answer. He couldn't lie and say he felt nothing.

"You stayed for the highs and the adventure, but mostly because you believed you were making a difference in the world, that you mattered." Neil gestured. "You can have that here, but it's better because Adrian is worthy of that kind of respect and loyalty."

Marc said nothing, not wanting to argue with his new friend.

Neil sighed. "It comes down to how bad you want a chance with her."

That got Marc's full attention. "I don't understand how swearing myself to someone I don't know, or trust, will give me a chance with Angie."

"Would it help to know that she has? Sworn to him, I mean. She's already been...looking."

Marc wanted to be surprised but he wasn't. "All I see is an abusive man was given a place of authority here."

Neil tried not to get mad. "That's Kenn. Doubt him, like the rest of us, but never Adrian. He would give his life for anyone here. Kenn hid it. Adrian will take care of that, but in his own time and way."

"I'll try, I will. And I appreciate what you're doing for me," Marc conceded. "God knows I need it, but if she chooses him, I don't know how long I'll stay. You may be doing all this for nothing."

Neil decided he'd played nice long enough. "You'd leave behind the love of your life and *your son*?"

Instead of the lie that sprang to his lips, Marc let the survivor inside handle it like any other hostile situation. "That means Adrian knows. Does Kenn?"

Neil was impressed by Marc's reaction and pleased with himself for figuring it out. He hadn't been sure. Kenn and Charlie did look alike. "Negative, and not one of us would ever tell him."

Marc scowled. "Us?"

"Adrian's circle. Kenn's the only one who hasn't put it together."

Marc spent a moment considering. "The Marine I know would have suspected it by now. My bet is that he does, but he thinks it will tip the camp in my favor. He's acting like he doesn't, so it won't come out."

Neil stared. Hadn't he often thought there might be devious things going on in Kenn's mind? "You know him better... Does he have that much self-control? Shouldn't he have at least confronted you or her about it?"

Marc now wondered if that had been the rage behind the slaps on the drive here. "Maybe he has. You should ask her, so we'll both know."

Neil repeated his earlier question. "Would you really leave?"

"Yes. I'd rather die than be here for that."

Neil wasn't sure he believed the man, but he wasn't sure he didn't either. "I'll take my chances. In return for all my hard work, I'd ask that you not talk about anything you see tonight, and that you keep an open mind about what kind of future you want here. Two days is hardly enough time to know."

"I agree, and thank you." Marc smiled. "On my own, today would have been ugly."

"It's not over. Kenn will put up a fight the second he sees you, but Adrian won't let him shoot you. Neither will I."

Marc snorted. "You didn't like Kenn on first sight, did you?"

"Nope. I know a problem when I smell one." The level five Eagle waved a hand. "Welcome to Fort Haven."

Chapter Fifty-Three  
**Pushing It**

1

**K**enn was enduring all the remarks by pretending Seth had won the shooting contest.

The ball of festering anger was mostly gone now that he had a plan of action. He didn't expect Angela to give in quickly, not with all the support here, but he had things left to try. Kenn wasn't sure if he could start over. However, it was significant that he was even considering it; his heart thumped in denial when both of his rivals came from the trees into the training area. The two men were laughing and talking as if they'd been friends for years instead of a day.

*Probably about me.* It was yet another slap in the face for Neil to bring him here. Kenn cautioned himself to be careful. Adrian was also here. He couldn't lose control. He could put up a fight though, and he would. "He's not allowed to be here."

Every head swiveled as Neil and Marc stopped by the flickering bonfire.

Neil's tone was full of open contempt. Here in the fort area, he didn't have to hide his emotions. "Says who?"

Guards murmured in surprise at the direct challenge; three dozen men chose that moment to get a better view.

Kenn tossed his smoke into the fire. "The rules. He's not one of us."

Neil shrugged. "Yet."

Kenn looked at Adrian.

Everyone except the trooper was surprised when Adrian shrugged.

"You don't need me for this."

His bored tone made Kenn flush.

Neil gestured. “The rule is no unauthorized personnel. Marc’s authorized.”

“By who? You?!” Kenn was furious.

“By Adrian. The rules he made before you came still exist. The contest winner gets the title, no toilet crew while he’s the champ, and he’s offered a place with the new rookies.” Neil’s voice sharpened. “Marc is going to be one of us, whether you want it or not.”

“I’ve never heard that rule.” Kenn’s voice was as cold as the wind, but inside, he was burning.

“We have the crews mostly covered now. Back then, we needed warm bodies on posts any way we could get them. Once they were shown the fort and evaluated, they were put to use. All of them are still Eagles. We don’t use some of the old rules very often, but we do still need good men. That hasn’t changed.” With no note of accusation in his tone, Neil’s expression still overflowed with it.

Kenn hated him, knowing he had lost again. “He hasn’t been evaluated.”

Neil blew out a frustrated breath at having to drive in his point. He enjoyed drilling people. He didn’t like being cruel. “He’s as good as Kyle and his team. You just don’t want anyone to know. Give him a test. He’ll pass.”

“Not right now.” Adrian admired Neil’s ambush. “We’re busy. Marc stays. Let’s get going.”

Kenn snapped his mouth shut on another complaint.

Every man waiting to be tested suddenly hoped they didn’t draw his name for the cage.

“Who has inside?”

Doug motioned at Adrian’s question, swollen nose starting to fade into deep shades of purple and yellow. “Me. Kyle insisted we trade.”

“Good. Pick your first sacrifices.”

The big man pointed at waiting rookies.

Marc stayed by Neil, taking a minute to do as the trooper had asked—gather information.

The tent behind them was gigantic, shut on three sides. The outside area was lit by lanterns and the bonfire, as was the smaller tent to their left. Marc saw efficient organization and no boredom or signs these men were being forced. There was only a strong determination to succeed that he recognized from green recruits on the base, and from himself. These men wanted to be here.

“There’s a reason we’re here.” Adrian’s words got immediate attention. “There’s a reason we’ve made it this far when so many have not. There’s a reason we were spared.” Aware that he would have Marc’s ear for the next thirty seconds, Adrian used the time as well as he could. “It wasn’t luck or coincidence, or even skill that brought you here. It was fate. We were chosen to save our country.” He met Marc’s eye before glancing at his men. “More of us are coming. We’re not complete, not even by half yet. Together we’ll be strong enough to start over, to keep America alive.”

Adrian paused, voice hardening. “Now, if that’s too much for you, or you don’t want to think about the future, or you just don’t care, then you shouldn’t be here. Doubts are normal, but they don’t belong in my army. When you’re done and you want out, it’s okay, with no fights or bad reputation. These are things I tell rookies during their first tests. You’ll hear it repeatedly as you pass through the levels because I need you to believe in it as much as I do or this won’t succeed.” Adrian gave Doug a gesture. “They’re all yours. Be gentle. It’s their first time.”

The other men laughed as ten nervous guards followed Doug into the privacy of the tent.

“I’m out here for a while; then we’ll go in.”

Marc nodded at Neil to show he’d heard, watching a large black hat get passed around the remaining males. Each man drew a slip of paper from it, followed by groans or grins.

Marc hung back as Neil joined Kyle and Kenn by the smaller tent that sported a number of banners, an American flag, and a simple name: *The Cage*.

“Trainers.” Adrian held out another black hat to Kenn, who drew a paper and passed the hat to Kyle. Neil also drew a slip.

“I have...number one.” Kenn growled for drama.

“I’ve got Kenn. Shit.”

Kenn snickered at Kevin. The rookie had just gone green.

“I’ve got Neil.” Seth was full of arrogance and unintentional disrespect. “You’ll take it easy on me ‘cause we’re buddies, right? You scratch mine and I’ll do yours?”

“Maybe, if you blow me.” Neil leered. “I only give special treatment to my bitch!”

Loud, mocking laughter echoed from the listening men. Neil never spoke that way in front of the camp.

Seth’s amusement faded, hearing the tone. Neil wasn’t kidding. “I thought we were friends.”

Neil took off his gun belt. “We are—the best—but here and now, that means shit. I’m what stands between you and level three status. I won’t just give it to you or anyone else.” Neil finished his warning as Kevin and Kenn entered the cage. “What we’re doing here matters.”

“I know that.” Seth tried to apologize. “I was just running off at the mouth.”

Neil’s frown didn’t change. “Yes, you were.” He left Seth off balance, unsure what to expect.

Marc saw Adrian’s glance of approval and understood that here in Fort Haven, it was all about the lessons.

Adrian held up the stopwatch. “This is simple. My dog tags are in a corner of the tent. Return them to me, and you pass. The limit is ten minutes.”

Kevin’s fight was almost an exact copy of Seth’s first test. Marc also felt that moment when the man realized he wanted this bad enough to keep going despite the pain and the odds.

When Kevin’s bloody hand held up the metal tag, Adrian was there to take it.

Marc joined in the cheer, connected to them in spite of himself.

“Time?”



Kyle had the clipboard and stopwatch. He glanced at Adrian. "I forgot to hit the button. Have him do it again."

Kenn spun back toward the cage.

Kevin's face fell, making people laugh.

Kyle gave the real call. "Four minutes, fifteen seconds. No record."

Adrian hadn't expected one from Kevin. "Pass. Go to Doug. Next match."

Neil and Seth entered the cage.

True to his word, Neil had no mercy on his friend.

Marc was impressed with Neil's command of his body as he smoothly blocked, tripped, and kicked.

When Seth finally started to get mad, Adrian gave Neil a subtle signal.

Neil circled Seth. "Where's our friendship now?"

Seth shrugged, dripping sweat as he kept moving to avoid the traps. "Rules are rules. I'll follow 'em."

Neil crooked his middle finger. "Come on, then!"

Seth came in low, sidestepping at the last minute to avoid the trooper's leg sweep. He landed two hard fists to Neil's gut that forced the man to retreat.

Neil recovered fast and delivered a roundhouse kick that knocked Seth to his knees. "Do it again! Do it right!"

When Seth tried to, Neil got him in the shoulder with a knee.

Seth lunged.

Neil used Seth's momentum to slam him to the ground. "Get up! Be an Eagle!"

Seth was on his feet a second later; his angry swing made Neil grunt.

Seth hesitated to hit his friend again.

Neil's uppercut was brutal. It sent Seth back to the ground. "Never hesitate! Don't you want this?!"

The cops were both bloody and drenched in sweat, but Neil didn't even sound winded. *Third in command and definitely on that dangerous list*, Marc confirmed for his mental file. Neil was also a lot more than he appeared.

It took Seth almost the full ten minutes, though Marc was sure Neil could have held him longer. Everyone except Kenn was glad to see the two men sharing grins when it was over instead of harsh words.

“Pass. Go to Doug.” Adrian waved. “Kyle’s next. If you drew his number, hold it up and he’ll pick one of you. If you just came from inside, get a number out of the hat and get ready.”

Kyle indicated the larger of the two men who had his number, giving the stocky rookie a menacing stare.

Neil returned, bottle of water in hand. “This should be interesting. Kyle and Adrian suspect he’s gay. They want to expose it to the Eagles.”

Marc tensed. “By beating it out of him?”

Neil took a long drink as Seth ducked into the tent. “It’s not funny how some of the worst shit always seems to have a place, but here, it does. If you can’t fight, this is the wrong career choice. Better that he finds that out now.”

“It does sound like the same old shit.” Marc’s voice was low, telling Neil he hadn’t forgotten where they were, but his tone was offended.

“Try it from another angle; it might help you to understand. What happens in the future when we settle down? Do the problems go away or start up again?”

“It turns right back into what it was, but it’ll take time for that to happen.” Marc grunted. “There’s no need to handle it now.”

“Adrian’s vision of our new world does not include the problems of the past.” Neil pointed out the enormous difference. “He’s tackling *all* of them at the start, trying to eliminate the future threats to our survival. This is one of them.”

Marc could feel himself getting angry. “How did the gays cause the end of the world?” *The things these people tell themselves!*

“The same way the wars we were fighting did, the same way unchecked immigration and economic threats did. Smoke to blind us, it succeeded. No one knew what the government was doing for those years before it all fell down. We were too busy being part of

the problem and killing each other over the scraps from their table. It was the same around the world. We let the war happen because our differences divided us.”

Adrian frowned at Neil’s limited understanding of the master plan on this issue. Kyle knew the truth. Eventually, both women and homosexuals would be a part of his army. There was only one way for either of those to happen—a representative had to step up and carry the heavy duty of being first. With the gays, Ray was their champion. Adrian already knew how this match would go or he wouldn’t have allowed it to happen yet. The females didn’t have a champion. None of them wanted to learn how to take a hit or shed blood.

Adrian moved toward the cage, giving Kyle a negative motion when the mobster would have enlightened Neil and Marc. Like with Angela’s gifts, homosexuals in his army had to be handled one step at a time. First, was exposure. After that, was reaction and possible recovery from lying about it in the first place. Then, the respect for not quitting would show up. If Ray got that far, more would come of it.

“But beating them? What comes next, banishment?” Marc was struggling to keep the conversation private. “How will that fix a future problem?”

Neil ignored the sarcasm. “It won’t fix it, but it will eliminate it from *this* group. And not by bad methods, either. Ray volunteered to be an Eagle. He wasn’t singled out, and if he honestly thinks he can be one of us, truth has to come first.”

“Why not just talk to him?”

“Because he already lied by pretending otherwise. He leers at women, says he has a thing for Becky. It’s gone too far for a simple conversation. He’s hiding.”

“And the camp agrees with Adrian handling it this way?”

“The camp doesn’t know we have homosexuals here!” Neil was horrified. “If they knew, they might kill them. Adrian wouldn’t be able to stop it. That was a part of the old world, and these people will turn into wolves at the sight of it.”

Marc let that sink in. Adrian was trying to protect them? *No*. Adrian was one of the wolves watching for the old world too. He didn't want his camp to turn into a lynch mob and maybe lose leadership. "Why not just tell him to leave? Why go through all this?"

Neil let out a disappointed grunt. "You're so quick on the pickup that I forgot you're a rookie here. Look around, Marc. What does Adrian's leadership scream, more than anything else?"

Marc wasn't sure what to say.

Neil waited, certain he would get it. They all did.

Struggling, wanting to understand how they could all be okay with such horrid reasoning, Marc pushed by his anger to think about the Safe Haven he'd seen but hadn't wanted to acknowledge. "Light...hope... He cares about them."

"Not just about the ones already here, but about *all* life. You'll see it in time." Neil sighed. "Even those we turn away, he misses."

It clicked for Marc. "He wants the gays to stay."

"More than that. He hopes for their differences to be admitted to and faced." Neil understood more than Adrian or Kyle thought he did, but Neil didn't think it would ever happen, so he'd given Marc that view first. "They can be gay; they just can't lie about it. Lying made the old world go round." Neil signaled toward the cage, where Ray and Kyle were starting their match. "That one, however, might not go further no matter how good he does. He's lied too many times. For anyone to be accepted in Adrian's army, that's the number one thing you never do to the boss. We can't forgive it."

Both of them were thinking of Kenn as they turned to watch the match.

## 2

Eight minutes later, Kyle hadn't taken a single hit, and the rookie was on the ground, bleeding and gasping for air. The dog tags were still in the far corner.

"Get up!" Kyle pointed. "Get up or get out!"

Ray struggled to his feet, all pretenses gone with the pain and blood, as the trainers had known it would be. "I belong here too!"

"Prove it. Be a man!"

Ray came in too low, letting his anger at the insult drive him.

Kyle used it to throw him to the ground. He smirked in satisfaction when the rookie let out a cry that was feminine.

Marc saw Adrian's signal. When Ray got up, swinging wildly, Kyle let the hits land. The football coach darted for the tags.

Metal in hand, Ray's fists clenched when he realized he had to get by Kyle again to give them to Adrian.

"Don't hesitate. I'm just a man." Kyle was surprised the bleeding rookie hadn't given up yet.

"Yeah, one who loathes me."

Kyle shrugged. "All our enemies will hate you. Your belief in yourself has to overpower that fear. If you can't control your need to hide or beg for mercy, you won't survive here and neither will any of the others who think we don't know about them."

Ray started to lie again.

Kyle got angry. "Why don't you leave? Take your friends with you!"

Ray's eyes glazed over as he advanced. "You keep them out of this!" He drove his head into Kyle's gut, taking them both to the ground.

As the buzzer sounded, Adrian was there to take the tags the panting rookie held out.

They both stood; Kyle moved toward where Kenn stood.

Adrian stared. "Pass."

Ray gawked at him in disbelief, breathing rough. Blood dripped from numerous cuts and small gashes. "What?"

"You made it into my army." Adrian's voice softened. "You'll pay a higher price for it than my other men."

Ray lifted his chin. "Because I'm gay."

"No." Adrian was proud of the man, but he didn't let it show. "Because you're not one of us yet."

The rookie's face fell inward, collapsing until he was almost on the edge of tears.

Marc swallowed a snide thought. *Everyone feels an urge to serve Adrian. Is it in the air? The food?*

“The war came and blew it all away. We’ve started over, but you’ve been lurking in the past, not sure which way to go.” Adrian gave Ray the rest of the truth. “Some people will never be okay with it; some people will never forgive you for hiding it. All I can promise is the chance to pave a path for others like yourself. You’ll work twice as hard as any man in my army, and you may still never get the peace and acceptance you long for. Be sure, Ray.”

Adrian’s gaze shifted to Kenn’s unreadable expression. “You can survive here while continuing the old ways. A lot of things that are discreet will be tolerated, but unless you change, you’ll never be an Eagle.”

Ray’s voice was icy. “You mean go straight.”

Adrian shook his head. “Change is different for every man in my army. The only wrong choice is lying about it. The truth always shows up at some point. Doug is waiting in the tent for you.” Adrian turned to the other men. “Next matchup in the cage is Neil. If you just came out, draw a number from the hat.”

### 3

An hour later, Marc and an exhausted Neil entered the big tent. The pungent smell of hay filled their noses.

Doug gestured. “We’ll all match for a few days.”

Neil laughed. “Yours is a better color.”

The two men gave Marc a pointed look.

He understood it was another way they would be able to help. Conversations over black eyes wouldn’t just be about him and Kenn.

“The small hay room is an improvising test. The men have a certain amount of time to make something from what’s there, usually a communication device.” Neil pointed things out as Doug went by. “The cubicles are the same, but each level goal is harder.”

“Do you use your own list of ideas or what Adrian and Kenn provide?” Marc watched Seth’s fingers fly over a nice 9mm that his blindfold kept him from seeing while he did it.

“Both. For Doug, who served, it’s also okay to invent his own.” Neil gave him a glance that said Marc would also use his own experience when he got this far. “The big hay room is memory, alertness, thinking. They may have to stare at doors, then use the clues on them to find someone or something. Another level might be asked to view things, then get hit with questions when they come out, like what color were his socks, which window had curtains, or which target had a grenade. The higher the level, the harder the questions. Each member of the team must pass six of seven parts. If two or more of them fail, none of them advance and they all repeat the course with the next group. Adrian’s goal is to have all the camp’s men in training by the time we settle somewhere for the winter.”

“And the women?”

“Eight ways to start a car with a dead battery. Now!”

They were both distracted by Doug ambushing a pair of guards who had thought they were done and drawn his attention with their high fives.

The two men stammered answers.

Neil pointed to a dark corner that wasn’t being used. “Let’s go over there so he doesn’t get us next for distracting them.”

Marc thought about repeating his question but realized he didn’t need to. After watching all of this, he knew the answer. There were no women here because this was man’s work. Few females would have the courage to try, let alone be strong enough to succeed.

*Angie does. Angie is.* Marc pushed away the thoughts. *She won’t want this...* Marc didn’t want to explore that any further. He wasn’t sure he could take it. “I’ve only counted six tests. What’s the seventh?”

“Adrian’s approval. You either have it or you don’t.”

Marc frowned, confused. “He didn’t give it to Ray, but Ray passed.”

“Ray earned it by the rules, but some things will not be accepted by these people yet. What the camp is against as a whole, I am too.” Adrian’s voice rang out as he and the last group of men came into the dark tent behind them. “Ray passed the tests, but the camp’s approval and mine go together.”

Marc nodded. They had his back, and he had theirs. God help those caught in between.

“Have you decided to accept the winner’s slot with my Eagles?”

“Of course.” Marc knew the right answers to give. “If you’ll have me.”

Adrian nodded. “I will, but I must ask. Why the change of heart?”

Marc was aware of Kenn’s furious visage in the group of thirteen Eagles behind Adrian. “I haven’t had one. I just think it’s a good way to spend my time. I like to stay busy.”

“Not enough.” Kenn sneered, stepping by him. “That’s not enough to get you your own team. They won’t follow you for that reason.”

Marc snorted, ready for the big confrontation if it had to happen now. “You’re the only one hoping for power and control. The rest of us just want to survive.”

There was a thick silence where most of the men expected a fight.

Kenn lifted a corner of the flap. “I’d never betray Adrian that way and he knows it. He’s my first priority. You’ll never be a true Eagle until you can say the same. Your loyalty is to a woman; that won’t be enough to earn you a place here.” Kenn stepped into the cool night air, voice a low mutter. “I’ll see to it.”

#### 4

Angela was more than tired by the time Chris said they were done for the night. She had stayed for many reasons, but the biggest was his defense. The vet hadn’t given the impression he wanted to talk about it, which was good, because everyone else



sure did. He didn't want a thank you, so she'd given him her help instead. By 11pm, every animal had been watered, fed, bedded in clean areas, and they had finished repacking everything and put it all away.

"It's late." Angela used lotion on her chapped skin.

The vet blew out their light, then gave her an unexpected smile that revealed a handsome man. "Not for me. I'm usually here until 2am."

"Hi. I'm Angie." She held out a hand, feeling like she'd made a little progress. She was pleased when he didn't hesitate to shake with her. He even added a heartfelt apology as the wind blew garbage from the forest around their boots.

"Yeah, I'm Chris. Sorry. I'm not sociable. It's why I treat animals and not people."

"You do all this once a week?"

He nodded.

She turned to go, Dog heeling smartly. "I'll be here next week, as long as they don't have me scheduled for something else."

Chris stared as she and the wild, yet trained wolf vanished into the dark forest. She was smart, quiet, hardworking; he was already looking forward to the next time.

*Every single male here will want her.* The vet reluctantly included himself. Chris wasn't worried about her getting into his mental doors now. His secrets were hidden deeper than she could go without him noticing.

## 5

Marc saw Angela come from the shower camper and slowed, but he didn't go to her. Instead of making eye contact that wasn't allowed, Marc counted how many men were staring, hoping she would respond. These were the proven men; they had a place here that Marc might never have if Kenn's words were true. And hadn't the silence afterward said they were?

Marc couldn't help the rare moment of self-doubt. Why would Angie pick him over all these men? He no longer thought their

time together would hold her while he earned a place. *Is there still a chance for us?*

As if she sensed him, Angela turned.

Angela was hurt when Marc turned away. He pretended he hadn't seen her and ducked into his tent. She could feel him wanting to take it back, but he didn't.

She got moving with a heavy heart. She'd loved Marc all her life, and while she knew he would fight for her freedom, she wasn't sure if he'd fight for *her*.

Angela pushed it away, concentrating instead on everything she'd done today as she headed to the mess.

Male eyes followed, including Adrian's from his dark tent. Her hair was past her cheeks in wet, shiny, black curls that a man longed to have wrapped in his fist as they made love. She was beautiful. When she went by, men noticed whether they intended to or not.

The sense of a job well done followed Angela, even when she recognized the lone man at a corner table of the dark, deserted mess. She ignored him as she walked toward the front, starting to feel the chill on her wet hair.

"She's off duty; the boy covering the mess is asleep in the cabin." Kenn took a chance. "I've got a thermos over here."

Angela considered how bad she wanted the coffee.

"I can leave."

His offer surprised her. She joined him at the table, comforted by the sound of guards walking by. She couldn't see the moon, Marc, or Adrian, but she knew all three were there. Two of them were watching over her.

Angela sat on the opposite bench, at the far end. As Kenn unscrewed the lid, she studied him. He looked different from the Kenny she'd known before the war. Back then, his hair had been neat and trim, never a beard, and his fingernails had been pristine. He had worn designer fashions bought at the most expensive shops in the mall, and he'd always sported the latest athletic shoe. She'd hated the solid red pair. They looked like they were covered in

blood and after a rough day at the hospital, it wasn't something she'd needed to see every time she got into their closet.

The man who sat her coffee down bore little physical resemblance to that person. This new man wore dusty jeans, muddy boots, and a filthy jacket that had seen a lot of wear. He had a thin goatee; his jaw was covered in a few days of stubble, and dirt was under his nails—all things he used to pride himself on avoiding.

“Sugar?”

Angela shook her head. She saw his surprised expression. She started to tell him that she no longer needed to seek comfort in food, but thought better of it. He wouldn't understand. The Kenny she had come to loathe was a lazy, cruel man who was only really happy when he was the center of attention. He hated kids and pets, had nothing good to say unless it benefited him somehow, and he had been a slob to live with. She'd picked up after him for a decade, but he had never once helped. He said it was woman's work and he meant it. If the man across from her, pretending to read his papers, was what he appeared to be, then Kenn had changed and the slaps were...what? Twitches from the past?

This man was helpful, sought-after. When he'd said he did a little of everything, he hadn't been lying. Angela was sore about how high up he was here, but not surprised by it. She just hoped he wasn't after Adrian's job. Those shoes were way too big for Kenn to fill.

Angela sighed. Safe Haven's XO was calm, easygoing, patient. She was suddenly filled with cold resentment for the man. Why was Adrian worthy of that strength, but not her and her son? Kenn could stop himself from hurting some drunken camp member who'd taken a swing at him this morning, but he couldn't keep from shoving her eight-year-old son into a wall for jumping on his bed. *For Adrian...but not for me.*

Angela shivered, recognizing the moment. She had made up her mind, and it had little to do with Marc. She would feel this way if she had come here alone. It wouldn't go away, even if Kenn never mistreated either of them again. She hated him, and his

being so different now made it crystal clear. She couldn't forgive him, and she certainly couldn't abide him touching her ever again.

*It's over.*

The door in her mind swung shut with a final thud that echoed. She felt the witch inside applauding her choice.

"You're quiet." Kenn had been trying to wait and let her speak first so he could get a feel for her mood, but he didn't like the resolve he was reading in her eyes. *What's going on in that pretty, brainless head of hers?*

"I'm thinking." Angela glared. "I can't make decisions if you're talking."

Her tone suggested bad news for his plans of reconciliation. When she said nothing else, just sipped her coffee, Kenn felt that ball of rage return. "What decisions?"

"A lot of things, though most of the votes have been counted on the big issues."

Kenn's face fell; sadness overwhelmed the anger for a moment. He was going to lose it all. It had been so good here, so *perfect*. "That's it, then. You've picked him."

The words were full of hurt. She chose to fight the guilt. Kenn couldn't be allowed to spot a weakness like sympathy. "My choices are based on our past."

"But things are different here. I'd never be like before."

"It's too late."

Kenn was quiet for a long minute. He had known as soon as he recognized her show of force. Marc had always been better. "You want to be with him?"

Angela forced an angry tone to cover her fear. Marc wouldn't let him hit her more than once, and neither would Adrian or his men. Kenn's threats had all been bluffs. "Right now, I only know what I *don't* want."

Kenn flushed, controlling the need to slap her for the open defiance. "You don't have to be such a bitch about it!"

"Why should I tiptoe?" Angela's eyes were chips of ice. "You never cared for anyone's feelings until now, until *Adrian*, and that stings for me!" She shoved herself away from the table.

Kenn let her go, wanting her body but hating her. He was changing; he was ashamed of most of his behavior toward her and the boy, but a bigger part of him still wanted to hurt her.

Kenn had always been skilled at giving people what they wanted. Before, it had always been: act one way and think another, but the war and his time with Adrian had left a mark. If not for Angela's arrival, he wouldn't be feeling like an outsider. *Why can't she just be happy that I've changed? Why can't she give me another chance? Why didn't she just die?*

Angela kept walking. *Because Marc finally came for me.*

## 6

"I wasn't sure if you'd let me come." Becky was breathless.

Neil frowned, wishing she were older while longing for an hour alone with the hot little piece. His post was farthest from camp tonight; he had worried about her coming out here all day. They were surrounded by thick trees and almost total darkness, but alone? He was never sure, thanks to Adrian's setup. "I shouldn't have. This isn't safe for either of us. There's no other guard here."

Becky came closer in the cool darkness, heart pounding. "That's why I like it. We're alone."

Neil tried to fight the arousal when she swept his body in innocent desire. This was the furthest their flirting had gone so far. "Don't tease me, Rebecca. I'm not one of the little boys you play with."

*"Playing is not what I had in mind."*

His body responded, but Neil scowled. "Tell me why we're here."

She blushed.

Neil realized she was working up the courage for something forbidden, but he didn't stop her. As long as it was her doing the actual touching, his place would still be safe.

"I need to ask you something."

Neil's body responded again to the invitation in her voice. "Go ahead."

Becky moved even closer, putting them inches apart. "Do you like me? 'Cause I sure do you!"

Before he could speak, she leaned forward and pressed her soft lips to his.

Neil froze, aware of the rules even as his body strained to get to her.

The teenager felt his coolness after a few seconds. She stepped back, cheeks scarlet. "Sorry, guess I misread."

Her muffled voice was thick with humiliation. Neil moved toward her even as he told himself he shouldn't. He pulled her into his arms. "You didn't misread." He leaned down. "Can I kiss you?"

Her blush deepened as she nodded.

Neil placed a chaste kiss on her mouth... Her arms went around his neck. He held himself still with iron willpower. *God, it's been a long time!*

He broke the embrace, tilting her chin up. "I am interested, but this is forbidden right now, and I won't break Adrian's rules again, not even for you."

When he pushed her back, she let go. "But in October..."

Neil sighed, body hard. "Come fall, I'll be one of the many tapping on your tent flap."

Before she could swear that he was the only one she wanted, Neil held up a hand and put more space between them. "No promises from either of us. That's a long way off and there's still a lot to be done."

"And I'm gonna help. You'll see." She beamed at him. "October, Neil. Then I expect a real kiss."

Neil was thoughtful as she left. He wanted the flirty teenager, but there were other, more urgent things he desired.

"You know, there can be exceptions to my rules."

Neil jumped. He turned to see Adrian coming from behind a nearby tree.

“She’s made an adult choice. If you want her now, you have my approval.”

A little embarrassed, and not about to tell the truth, Neil swept the thick, black hills around them. *Clear*. “She’s not ready.”

“She thinks she is.”

Neil pushed his hat further onto his head as the wind gusted sharply. “She’s fourteen. What does she know?”

“She knows you’re attracted to someone else. I imagine she saw the way all my army was gawking at Angela, and she wanted to stake some sort of claim on you.” Adrian lifted a brow. “Did it succeed? Are you marked?”

Neil blew out an awkward laugh, shrugging. “Not as much as Marc, but yeah, Becky’s got some of my attention.”

“Good. It’s a great match for her, a solid start to this side of being an adult. Tell me when you’re ready. I’ll set it up.”

Neil nodded, always grateful to have Adrian. He was the solution to so many of their problems. Their population was mostly male. To keep the men from fighting so much, the age of consent had been lowered to sixteen, but it went deeper than just hormones and control. They needed babies to keep their country going. Without new life, they were doomed.

“You spent the day with him.”

Neil was glad of the subject change. This was what the boss had come out here for. “Yeah, he should be in the shower right now. I told him I’d meet him at your tent for the game.”

Adrian already knew Neil and Marc were becoming friends, but he had to ask. “What’s the verdict?”

“I think Marc is one of those special few you asked me to look out for. He’s already starting to win people over.”

“While my right hand has spent the last two days pushing everyone away.” Adrian was aware of everything that had happened now, thanks to the nightly reports.

“If Kenn doesn’t back off, the camp might file a charge and vote for punishment.”

Adrian sighed. “He’ll come around. I hope.”

Neither man thought it would be easy.

“What about Rick?” Neil didn’t like the guy, though he hadn’t had much contact with him yet. *Something about him is even more off than with Kenn.*

Adrian scowled this time. “He’s out of quarantine, with a guard.”

“His schedule starts tomorrow?”

“Yes. Come morning, all the new people are on company time, though I’m sure that will come earlier for some than others. Kenn will be hot-to-trot for a while.”

“Did you see his face when we got in line for the shooting contest?” Neil smirked. “I thought he was going to choke.”

“Yes, I did.” There was no answering mirth from Adrian. He wasn’t the least bit amused. “Kenn didn’t want me to know how good Marc is. He also didn’t tell us that Marc was his team leader or that Angela was a doctor. What else is he hiding?”



Chapter Fifty-Four  
**Concealed Demons**

Day 3

6am

1

**A**drian walked through the quiet camp at a fast pace, heartburn keeping him from feeling the chill in the wind. Leaves blew from twisted trees, but he didn't notice.

Adrian stepped under the mess canopy and strode to the table where his best men were eating but not talking. The mood was tense over Marc's victory last night and the silent but hard declarations of loyalty to the newcomer by so many in the chain of command. It was one of the things about to change. This would bring them together. Danger always worked that way.

"We need more water. The tankers are shut for testing." Adrian had undivided attention as he sat in his place. "The dogs are acting funny, foggy. Someone may have tampered with them and our supplies. Hopefully, they only stole food or water, but we're not taking chances."

His full table was covered in opening notebooks and one stack of half-finished trays piling up in the center. They all wondered how much of what they'd just consumed might be contaminated.

"Morning and lunch are drawn the night before, so we're okay for the moment, but dinner will have to come from the reserves. John's testing those now."

Everyone held in questions as Adrian lit a smoke, knowing he wasn't done. The quiet watchfulness of his men drew attention from the half a dozen sleepy-eyed camp members around them. They began to spread the word. *There might be trouble.*

"Kenn found an untouched water tower last week. I had hoped to leave it for an emergency, but we need it now. It's back toward

our last known location of the slavers, but this has to happen. Use our highest security procedures. No one below level three goes.”

Kenn assumed the slavers would still be furious over their rescue of the Cheyenne survivors. “They’ll be waiting for us, maybe.”

Adrian knew. It’s why he had heartburn. “We’ll send our best men. You will stay. I need you here. We’ll push travel back too, instead of leaving tomorrow. One of us will change the schedules as we go.” Adrian spotted Rick getting into the mess line and stood. “Kenn has point. I’ll be around.”

Kenn kept his relief to himself as the other black clad men left the table without a word to him. Kenn was delighted that Marc’s new friends were leaving camp. *Maybe I can get some time alone with Angela and talk some sense into her.*

Kenn picked out a flash of long black hair coming through the fog. *Or whatever it takes to get through to her.*

## 2

Angela’s third day in Safe Haven dawned damp and foggy. The sun was a distant shadow clouded by the thinning layer of sky grit. She got into the coffee line, trying to view this as a new beginning despite her rough mood. She wondered if Samantha might be too as she spotted the thin blonde in the line, looking normal in her slacks and soft brown sweater.

Angela scanned the other people, hoping for any brief contact with Marc.

Heavy boots crunched next to her.

The people around her retreated a space to be out of the line of fire.

Angela sighed, mood falling. *Lovely.*

“I was looking for you.”

The whine grated on her nerves. Angela was glad to hear soft paws come up behind her. Like Marc, Dog always made her feel safer.

Kenn’s visage tightened when he noticed the wolf.

Again, Angela had only gotten a little sleep without Marc at her side. Her tone was sharp. "I wanted coffee."

"I would have brought it to you."

"Since when?" Angela lifted a challenging brow. *If he wants to start shit, I'll help him.* The mood she'd woken in was ugly.

Kenn flushed. "I've changed. Can't you just give me another chance?"

The conversations happening around them died suddenly. Everyone wanted to hear her response.

Angela's thoughts stayed on her nightmares. "Not unless you can make me forget everything that's happened. As long as my ghosts keep screaming, there won't ever be forgiveness."

Kenn spotted Adrian coming through the other side of the mess, frowning. Kenn choked back a threat and shoved a folder at her. "That's your schedule. Follow it!"

Kenn stomped off.

People got out of his way, not wanting to draw his attention.

Angela sent a quick message to Charlie, warning him to also stay out of the angry Marine's path, but he didn't answer. She sighed unhappily, ignoring the frowning people around her. They thought she was just being a hardass, trying to get something she wanted...and she was. *My freedom.*

Angela pulled out the top two sheets and read the first note, this one handwritten by Kenn.

*I am sorry for the past. I know it's hard to believe, but I do care for you. Please don't tear apart the only family I've ever had. Here's my truce: I release you from our deal. You're free to go to him. But please don't. I still want you.*

Angela didn't believe it. Even if he had put love or need instead of care and want, she wouldn't. After everything he had put her through, a note wasn't enough to settle things between them. He was a fool if he thought it was. She crumbled the note and tossed it into a cold fire can that would be lit later.

As she walked with her mug to the food line, Angela skimmed the schedule for what she was supposed to do today... She was with the doctor. *Finally! Something I can do without being so careful and bored!* Angela glanced up as the three-dozen people around her went quiet. Angela stared with everyone else as tension thickened.

Samantha left her place in the front of the food line. She headed toward Rick, who was in the shorter coffee row. Samantha took a small envelope from her pocket. She didn't meet Rick's eye as she held out the Dear John letter. She made sure her voice carried to where Adrian was standing. "I'm sorry. It's over."

She walked away without another word.

Rick flushed at all the stares and whispers. He shoved the letter into his shirt pocket until he got his food and found an empty table. He was aware of Adrian studying him as he read her letter.

*Rick,*

*I've decided not to tell them you took advantage of me, or about the deal I believe you made with Cesar because I hope I'm wrong. This is a good place. You can make a new life here. We both can. I won't ruin your chance unless you make me. Please leave me alone. You're a part of the past I need to forget.*

Rick put the letter in his pocket, careful to appear sad but not angry for his audience.

When they saw he wasn't going to blow up, the whispers switched back to the other hot story—Kenn and his cheating wife. It wasn't as bad as Rick had feared anyway. He would do as Samantha asked, for a while. Then he would make her pay for breaking their deal as soon as she thought she was safe back among her own kind.

*Danger! Pay attention!* The voices whispered of grave peril. Angela stepped to the tailgate. She noticed a plump cook wearing a brown hat and dirty overalls. *Is the feeling coming from her or the jilted man sitting alone at the rear table?*

Angela gave the cook a smile, pushing gently. “Two plates, please. One is for the doctor.”

The woman frowned as if she didn’t understand.

Angela’s brow creased too as she picked up a sense of furious betrayal. “Two plates. My schedule says to get them from you.”

“Schedule?”

Angela held out the paper.

The cook’s expression lit up in triumph as she reached for it.

Angela immediately shoved it back into her pocket, scowling. “What evil are you hiding?”

Her hostile tone drew a lot of attention from those in line behind her.

Angela ignored the bystanders and the guards who were subtly moving closer. “How long have you been here?”

Maria hurried to get the plates, now wishing she had given the dark-haired slut what she asked for. Cesar would kill her for blowing her cover over something as petty as jealousy of the newcomer’s beauty.

The cook’s foreign mind was hard to read. Angela forced the witch down, aware of Adrian coming toward them. *I wonder if Charlie picked up anything from the pudgy cook.*

“Is there a problem, ladies?” Adrian stopped behind her, blocking some of the camp’s view. He didn’t want to interrupt, but these people weren’t ready to know what she could do. It would have to be careful and slow, but he needed this little edge. He would help her sharpen it.

Angela kept staring, searching. “No, not yet.”

Adrian took the covered plates the anxious cook held out. He stayed at Angela’s side as they left the too-quiet mess.

Angela gave the cook one last glare before she turned to him. “Beware of her or you’ll lose your highest team.” Angela couldn’t give him more details. *All I can see are the bodies.*

Adrian held his emotions in check, seeing how her eyes slowly lost their glassiness. *We’ll accomplish so much! First, I have to get her to trust me the rest of the way.* “Does it hurt to see into

people?” He knew the answer, but it was an easy opening line that he’d used to calm people like her in his old job.

Angela was glad he wasn’t upset, and she was amused by the question. It wasn’t what she’d expected. “No. It’s like that gray area between sleep and awake, where you feel like stretching forever and a loud noise can make you cry.”

Adrian chuckled, handing her the plates. “You can use it when you want? Control it?”

Angela nodded, feeling strange and wonderful to be talking about it openly.

Adrian wanted to say more, but there were people walking all around them. “Will you come and talk with me about this tomorrow?”

Meaning he would want to talk about her gifts this time. Despite wanting to earn a place where she could use her abilities, Angela hesitated. In the wrong hands...

Adrian sent a tiny wave of alpha pull her way. “Give me a chance to show you I can be trusted with that too.”

Angela frowned as people stopped and stared openly at them. *Word travels fast here.*

Adrian refused to scowl. *Is she immune to my alpha draw?* If so, she would be the first person he’d ever met who was.

Angela let her schedule influence the choice. He had listed her as a doctor. This way, she would be using both of her talents. “I’ll talk. I won’t promise anything more.”

“Great, my tent after lunch mess.”

His excited eyes gave away his casual tone. Angela gestured. “Won’t it bother you to let me have free run of your camp?”

“No. Your heart is purer than mine.” He smiled at her, unable to hide his interest. “And just so you know, there’s no one here like you. You’re unique, *special.*”

Adrian delivered another brilliant smile. “Come on. Let me introduce you to the slave driver we call an MD.”

*Bang-bang-bang-bang!*

Samantha stopped. She was on her way to the gun class, but the sight of Eagles loading a truck in the parking area had drawn her attention. They weren't using the slow, calm movements she was already coming to expect in Safe Haven. Their quick actions and worried glances said trouble was coming in some form.

Sam's mind went straight to the slavers; she wandered toward the parking area. Unable to hear the guards, she tried to appear busy studying the dreary sky instead of the leaving crew.

Neil didn't turn around to find out who was burning holes into his back. It could be anyone. None of the camp liked it when the shepherds were away, but this was a priority. They had to have water.

Neil motioned to his team he was ready to go, striding through the loading men.

Samantha's gaze followed. She'd seen Neil around. She knew who he was and what position he held here. *He's about to leave. Why does that bother me?*

Samantha didn't like the immediate answer.

*I'm safer when he's here.*

Neil turned around and caught her staring.

It was the last person he'd expected. The new woman had avoided contact with all the Eagles as far as Neil knew. He stared back, drawn... Her hair blew in the wind, giving him that flash of corn silk again.

Sam didn't realize Neil had turned; she was too shocked by her discovery. What was it about the males here that made a woman want to be protected?

She snorted, turning toward the gun class she was late for. The war had changed everything.

Neil was now the one staring. What had she been thinking? It had been about him, he was sure of that. Curiosity awakened, Neil's gaze followed her until she disappeared behind the bleachers of the gun class. *When I get home, maybe I'll dig into that.*

Kevin glanced up as the other students turned to frown at the late arrival. Teaching the class today, he motioned toward the front. “We waited.”

Kevin had noticed her pause to watch the loading crew, but he didn’t call attention to it. Samantha was settling in, trying to figure out her place. That she had one, the rookie didn’t doubt. She and Angela wore the same expression of determination that his sister had gotten whenever she wanted something.

Kevin sighed. *Safe Haven is great. My sister would have liked it here.* “On your mark, shooter.”

Mind still on the man she could hear rolling away, Samantha drew and fired without her usual flash of Cheyenne Mountain. *I hope he isn’t gone long.*

#### 4

*Something’s happening.*

Driving in from the south, the wind had begun to pick up; storm clouds rolled behind the grit. It cooled sweaty necks, but ripped papers from careless fingers. By midmorning it was coming at them in gusting blasts that made everyone glad the dustier places were behind them.

The parking area was deserted, with only three guards on the cars since it wasn’t a travel day. Adrian nodded to each of them as he headed for the supply trucks. Despite approving of the stacks of packed and labeled boxes around the semi, Adrian found himself frowning. It was a struggle to smooth his expression as he climbed into the rear of the rig. The sounds of his flock were normal, but not everyone was here. Something was happening. *Was it wrong to send the water crew? Are my men in danger?*

Adrian tried to push it away. They had to have water, and he couldn’t have put Kenn in charge to go himself. Kenn’s one small chance at leadership had vanished with the appearance of Angela and her busted lip.

“We’re almost done with this one. Did you know you had a crate of grenades in here?”



Adrian shrugged distractedly as Marc rose from a stack of boxes on the mostly empty floor. “I wondered what the key went to. Kenn and Kyle do most of the pickups; they take anything they think we might need later. Hard telling what you may find in the other trucks.”

Marc lit a smoke. “I had it put in the new weapons only rig, along with the ammo we found.”

Adrian forced himself to pay attention. This mattered. He had to make sure Angela stayed and that meant finding Marc something to do while he prepared Angie and these people for what came next. “You’ve gotten a lot done.”

Marc shrugged. “I spent some time last night figuring out the quickest way.”

After being awakened by Kenn’s angry voice at the crack of dawn (*what a different, unwelcome start to a day!*), Marc had found four rookies waiting for him at the trucks. They’d made it clear he was in charge. Marc could have supervised, but he’d done as much as any of them.

Adrian pushed his gift out gently, wondering if Marc might also be immune to it. “Before or after Kenn took the shirt off your back?”

“After.” Marc smiled ruefully. “Now I understand why Angie turned into a card shark.”

It had been rough at moments, like when Kenn had first joined the poker game, but it hadn’t been as bad as he’d expected. Adrian had done an excellent job of controlling the situation.

Adrian used his boot to squish a spider with too many legs into the floor.

He ground it in a way that made Marc frown in recognition. Angela had the same reaction to mutations.

Adrian changed topics. “I understand why you have the wolf protecting her, but it’s not necessary. She’s safe here.”

Marc didn’t say he felt better knowing she had extra protection.

“So, a day each?” Adrian kept trying to reach the stubborn man.

“A little less if I spend my free time on it, which I probably will.” Marc pointed. “I’m going to hang and then fill the baskets and shelves with what your people use most.”

“Our people... Great idea.”

Marc liked how that felt. He refused to let it show. “As for the stored items, you could—”

“We could,” Adrian corrected him patiently. “They’re your people now, too.”

“*We*...could limit access or have people sign out what they take and when. After certain hours, lock it up and set alarms that only a few people know how to remove.” Marc didn’t want to argue, but his glare said to ease up.

Adrian stopped pushing. “What kind of alarms?”

“Basic stuff. Like the discs you already use, but these will give the person a shock they won’t be able to hide because it will knock them out. I also thought a hidden video recorder wouldn’t be hard to hook up with the equipment you have here.”

“Absolutely. It’s lunch time. Let’s go eat and we’ll narrow down where to put it all.”

Marc swallowed the protest and followed Adrian from the truck. *So much for avoiding awkward situations.*

## 5

“John said you needed this ASAP.” Angela held out the envelope, eyes on her feet.

Two of the men glanced up from their potted meat sandwiches. Marc wasn’t one of them. *Is she okay? Does she miss me anywhere near as much as I miss her?*

“Thanks.” Adrian gestured. “Grab a tray and join us.”

“Sure.” Angela got into the short food line, positive Marc wouldn’t be at the table when she returned. The eyes on her weren’t as hostile anymore, but there was no friendship in those glances either. She stiffened her shoulders. *I have my son, and Marc when I’m ready for him. To hell with the rest of you!*

Adrian stiffened, catching Angela's thought. He would have to do something about her bad mood. What would settle her down? He doubted she was the sewing class type. After months on the road, learning from Marc... *She probably needs a workout.*

"Are we good?" Marc dared Kenn to say his plan wouldn't succeed.

Adrian understood Marc's need for escape as the damp wind blew a sweet hint of vanilla around the table. "You got what you need?"

"Yeah." Kenn hated the source but he loved the plan. With Marc's setup, thievery would become a thing of the past in Safe Haven. Kenn changed the subject. "Are those the results from the dogs?"

"Yes. They tested positive for sedatives, but none of the water is missing or contaminated." Adrian's voice rumbled in displeasure. "Danny's excuse is tight. We all saw him out cold by the fire."

Marc stood up and adjusted his coat around his Colts. He would only stay at the table if Angie gave him a sign that he should.

There was silence.

He sighed unhappily. "I'll catch you guys later." He was gone quickly.

Adrian glanced at Kenn with hard eyes but he didn't say anything as Angela took Marc's seat, something that drew mutters from those in the crowded lunch mess. She'd sat by the boss every day she had been here. *Why?*

"They'll be back for travel time?"

Kenn nodded, ignoring Angela and the big wolf that settled onto its haunches at her side. "Barring trouble, the water crew will be in around 8am, day after tomorrow."

Adrian sipped on the fresh mug of coffee she'd brought for him. He noticed Angela hadn't wasted her time bringing one for Marc. She'd known he would be gone.

"We'll get back on the road as soon as they get in." Adrian scanned the people around them. "You'll do driving schedules?"

“Yeah. Seth went with them, so I told Doug to take charge of the new Eagles.”

Adrian studied the murky sky beyond their perimeter, worrying. “They’ll want him back when Kyle starts in on them. He’s every drill instructor I’ve ever known.”

They laughed and continued to discuss business.

Angela kept quiet as the drizzle began to fall, lonely and still feeling like an outsider despite sitting at the *in* table.

## 6

“You shouldn’t get so close. Odd things come out of high water now.”

Samantha jumped. Her defensive stance relaxed when she saw who it was. “Thanks.”

She scooted back a little as the wind blew her curls around. Bugs crawled near her feet as she went back to staring at the leafy trees. It was pleasant here but not seeing the bodies wasn’t enough. Even the smell of decaying animals was a reminder, a flash of hell, a tortured slap; she sucked in a breath, pushing her crimes away. *What else could I have done?*

“You okay?” Marc began filling two milk jugs of sludgy water for scrubbing the trucks. Marc wondered if Samantha might be feeling the same loneliness he was... *Only, she doesn’t have a friend high in the food chain, does she?*

Samantha stood, brushing dirt from her tan slacks. “I’m bored and a little uncomfortable around so many people all at once.”

Marc met the eyes of a small group of men moving by; a hard glare kept them going. He turned to Samantha. “Most of us spent some time alone, but I’m guessing you spent all of it that way. It’s hard to adjust.”

“Yes.” Sam sighed. “Will you tell him I need a job or something? I have way too much free time.”

Marc took a minute to write it in his Eagle notebook; this was his first entry. “Just give it some time, Sam. The feelings will ease.”

“Will they?”

Marc sighed. He stored his book in his coat and picked up the jugs. “I hope so. Otherwise, it might be what pushes me out of here.”

Sam watched him go, distracted for an instant from her own problems. Marc seemed as unhappy as she was to be back in the arms of society, but he didn’t have the weight of her burdens. She resumed her seat on the bank. He was worried over his love, his heart. *I care for all these people. That doesn’t make me better than him, just more of a threat.*

Samantha’s time alone had forced her to take hard looks at herself and her role in the war. She hadn’t pushed the button, but she hadn’t lifted a hand to stop those who had. Instead of using her gifts for a heartless government, she could have been saving the lives of her fellow countrymen. That need to atone, the one she now suspected Adrian of carrying, was heavy. She’d ended things with Rick, and made a couple friends among the women for her outspoken views. But that had also limited her companionship. She could be with the other females at the gun class or the mess right now, but even though Safe Haven held her kind...

Sam stopped herself. Two days wasn’t enough time, she knew that. It was just hard. Who among these recovering survivors would understand the choices she’d been forced to make?

Samantha swept the camp, spotting happy, relaxed faces. *Not them.*

She turned to scan the area behind her and found three guards standing together nearby. Each of them made eye contact with her, then moved back into the trees, vanishing.

Before she could form a question, a fourth Eagle stepped forward. He’d been so well hidden that she hadn’t noticed him.

Jeremy didn’t avoid the searching glance, her almost desperate need to connect. As an Eagle, he’d observed it enough times to know it for what it was, but he wasn’t sure he’d ever seen it so clearly. *She’s haunted. Maybe I can help her with that.*

Samantha felt his gaze digging in, searching her as she had him, but it wasn’t invasive. It was sympathetic, caring even.

The emotions were so foreign that Sam snapped her eyes back to the trees, heart thumping. *That one understands too much.*

It was a relief to glance over a few minutes later and not see him, though she thought she could still feel his stare. *Who is he?*

Unaware of how she'd been manipulated, Samantha stayed there, exploring the feel of his gaze on her. Thoughts of fleeing to her tent had been replaced by a human trait the Eagles were being taught to use. Curiosity had been distracting people for centuries. That hadn't changed.

Chapter Fifty-Five

# That's Why You're Here

1

Angela hesitated outside Adrian's open tent flap, hating how it made her feel to have eyes on her constantly. Her words and clothes fit in, but she didn't, and they knew it. It was in the wary, hesitant interactions. She wasn't adjusting well. *I don't know how long I'll—*

“Should I come out there?”

Angela flushed. “No, sorry.”

She ducked into the scent of musky cologne, struck again by how neat Adrian always kept his tent. She wondered what it was about the aligned dimes, nickels and quarters that had bothered Marc so much. She'd caught a flash from him as he left Adrian's table. He didn't trust the blond man. The coins had something to do with that, but she wasn't sure what.

Adrian knelt by the cooler as she examined his home. She could have been a model, even with the heavy bags under her eyes. “Have a seat.” He brought two tin cups and a red thermos to the table.

“Thanks. What are we drinking?”

He handed her a sweaty green can and a paper towel as he joined her. He had a small brown box in his other hand.

Angela took the pop eagerly. She hadn't had cold Mountain Dew in over four months.

“It doesn't have a name. Rum, rehydrated berries, bananas, sugar—stuff like that.”

People moved by in the cloudy afternoon, gawking at them through the open flap. Angela guessed he didn't smoke with camp members...or maybe just not the women? Angela took a swig, enjoying the caffeine-riddled soda. It was her favorite.

“You’re off duty now?”

“Yes. John’s good. Nice. Anne is too.” Angela shifted as loud whispers about her and Marc floated through the flap. She adjusted her sweater to cover her unease. *Let them talk. What do I care?*

“They’ll appreciate the help.”

Angela hid a frown as people spotted Adrian rolling a joint and the whispers grew louder. *What do they care anyway? Just jealous they aren’t in here instead of me?* “He has me doing his notes right now, catching up on the issues here.”

Adrian smiled. “And making sure you know what you say you do, before he lets you near his patients?”

“Yes. He likes to throw trick questions.”

“He won’t test you long. A month from now, you’ll want the paperwork back again.”

Angela shrugged, wondering if she would be here then.

“I can tell you why you’re here.”

That got her full attention and a frown. “We’ve been through this.”

“I mean on the planet. Why you’re so different, and why you survived.”

Angela bit her tongue on the sarcastic remark that came to mind. Her mood was still rough.

“You would be welcome here anyway because of your medical skills, but there’s so much more you can do. You’re like me, and like the Eagles. You’re a Runner.”

“A runner?”

Adrian finished rolling while he explained. “Little kids are told not to judge on wealth or looks, that the inside is what matters, but they don’t understand and why should they? It’s confusing. They should be told there are three types of people they can model themselves after—those who Sit, those who Stand, and those who Run.”

The words carried a ring of powerful magic. Adrian let it linger. He hit the joint and passed it, noticing how careful she was not to touch him at all during the exchange.

“Sit, stand, or run?” Angela inhaled, mind working his riddle.



“Yes.” Adrian’s eyes darkened as he spoke. “Those who Sit are society’s burdens. They’re mostly uneducated and shiftless, with no ambition. They don’t give a damn about the greater good. They serve themselves, or worse, no one at all. They won’t even try to make it on their own. The old world took care of them at everyone else’s expense.”

He poured them both a cup of the reddish liquid from the thermos, impressed with the hit she drew into her lungs before passing the joint back. She was obviously a smoker. “Those who Stand are the workers. They fight hard for what they have, but few ever reach independence. They trudge back and forth their entire lives and keep the world turning just by showing up. These are the drivers, the servers, the doers.”

Angela could tell how much he believed in what he was saying. Her stomach tightened as he opened his mouth to continue, but she wasn’t sure why.

“Then, we have the Runners. The literal one in a million who survive whatever fate throws at them. Tolerating the world, and often unaware of how important their roles are, these are the tortured, the mocked, the exiled. They are feared, abused, persecuted, and they still push on. Runners uncover, discover, question, lead, create, challenge, and no matter the pressure or threat, there is a part of them that won’t fit in. It won’t allow them to conform or bend just because someone says so. This camp is full of Standers, thankfully, along with a sizable number of sitters, but there are also a dozen Runners here now, all gathered in the same place. The odds on so many one-in-a-million people all finding each other within four months of a war are astronomical.” Adrian delivered the rest of the speech he’d spent months waiting to give to someone like her. “*We* were born into this time and place to help our people, to save our country, our way of life. We have to get them to a place where they can Sit and Stand in safety. That’s why you’re different. That’s why you’re here.”

Angela was speechless, mind slamming it into place with a fit that was perfect. When it turned and fastened into an airtight seal, a wave of completeness rolled over her and sank in. All those years

she'd hidden, questioned, been through hell, and Adrian had been able to solve that mystery in just three days.

Adrian actually felt the instant her loyalty shifted to include him and his dreams; a heavy weight slid from his overloaded shoulders. The one he needed most was here. She would take his place when the truth came out.

“What am I supposed to do?”

Adrian soaked up the sense of partnership that filled the tent. “Help me. There's so much we need, I don't know where to begin.”

Angela was sold. “I'll give whatever you need.”

Adrian held out the smoking roach. “Always read the fine print. It's a hard job, and our survival will eventually come down to blood. You learned that on your way here...”

Angela blanched, shaking her head at both his words and the pungent weed. “I won't do that again. Ever.”

“You may not have to.” Adrian wanted to know what mistake Marc had made with her so it wouldn't be repeated here, but he didn't ask. “Killing is *my* job.”

She didn't like that. Her voice was sharp. “And mine?”

“Look, listen. If it's broken, show me how to fix it. If it's coming, warn me in time to deal with it. Advise me. Be my Merlin, and together we'll save our people.”

She stared at him for a long moment, breathing shallow.

Adrian felt the air thicken around them.

*And if we can give you none of what you ask for?*

Adrian spoke directly to her witch for the first time. “That's an unfair question. I already know you can.”

*This is not a deal to be made lightly.* She paused. *There is always a price.* The tremor of greed was easy to hear.

Adrian didn't care about the cost. “I'll give them everything I have. As long as they survive, there's no price I won't pay.”

*Your secret! Tell me what you've hidden from your herd.*

Adrian froze as his father's face slammed into his mind.

Angela's gasp floated through the tent. His father was Robert Milton... *He was the terrorist! He destroyed the world!*

Adrian waited for her to call the others or at least yell, but there was only a heavy silence that he unwillingly broke. “When will you tell them?”

Angela stared back with a devotion that stunned him.

“Never. You’ve given me a terrible, powerful knowledge. I’ll guard it with my life, so it doesn’t take yours.”

Adrian allowed himself to breathe. “Kenn be damned. Your place with me is set.”

## 2

“She’s a whore, like Tonya! Anyone can have her!”

The boy’s voice was cruel. Angela quickened her pace. She had just left Adrian’s tent and caught a wave of ugliness she recognized.

*Thud!* “Don’t ever talk about my mom like that!”

Angela rounded the corner to discover her gentle son standing over a much larger teenager. The would-be bully was bleeding from his nose.

Angela stopped, watching. She had been filled with peace upon leaving Adrian’s tent, but that was gone now.

“You hear me?” Charlie leaned down and grabbed the older boy by the front of his shirt; he delivered a harsh shake that rattled the handsome boy and sent red drops flying. “You want me to hit you again?”

The bleeding teenager shook his head.

Charlie shoved Eric down as he let go. “Then keep your fucking gob shut!”

“What the hell’s going on here?!” Zack was furious at finding his son on the ground, bleeding.

Angela stepped around the corner, but she didn’t say anything yet. She wouldn’t interfere unless she had to.

“He hit me, dad!” Eric held up a hand with blood on it.

When Zack went for Charlie without asking why, Angela drew her gun. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Zack spun, startled.

Angela lifted a brow as his hand inched toward his own weapon. “You going to shoot me in front of all these witnesses? I understand why Kenn chose you.”

The lifelong woman-hater glared, aware of the wolf snarling at her side. “You better control your boy!”

Angela shrugged, eyes like flint as people stopped and stared. “Looks like he’s already got it under control. Maybe your boy should be careful about what he says.” She motioned toward her shocked son. “Come on, Charlie.”

Charlie’s face clouded over. “I don’t need your protection! I can take care of myself!”

To her surprise and embarrassment, the teenager had flipped on her. “Fine.” Angela holstered, aware of tense guards moving closer. She looked at Zack. “As you were. Maybe a good punch in the mouth *will* fix the problem.”

She left them all staring, heart breaking. *How can he treat me this way? I almost died coming for him. Doesn’t that matter at all?*

“He’s just a kid, honey. He doesn’t understand.”

Angela turned to see Marc walking a few feet behind her. “Are you following me?”

“No.” Marc was happy to be getting a second to talk, though. “Just heard the same thing you did.”

“And see?”

“Yeah, you two are definitely related.” He grinned. “Zack didn’t like having a woman point a gun at him.”

Angela didn’t respond to his attempt to distract her. This was hard on them both, worse than she’d expected. She moved away from Marc, knowing the more they were seen together, the harder things would be for him.

Marc let her go, aware of an Eagle trailing her. He didn’t agree with everything Adrian had going on here, but he did on that. Angie needed a guard right now. Not for her defense, but for the camp’s. Zack had no idea how much she had wanted to shoot first and ask questions later, but Marc had read it.

He strode toward the showers with an uneasy heart. Something was happening with her, another change, and he was too far away to be sure what it was or what it meant for their future.

### 3

Kenn was the man on point today, which gave him a great excuse to go wherever he wanted. He'd trailed Angela from a distance all day. Now he was as confused as he was angry. *She's so different!*

The Angie he'd ruled for so long could never have bluffed an Eagle; she wouldn't have thought about pulling a gun, let alone be able to do it with such menace. Kenn recognized it now that he had seen it from a distance. She would have pulled the trigger on both him and Zack. Judging from her reactions, she already had at some point.

His Angie had killed someone. That was partly responsible for his confusion. The respect he felt over that was new and unfamiliar. Kenn wasn't sure what to do with such a foreign emotion when it came to his timid little woman. He also had a distracted feeling of pride when he thought about how well Charlie had handled himself. Kenn had called Zack when he saw the man's sixteen-year-old son slam Charlie against the wall of the showers. Like Angela, he'd also felt the intent in Zack's reaction, and that added another layer of confusion. *Now I'm feeling protective of her and Charlie? When did that happen?*

Kenn sent his relief on his way as the sun began to sink. He wasn't done evaluating, sorting, planning. When he was, he would do something that would either get him banished or forgiven. He wasn't sure yet which way he would go.

### 4

Angela stomped toward Adrian's secret base, furious at Kenn for running his mouth and causing everything to be so much harder. *Will I be let in without Adrian as an escort?*

Only one way to know. Angela met the eye of the nearest guard. She gestured toward the training area, then lifted a brow.

She was surprised by the instant permission. *Did Adrian tell them I might come by?*

Maybe, but he wouldn't want anyone else to know about it, she was suddenly sure of that. Angela headed for the defense area next to the training zone, feeling the cute guard's confused eyes stay on her.

She found the hay ring empty. After a quick glance to be sure none of the camp was observing, she ducked behind a big tree. Angela then moved into the training area without being seen.

She heard the faint crackle of a radio and knew those inside had just been told she was coming. She recalled the vigilance Adrian had spoken of on her first day here.

*You do need a workout...*

Angela agreed with the witch. The skills Marc had taught her were basic, but she still needed to practice them. After three straight days of no use, she suddenly felt like she was starving for this. Being able to sneak up on Adrian's army would be a good challenge for her nerves.

Angela looked back at the guard who had given her permission.

After a minute of consideration, and another to reassure himself that he had indeed heard her soft voice in his mind, Billy was positive Adrian would love the idea. Their leader had spoken to him last night about her...differences. The easygoing limo owner couldn't wait to find out if she was worthy of the respect he had heard in Adrian's voice.

Billy waved her in. He doubted she could infiltrate the base, but he hoped for it anyway, just so Adrian wouldn't be disappointed.

Angela delivered a genuine grin and got moving.

Billy forgot how to breathe and almost passed out before he remembered how.

The training tent was full of alert male shadows. Angela chose a tall tree by the left side of the canvas, where the thick trunk was

wrapped in strong elastic ties. She climbed it slowly to prevent the vinyl walls from vibrating. She had no doubt it was one of the things Adrian covered with his men, considering they spent most of their time under canvas.

The three guards who were able to see her were perimeter men. The level four Eagles were curious and doubtful. All of them had done something similar on their last test, but this was a woman trying to infiltrate.

Angela shimmied up the tree without alerting anyone.

It was a confirmation of Adrian's words, and also a turn-on. Even when she made a big mistake, the guards kept rooting for her.

Angela used her knife to slit a tiny hole in the tent to peer through. *So far, so good.* The men were no longer working; they were all watching the doorway, waiting for her arrival with sweaty towels and curious faces. None of them winced like she did at a sudden loud static whine from too many radios being on in the same place.

"The Eagle who finds the spy is invited to sit at my table for evening chow."

Adrian's transmission on their private channel caused a flurry of activity as men grabbed their gear and rushed outside.

Angela used the witch to dim herself, not wanting it to be over yet. It was just an illusion though. She wondered who might be able to see her anyway.

Adrian's voice in her head came a second later.

*They'll spot your shadow.*

Angela frowned at her oversight, hearing the patrol they had formed coming around to her side of the tent. She'd forgotten about the sun. She wasn't used to having to include it in her plans.

Angela slit a larger hole over the one she'd made and dove through just as the patrol rounded the corner. She rolled to her feet in the empty tent and slid her blade into her boot before smoothing her clothes back into place. As she moved toward the flap, Adrian's happiness washed over her like water on burning feet, soothing her.

*Beautiful. That's on the infiltration test. These guys don't usually do that until around level four. Well done.*

Angela stepped to the open flap, letting that feeling of approval soak in. Regular doses of it would be good for her. *What are the chances Adrian will let a woman into his army?*

“So, who’s sitting at my table tonight?” Adrian grinned at the still-searching patrol as he joined them.

Angela emerged. “Me.”

The men turned in shock to find her by the flap.

“Again, some other time, just to be sure you’ve got it right?” Adrian’s voice dripped happiness.

“Absolutely!” Angela flashed a smile at the stunned guards around them. “Thank you. I needed this.”

Angela walked into the woods, going back the way she’d come so any camp members would see her emerge from where she’d disappeared. They weren’t supposed to know she’d been in the off-limits area.

The shock she left in her wake only lasted a brief time as Adrian began to speak.

When Kenn dropped by a few minutes later, hoping to find out what she’d been doing in the training area and why he hadn’t been called, he found them all strangely smug, even his boss. Like they knew something he didn’t. *What did Angie tell them...? Do for them?*

## 5

“Fate thinks hard on you.”

Angela’s words caused silence to fall among his joking men. She met Adrian’s eye across the suddenly tense center table.

Dog rose to his feet, head cocked to the side as if he too had sensed it.

“Something comes.”



An instant later, the entire evening mess of one hundred went from loud and good humored to silent. The sound of feet running through the evening dimness was always bad news.

The fog parted to reveal Matt flying toward them. Startled people moved aside as the teenager found Adrian.

“There’s a call... Dad says to come quick!”

Adrian did. He would be pissed at Mitch for scaring everyone if this was a false alarm, but he already knew it wasn’t by the fear on Matt’s face. First contact with the enemy was about to be made.

Adrian didn’t feel the chill in the darkness as he moved to the communications truck.

Mitch started talking as soon as Adrian was close enough to hear. “It’s the slavers—said they have news about the group of men who left us today.”

The radio crackled. “I am tired of this waiting. Who speaks for you?”

Adrian instantly hated that voice.

Mitch saw Adrian and Kenn exchange a dangerous glance. He tossed an arm around Matt’s neck. “We’re on dinner break. If people ask, and they will, say it sounds like a bad joke. Adrian is handling it. Nothing else.”

Adrian nodded at him, climbing into the seat.

Kenn got in too; neither of them bothered to shut the doors. Many of the camp members carried scanners on their belts and a large number of guards had followed them from the mess.

“This is Eagle. Go ahead with your message.”

There was an amused chuckle. “Here’s my message, *gringo*. I have your men. To get them back, you will swear your allegiance to me and send out half your women and supplies. Tonight.”

“Get off this channel!” Adrian’s response was sharp, commanding. “I’m expecting a call.”

A stunned silence fell as Kenn and the rest of those listening worried over him handling it that way, but not Adrian. He knew a bluff when he heard one.

More laughter floated through the radio, backdropped by the roar of a camp that was clearly bigger than Safe Haven.

“Ahh, a hardass, but you care for them, I know. Send out the females first.”

Adrian made no reply, waiting, judging.

The radio lit up again, carrying an edge of frustration in the killer’s voice that muted the screams and voices bleeding through the transmission. “I will hurt them! I’ll cut them up and make you listen!”

Adrian keyed the mike. “Be careful, Cesar, or *your people* just might be the ones conquered. We’re not an easy target.”

“I’ll never back off!” The slaver was caught off guard at the open use of his name. “I will have the witch! You will not stop me when I come for her!”

The radio went dead.

Kenn turned expectantly. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing.”

“But what about our—”

“He doesn’t have them. They’re listening, though.”

Kenn’s eyes narrowed as a short Morse Code message lit up the other radios, telling them Kyle and Neil’s team were fine and almost to their destination. Kenn hadn’t known Adrian was doing private lessons with the Eagles too. *I thought I was involved in everything he has going on.* “How did you know?”

“Because they’re well-trained. They don’t give names and ranks—they lie, the entire time, about everything. If that evil bastard had even one of our guys, he would be demanding we hand over the dozen Mexican royals we’re holding hostage, or the location of the fuel tankers we hid. But he didn’t.”

Kenn’s lips thinned. “Instead, he wants the witch. Angela.”

Adrian frowned. “Send her to my tent early. She either had contact with them on the way here, or someone in this camp is a traitor.”

Kenn nodded, wondering if his boss now wished Angela hadn’t come. The slavers had followed her. They were all in danger.

Adrian caught the thought. “She has every right to be here. I know you don’t like it, but these people need her. *I* need her. We

can't keep doing it all alone, but more than that, she's as much the reason we're here as anyone else in Safe Haven."

"The slavers won't stop until they get her."

Adrian's fury boiled over. "I'll die first. You'd better get on board with that at least or just resign now!" Adrian turned toward his tense people. "Stay here until Mitch comes back. I'll be singing to the herd."

## 6

Rick blew out the flame on his lantern and laid down, heart thumping despite the simple chore he was about to perform. The security here was extreme and no one trusted him.

Rick eased out of his bedroll; he had been told to put his drafty tent where the bonfire would reflect his shadows. He was forced to crawl so the other tent shadows would cover his movements. He tensed each time footsteps crunched or voices rang out.

It only took a minute with his knife, two minutes with a spoon lifted from the mess, and another sixty seconds to place the plastic-wrapped beeper into the ground and cover it. He repaired the small hole in the tent floor with dark green tape, then pushed the dirt crumbs into a small pile under his bedroll. He'd buried two letters with the remote. One of them was his Dear John from Samantha. He'd also added his schedule with the next day's travel route marked on it. Cesar would only have to hit the button on his locator to detect which bare spot had been his.

With the chore complete, Rick laid back down. He cleaned each grain of dirt from his nails while contemplating his next move. Cesar had told him there was another spy here. He would make contact soon and deliver a reminder of that deal so he would have help.

Rick patted the small dirt lump under him until it was flat. He and Cesar had used this simple method of communication before. By the time Adrian broke camp, the disturbed earth would be settled and unnoticeable unless someone was hunting for it. These precautions hadn't been necessary in most of the groups he had

helped the slaver conquer. Rick now had firm doubts about Cesar's ability to emerge as the victor against Safe Haven. He had begun the usual campaign of fear though, drugging the dogs and forcing the leader here to react rashly. Every guard Cesar could pick off on a supply run would mean fewer men they had to face later. Next would be a fire that destroyed food supplies, but Rick was already sure that mental games weren't going to crush the hope here. He had tried to make that clear in his letter. If Cesar lost, it would strengthen not only Safe Haven, but also every other town of survivors waiting to be attacked. They might all try to fight back. The human spirit was hard to predict sometimes, and Adrian knew how to handle his people. *Cesar isn't nearly as good.*

## 7

"Cesar doesn't believe us about the witch because he hasn't seen her do anything." Dillan rubbed at the unreachable ache in his wrist as he observed the well-protected camp through his scope. Safe Haven's lights were a vivid beacon in the darkness.

Dean shrugged, busy working on items they needed. "It won't matter. The leader down there called Cesar's bluff; he didn't run. Cesar wants him dead now. He won't back off."

Dillan looked at his brother in the cold darkness of the drafty house they were using for a blind. The dim moon above gave just enough light to work by. "Cesar may not be able to handle these people."

"...Cesar's got the tank by now." Dean refused to admit he'd been thinking the same thing during his turn at the scope. "He's on the way here with it. When he hits them, she'll be unprotected in the chaos. We'll get to her then."

Dillan grunted. "When Cesar gets here, the people below will fight back. Rick's usual tactics won't work to rattle that blond leader. He's too hard."

"I know." Dean set the dart he'd just finished onto the cluttered, dusty coffee table of the burnt home. "The usual plan would work if Cesar gave it time; he won't with this group. We'll

hit her and the boy with these knockout darts during that fight, then take them to that cabin where we found the last group of slaves.”

“And if he wins? Cesar will come after us.”

Dean’s voice was cold. “Then we’ll use her against whoever shows up. The witch came across an entire country to claim her son. She’ll do whatever we want to keep him alive.”

“Agreed.” Dillan moved away from the dirty, glassless window. “Come morning, we’ll relocate?”

“Yes. And if we get the chance, we’ll take it before Cesar arrives. Keep searching for holes in their defenses. We only need them to make one mistake.”

Chapter Fifty-Six  
**Pawns And Plans**  
Day 4

1

**T**hough it was only seven in the morning and the damp fog was rolling, Angela still had to wait for the line of people at Adrian's tent to finish their business before she could confirm why he had sent for her. Kenn had given nothing by words or thought, but she knew. The call from the slavers was all anyone wanted to talk about. *It was a mistake to stay here.*

Angela tried not to cringe every time someone said *witch* and looked around. She knew the call was the reason for them being here. Nearly everyone was scared, hoping for reassurance. There were more people wearing guns today, and the line at the target range was already long though it was so early and so chilly. The sounds of gunfire rang out continuously.

Adrian was sitting at a folding table next to his tent, shielded by a green canopy.

After listening to the first three people—older, nervous women—ask about joining the gun class, Angela tuned them out, wondering if Adrian was going to make her leave. *Might be for the best.*

Angela picked up Adrian's thought. She went to sit on the damp grass, content to wait though more people had joined the line. Some of those regarded her differently, more respectfully.

Angela listened, impressed with how Adrian handled them.

It was nearly 9am before they were alone.

Adrian waved her into the empty seat as the last camp member left. "Sorry."

Angela shrugged, brushing at her damp jeans. "I didn't mind."  
He looked at her.

Angela's eyes dropped to the lifeless dirt at her feet. "I don't know how they know. We saw almost no one on the way here."

"*Almost* no one. I need you to tell me about all of them."

Angela frowned in concentration, trying to tune out those walking by, whispering, staring. "There were people everywhere at first, but by the time I left Ohio in February, even the group living at the college had torn themselves apart. I had to...convince them to let me go. They discovered a lot, but there was six of them. When Marc came, their leader, Warren, ambushed him and died for it. Once we were on the road, I..."

Her face drained of color. Adrian hated the fear that came into her expression.

"I was stalked by brothers in Indiana, near Martinsville. I defended myself. They saw things. They would have gotten me if not for Marc. They said they'd follow, but they were both seriously wounded. I thought we'd lost them. I wouldn't let him finish them off, but I knew better." She stared at the fingers caressing her gun. "I was attacked again in Versailles. I...killed him. We saw no one else except for a Mountain couple we spent the night with in Nebraska. It has to be the twins."

Adrian read between the lines; his respect for her doubled even as his worry grew. "Will you show me?"

Angela scowled. She didn't want to experience it all again, but she had led them here. She had to give Adrian whatever he needed to make them go away. "Yes. We'll have to touch. I'm not strong enough to do mental shows."

His heart thumped. Adrian stood up. "Bring your chair."

## 2

"It's hurting her."

Charlie looked up from the basket he was sorting. The sullen teenager wasn't happy to be laboring alongside Marc, but Adrian had insisted. It had now been three hours of tense silence. "What's hurting who?"

Marc kept working. "Your mom, when you won't talk to her."

Another tense silence echoed.

Marc gestured. “See, *this* I expect. Hate me, but give your mom a break. She went through hell to find you.”

Charlie had been thinking about it all morning, unable to drift off again after her nightmare had woken him, but he didn’t respond. What could he say to make this stranger understand he was trying to keep his mom alive by making her pick between them?

They labored in silence for a few more minutes. Charlie felt Marc wanting to talk, to explain. Charlie was glad when the man didn’t try. Kenn had said a lot of things about his mom, things his mom said weren’t true. Even at his age, Charlie knew who he could trust. He also knew how dangerous Kenn was. “Can I ask you something?”

Marc paused to light a smoke. *I need to repay Adrian somehow for this precious time.* “Shoot.”

“Is she telling the truth? You would have come back for us if you’d known?”

Marc’s gut clenched. “In a heartbeat. I used to fall asleep hoping to hear her calling for me.”

There was another long pause.

“I wish she had.”

Marc could have cried in that moment, one of the few times he’d ever felt such an emotion. “Me too, boy, me too, but she made the only choice she thought she had.”

“And we got Kenny.”

The bitter tone made Marc frown. “Yeah, some great joke, huh?”

Charlie nodded angrily, dropping the small box he’d been about to unpack.

Dog appeared in the wooded shadows around them.

A brief, intense moment of concentration between the wolf and teenager got Marc’s attention. Marc scanned to see who else might have noticed.

Only the guards. Their eyes were glued to Charlie, but not in surprise. They were concerned.



Marc wasn't happy. *They all know. Which means Adrian does too. Kenn will be next. None of our secrets are safe.*

"I probably won't be able to come back." Charlie let out a sigh. "Sorry."

The teenager was gone a second later, vanishing into the late morning shadows around them.

Marc kept working and worrying. Charlie was so much like Angie it was scary. Whoever the teen was about to confront had better know how to handle him.

### 3

"Where the hell have you been?"

Angela gave Kenn a cool glare, cheeks flushed at how many people were turning to stare. He'd snuck up on her while she was busy thinking about Adrian's words of protecting her from the slavers. She hated it that she hadn't been listening, but after the call last night, the witch had to be let out carefully. As a result, Kenn had startled her. Angela was surprised to discover her anger was stronger than the fear.

"Well?" Kenn had been searching for her for a while.

"With the doctor, and then Adrian, as you damn well know, so get off my ass!"

Kenn moved in front of her at the lie. He knew she hadn't been with John—he'd been there twice already.

Angela shifted around him as the witnesses muttered. "Go away, Kenn. I'm not in the mood."

The Marine ignored her order; he fell in step.

The guards scowled, fingers on radio buttons.

"Where are you going now?!" Kenn followed as she left the long bathroom line.

Angela let her rough mood have full control. "Wherever I want!"

Kenn stepped in front of her again, drawing attention as she flinched and went for her gun.

He reverted to whining. "I just wanna talk!"

She went around him again as the guards advanced. “Not now, Grunt!”

The tone of command coming from her mouth shocked Kenn, forcing him to obey. He watched her go with concern that was unusual. *She was already upset. What caused it?*

Kenn started to look to the nearest Eagle, like he would have done before she came, then stopped. They were against him now, surprised and angry that Adrian was letting him off without a punishment.

Kenn headed for the supply trucks instead.

#### 4

Angela wandered for hours before lining up to wash for lunch mess. She’d lied to Kenn, but she wished she did have duty with the kind doctor. Yesterday hadn’t been enough of a workout to calm her, not with everything that was happening. She knew she should be glad for the free time before the guard shift tonight she’d volunteered for, but she needed a distraction from her fear. The twins were coming for her, and these people would be in the crossfire. *Unless I give myself up to spare them.*

Terror rose at that thought. She returned to her agitated roaming instead of eating. She wasn’t hardened enough yet. She wasn’t a trained killer, but when she turned herself over to the slavers, she would have to be. She’d told Adrian she wouldn’t ever take another life, but if the Mexicans came to Safe Haven, Charlie and Marc would be murdered.

Angela’s gut twisted again. Her mind went to the Eagles. Did Adrian welcome female fighters? Would she be allowed to try out? *Can I do it?* She had heard about the level tests, and the physical requirements that always drew blood. The fear was there, waiting to evolve into panic, but she considered it anyway.

Angela’s feet took her toward the off-limits area. She wouldn’t do anything like she had yesterday. The witch was locked up tight now, but she could watch them, right? Angela stopped abruptly. *Watch...*

*The twins are watching us!* That had been her feeling of danger on their first night here. They would have seen her reunion, her son. They wouldn't take her without him, not with it being such an obvious method of control. *They know about Charlie!*

Panic erupted, fear ordering her to get her boy and run hard. She turned as if in a daze.

Concerned guards moved her way.

Adrian came from the shadowy doorway of his tent.

Kenn felt her distress and rotated toward it.

Angela only wanted Marc.

He was at her side before any of the others could reach her.

“What is it?”

She sent him her thoughts in one horrifying picture of a gun being held to Charlie's head by one twin, while the other ordered her to kill these people.

Angela found no surprise on Marc's face. He'd already thought of it. “Will you take us north? We'll go right now. Adrian won't let Kenn stop us.”

“It won't do any good, honey.” Marc's tone was regretful. He'd considered it again after the slaver call, but the twins had followed them for a thousand miles and he'd only known because of a trim on his bumper. “They're coming. We have to get ready.”

“But we could lose them—”

“No.”

Her fear cleared a bit at the hard tone; she read his thoughts.

*The brothers are too good, even for me.*

She caught a flash of the fire, of him finding a bullet mark.

“They were there? They shot at us and we didn't know?!”

“It's what changed my mind about leaving you.”

She sucked in a breath. “I'm scared, Marc.”

“I know.”

“What are we going to do?”

Marc locked eyes with the man now standing behind her.

“Trust Adrian to protect you both.”

Angela stiffened, but she spoke what was in her heart. “And when he can't?”

Marc turned away, waving at Dog to stay with her. “I’ll do what I should have already. Hunt them down and end this!”

Angela spun to find Adrian, wanting to say so much that she didn’t know where to start.

Adrian knew. “I can. He won’t have to do that.”

She scanned the livestock area and found her son in a shoving match with Zack’s other son, Timmy.

Matt was lying on the ground nearby.

Angela swung back to Adrian in desperation as guards rushed to break them up. “I’d send him away with Marc and give myself up.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Adrian leaned in. “But will that succeed? Tell me!”

Magic slammed into them at his demand; the witch scanned the future for him.

Adrian’s heart pounded.

*It would keep them away for a while, but make peace, it will not.*

“Good!” Adrian grinned savagely. “I don’t want to make peace! I want them eliminated.”

Before Angela could respond, he gestured toward the fort. “Let’s go watch the Eagles train. We’ll both feel better.”

Angela went where he led, desperately hoping he could save them all.

They entered the training tent as the bell for evening mess rang; every head turned. All of the Eagles were surprised to find her here again.

Angela nodded to the guards she recognized, attention settling on the far corner, where three men were practicing a hostage rescue scenario.

She turned to Adrian, tone daring him to lie. “It’s for me, right?”

“Yes, in case we make a mistake. We’ll come for you.” His voice lowered so only she could hear. “*I’ll come for you.*”

Rather than protest as she might have done, Angela was grateful. Adrian meant it. If the twins somehow kidnapped her, he would be at Marc's side for the rescue. "Can I help?"

Adrian felt fate take notice. Her asking was the first stage of their future starting. "Depends."

"On what?"

He gestured. "They're using live rounds."

When the witch said she would cover it, Angela nodded. "I'm in. You want me to play myself, right?"

Adrian judged the reaction of his men. This would be a crucial test of their lessons. They weren't as ready as he would have liked, but he bit his tongue before he could tell them to switch to blanks. He would wait a minute and observe how they reacted to using the real hostage in their lesson. Right before the actual shooting started, he would have them switch to training weapons.

Angela joined the three Eagles who had stopped to listen and were now frowning. "You want me to sit pretty or do what I really would if I were a hostage?"

Adrian was impressed by the question. "Being very still would be best for now. They're already spooked." He did wonder what she would have done.

"You got it." Angela sent him a quick flash of being inside a shield of protective energy. She felt his immediate relief as she took her place in the center of the set.

Billy handed her earplugs. He had been the one to allow her into the training area yesterday. She felt a spark of interest for the ponytail-wearing sandy blond. *Is he trouble?* "Be careful, will ya? If I get trimmed, the wolf will want to talk to whoever did it."

Snorts and chuckles came at her words.

"I mean it." Angela grinned. "No one wants to wake up with a wolf on their chest."

Her use of laughter to break the tension drew more respect from Adrian. *She sounds ready for more.*

Angela felt safer surrounded by the Eagles. Her nerves began to settle as she sat in the center chair, though she was shocked to find herself here. She had gotten used to letting the witch guide

her through the more challenging things in this new world, but being here right now was all her own doing. She smothered a wide grin at the feeling of freedom. She could never have done this before the war. "I'm set. Let's roll."

Adrian watched her handle the situation as if she'd been doing this all her life. He felt his plans shift. Adrian settled against the far wall of the warm canvas to let her prove herself.

The training exercise was short. Three guards faced three targets that were set to pop up randomly. The hostage was in the middle, with the bad guys using her as a shield.

Billy and Jeremy exchanged a long, tense glance.

When Billy bobbed his in agreement, Jeremy turned to Adrian. "Request permission to change the team?"

"Granted."

Jeremy gestured at Doug, expression pained. "Doug out, Daryl in."

The big man took it better than Angela thought he would. The other guards didn't believe he was good enough. They were making the best choice for the mission.

Angela switched her attention to the three men getting ready to roll. The witch inside smothered her in layers of protection.

"Team one, set."

"Targets, set."

They looked at her.

She smiled sexily. "The innocent hostage, set."

Instead of jokes, all hell broke out.

Not using suppressors, the deafening barrage froze Angela. Her eyes slammed shut. She didn't move an inch as tiny missiles punched into targets.

Silence fell.

Angela opened her eyes to find the men staring at her in horror. Even Adrian was.

"What?" She glanced down, terrified she would discover blood.

A hot piece of metal sat in her lap.

Angela picked it up with fingers that didn't tremble or flinch from the heat. "Who does this belong to?!"

The tone of command to her voice made Adrian's inner Marine applaud.

When Jeremy held up a hand, she tossed him the piece of hot lead. "Do it again; get it right this time."

Angela slid her earbuds back in and froze, waiting.

A second later, the men began resetting it for another run. They all assumed it would have been a trim, but it had been worse than that. If not for her shield, she would have been hit in the stomach.

Angela felt the witch's pleasure when she didn't bat an eyelash at the knowledge.

This time, a feeling of magic filled the air.

Adrian watched them roll the session again in surprise. They hadn't looked to him for confirmation.

Angela kept her eyes open this time. Their careful, practiced movements were like a smooth play. When the bullets stopped flying, she repeated what Adrian had said to her yesterday. "Very nice. A couple more, to be sure you've got it right?"

There was no hesitation.

The other Eagles in the tent were stunned as the three men ran it a third time. Why wasn't Adrian saying something? *She must have his approval.* It was the only thing that made sense. Men studied her to confirm it. What did the boss have planned for the black-haired beauty?

## 5

Angela stood up as they finished round five. She knew by the tension in the tent that something had shifted. When she frowned in concentration, her three would-be rescuers responded.

"You okay?"

"You hurt?"

Angela flushed as the thoughts in the tent slapped her. She waved off Adrian's concern as she went by, heading for the open flap. "I'm hitting the showers."

She left, ice shield back in place.

“I’d say she picked up on not being welcome here.” Adrian saw their regret at interfering with his plans, but it wasn’t enough. “*We* need her.”

That one word cleared things up for most of the Eagles. Whenever Adrian said *we*, it was a greater good issue; they had no reason to doubt him.

When Adrian strode into the darkness after her, he knew his wishes would be carried out. She had to stay. The men would help him with that now.

Adrian took a quick glance around. *Where is she?*

He caught a mental flash of the caution tape and frowned, moving. He recognized the spot, and it wasn’t in camp.

As he walked, Adrian was aware of being trailed by more than just his normal guards, but he didn’t send them away. This time, they needed to hear what was said.

Angela threw the rock as hard as she could. She was gratified to hear a loud *thunk!* as the stone hit the creek twenty yards away. When she felt Adrian join her, she didn’t turn.

“It won’t always be this way.”

She didn’t answer, determined not to let him see she was on the edge of crying. The thoughts from some of his army had been mean. She’d been slapped by a dose of reality. Good at it or not, this was a man’s world. It would be a hard fight to get accepted.

“Angie?”

“I’m okay.”

“It’s not safe out here. It hasn’t been reconned.”

She didn’t answer.

Adrian sighed. “I’m sorry. I thought they were ready for at least this much.”

Angela shrugged, listening to the soothing ripple of the water as it rushed by in the darkness. “Most of them are.”

“Will you tell me who isn’t?”

“No. It doesn’t matter. They’re right. I don’t belong. I’m...different.”



Adrian's heart broke for her. His heart responded to the soft side she hadn't shown yet. "Give me time. I'll change that, my word."

"There's not much time left. Marc will leave soon."

She didn't say, "*And we're going with him.*" but Adrian knew. He gave her a minute, letting her breathe. She didn't want to go. He felt that clearly. She needed another, bigger reason to stay, and he had it. He changed the subject. "You were solid in there."

"It was good for me." Her tone grew bitter. "At least this was a situation I could get out of."

Her thoughts were open, vulnerable. He caught a quick glimpse of her pulling a trigger and being splashed by gore. "What happened?"

Angela sighed, hating it that she hadn't fully recovered yet. "He tried to rape me."

Adrian swallowed anger. "Then he got what he deserved."

"I think so too. It's what lets me sleep, sometimes."

"Killing isn't always murder. Surely you know that?"

Angela took the smoke he offered. "I do, but it still eats away at me some nights." She sighed restlessly. "This will probably be one of them."

"You're the strongest female to join us so far. You have the determination I've been hoping for." Adrian let some of his plans out. "The women here need someone like you to help teach them, to *lead* them."

Understanding came for her and for the trio of men listening from the shadows.

Adrian waited for a reaction, treading lightly. It had to be her idea, but he could set it up as he always did and let her fall into place on his right.

"You want me to train them... You want a female army too."

*Damn, she's quick!* He had purposefully avoided thinking it so she couldn't pick it from his mind. "Yes."

Angela was quiet for a long moment, considering. It would be something to lean on during the nights when the dreams insisted that she was stained forever. If she kept helping other people, it

would be a small, steady payment on the debt she owed for taking a life. “What about the men here? This won’t go over well.”

Adrian chose his words for their audience, knowing they would be repeated. “It would if they understood how useful it can be to have a woman on the team. She’d have to be different though, and it would have to be all or nothing from her. It’s one of those things that can’t be asked for, but has to be earned to have meaning.”

Angela acknowledged the hints. When he turned toward the quieting camp, she let him go without asking questions. First, she had to decide if what she wanted would be possible with so many of her past demons here. Adrian’s request wasn’t a complete surprise. Why else had he shown her his army in the first place? But it would mean separating herself further from Marc, who was only here because he was hoping for another chance with her. If she told him she wanted to become an Eagle and help teach the women here to do the same, he would leave tomorrow. Marc would know it wasn’t possible for her to be his mate and a leader. She’d always be pulled between the two, but both of those things were all or nothing. Marc wouldn’t share.

Angela felt the wolf and the guards lingering, waiting for her, but instead of returning to her tent, she settled on the damp grass and began to sort through her mind. *What do I want now?*

Adrian was tempting her with a new life, with possibilities she hadn’t ever considered, and she was afraid her time alone with Marc hadn’t been enough to keep them together. He wanted a mate, a part of the past returned. She wanted that too, but she needed this second chance at a fulfilling life.

Angela laid back on the ground, staring at the sky as full darkness settled over the broken land. *Is there a way I can have them both, if only for a little while?*

The cook flinched, bumping into the door of the dark supply truck. This side of the mess had no one in sight, not even a guard. It was pitch black except for her dim lantern.

“Who ees there?” She held up her light and sucked in a sharp breath at the shadow next to the rig. “Dio.”

Rick chuckled at the name, moving out of the shadows. “Sometimes.” He held the door open so she would have no choice but to go inside or draw attention. When she hesitated, he uttered three words.

“Cesar says hello.”

Rick clicked his tongue at her near panic to get inside. He shut the door behind them. “These people have a monthly meeting. You’ve known where they’d be, and yet, no word since he sent you here. Not a single call. Why is that?”

“I couldn’t. The radio is guarded!” Maria was trapped. Cesar was holding her sons, sparing them if she would infiltrate the Americans they had heard on the radio, and now, he’d sent this devil to what? Kill her? Scare her?

“Can we trust you, Maria? Or are you a convert too?”

His scorn drew a reaction, but not the timid one he had expected.

“If you are here, then you owe him too! Maybe we help each other, and both stay alive, yes?”

“That’s what Cesar said.” Rick moved closer, big body intimidating. “But understand this. I am loyal, and if I get caught, I won’t go down alone.” He slipped around her, reaching for the door handle. “I’ll be in touch. Soon.”

She paled. “Cesar is near?”

Rick stepped out into the cool night air. “Don’t wish for the devil if you owe him money you don’t have.” He glanced back pointedly. “Especially when you never intended to repay him.”

Angela ignored the woman, slipping on her boots. Hilda had been on her way back from the bathroom when she'd spotted Angela moving around inside her tent.

The den mother slid in front of her flap to keep her from exiting. "You sleep!"

Angela pointed. "You move. Now!"

Hilda considered, then shook her head of pink-and-green curlers. "He says keep the women healthy." Her face softened. "You don't sleep, don't eat. Not good."

Angela felt her anger fade, but not the sense of urgency that had woken her. "I'll try harder. Later."

Satisfied, Hilda moved.

Angela went out, pulling her sweater on. She knew Hilda cared about the females here. She was also sure something in the German's past was driving her, but Angela didn't push for answers right now. She darted between tents, sure she knew where Adrian was. She had to show him—

"Just tell me what's going on. Why are you so determined to become my pal?"

Tonya's voice was unmistakable, even without the usual fake accent. Angela made her way past the showers, avoiding the three men guarding their perimeter. The Eagles were too far away to hear the women, but Angela stored every word.

"Because he has secrets. Who was he?!"

"Not a clue. I know I've seen him before... A politician maybe?"

"I've already run through that list. He's not on it."

Angela tried to figure out who the other voice was as she crept by during the thick silence... *They're talking about Adrian.* She felt her blood heat up with the urge to defend him.

"Maybe we could team up while he's distracted by Barbie and her wolfman."

Pleased, cruel laughter came from the other female. “I knew I read you right. Let’s grab some coffee at the mess and talk.”

*They’re plotting against Adrian!* Angela wanted to confront them, but she kept moving. This couldn’t wait.

She had little trouble sneaking around four rookie guards at the creek bank since she was inside the tape and they were watching for trouble from every other direction. As she rounded a bend lined in tall spruce trees, she caught sight of Adrian; she stopped abruptly. *He isn’t alone!*

Hot, searing jealousy burned a path down her throat. Angela pushed it away, cheeks flaming as she turned her back to them. She listened against her will.

“What?!”

“I’m sorry. I have to go.”

The sound of a soft kiss being pressed to a softer, younger cheek echoed under the rustle of bodies becoming untangled, clothing being adjusted.

“But we’re—”

Adrian left the anonymous female without an explanation.

As he stopped behind her, Angela could feel sexual tension running the length of him. He’d been on the edge. She caught another hot flash that sent a chill of surprised need into her gut. He’d been pretending it was her.

“Something’s wrong?”

Angela swallowed a nasty remark. “There’s something you should see.” She spun toward the caution tape.

The rookies on the area dropped hands to their guns at the noise from her no longer careful steps.

Adrian was impressed, pulse still racing. They hadn’t known she was here. He hadn’t either until her pain echoed through his heart.

Aware of the wolf paralleling them on the right, Adrian waved away the Eagles who tried to follow.

He wished he hadn't when she didn't stop for a mile. She moved with a surety and grace in the unknown forest. It sent his mind back to the fantasy that it had been her in his arms.

Adrian scanned for trouble. *Clear.* Then he scanned her, noting the way she'd learned to keep herself under tight control as they walked. *My fantasy wasn't even close.*

"This way." She led him to a steep cliff that overlooked the route Safe Haven had traveled to get here. "Use these. You'll get better details."

He stared through the night vision goggles she took from her belt, stifling a moan at the sweet hint of vanilla lingering on them. He stiffened when she leaned in, using a gentle finger to guide his sight.

Adrian felt the thrum of raw energy. He froze, understanding why she'd brought him here.

Angela turned her back to his, almost touching, hand resting on her gun as she protected him.

It gave him time to see everything that mattered.

Angela just enjoyed the moment. He was pleased by her actions, as well as this warning. It felt good and it was a balm to her fear.

After a long minute, she heard him light a smoke. She stayed alert, assuming he was choosing what to do.

"Hell of a fight down there." Adrian studied the glow of a huge fire, the explosions. "Surprised we can't hear it."

Angela didn't say she could. The cries of the dying had woken her. "They're coming for me soon."

She hadn't meant to say it.

Adrian instinctively moved closer, unable to take her fear. "I'll protect you."

She didn't answer, not sure if she could trust him.

Adrian put his arm around her shoulder and tugged her against his warmth. He didn't say anything; he just held her. *Sometimes, that's all a woman wants.*

Angela allowed it as they watched the flashes of light in the distance, the battle for survival going on there. She could feel him

wanting to help and hurting because he couldn't. "The witch says it's not your destiny to save them all. Try to relax. Stress is bad for the heart."

"Don't I know it." Adrian retreated a bit as the scent of sweet vanilla began to steal his thoughts. He gave her the goggles back. "Let's go home."

Angela noted Dog patrolling the darkness around them. It was also a comfort. "I overheard a conversation tonight. You need it word for word." Before he could ask, she took his hand.

Adrian felt her response to the contact, her fear of it, and then he was in her head as she dealt with Hilda, then slipped past the showers.

When she let go, Adrian had to clamp his teeth shut to keep from protesting. He hoped she would take his silence for anger at Tonya and Cynthia. It had been a long day. His control wasn't at its strongest.

"Will you punish them?"

"No." Adrian snorted, leading the way. "They'll never quit."

Angela lifted a brow, marveling over using her gift like it was something that happened all the time. "Care to share?"

He shook his head. "You'll get the full soon enough. These people love to gossip. Thank you."

Angela shrugged. "It's what I'm here for, right?"

Adrian thought of his dreams, of the goals now expanding further than he had ever hoped possible. He let longing fill his tone. "Among other things, if you ever want it."

Full of confusion about these new, unwelcome feelings, Angela turned away before he could read her face.

## Chapter Fifty-Seven

# Man Down

Near Rapid City

April 5<sup>th</sup>

### 1

Adrian was waiting at the QZ when the water crew pulled in. He knew by their faces they'd had a narrow escape. They had gotten the precious liquid, though. Adrian could tell by the way the tires on the tanker were pushing out from the weight. He was relieved at least one of their big problems was solved for a couple weeks.

Neil came to him at the tape. "They followed us from the state line, tried to surround us while we got the water. Rough count is sixty men. They have jeeps, trucks, machine guns. We didn't engage, but we did put a timer on the tower so they couldn't have the rest of it." Neil removed his hat and wiped his brow. "Maybe we took out a few of them when it blew, but it's not likely since they were watching us the whole time."

Kyle joined them, wearing the same grim expression.

Adrian's gut tightened. "How did you evade them?"

"Can't attack what you can't find." Kyle signaled a duty guard over so he could get an update on the camp as soon as he finished giving Adrian the details from their run. "We cut through a storm drain and rolled up the mill creek for a few miles, like Kenn had us do after Cheyenne. They never saw us come out."

Adrian was pleased but not relieved as the whining wind mocked him. *Something else happened.* "You eluded the enemy rather than fight a battle you wouldn't have won; they got no water or hostages, and you brought back supplies and information. So why are my top men so upset?"



“Because another city’s burning, Boss.” Kyle’s voice was grim. “They’ve taken Casper. The smoke will be visible to everyone when we clear the trees.”

Adrian dug into the pockets of his jacket for a smoke, acting as if he hadn’t known. “So they have enough men to scout this camp, follow you, and still sack a city—all at the same time.”

Neil guessed at Adrian’s thought. “We can do it. We’re ready.”

Adrian saw Kyle clamp down on a protest. He knew that wasn’t true. So did Adrian. They were good, yes, but that good? Not yet. *I need another eight weeks.* “These people aren’t ready. If we did it now, we might as well keep going. We’d be starting yet another war we can’t be sure of finishing, and there will never be support here for that.” Adrian sighed. “For now, we’ll double the security, increase the number of levels we start each month, and get out of sight.”

Both guards heard the tone and knew Adrian was thinking of all the people who would die in their place. Neil was sure Adrian would change his mind.

Adrian wanted to, but that wasn’t the prudent choice for meeting his goals. “We need to make some real distance. Don’t hold anything back when people ask about your run.”

Neil frowned. “They’re going to keep following.”

Kyle added his agreement. “They’re not just scavengers.”

“This is your job, gentlemen.” Adrian gave his top men more trust. “Protect her quietly, though. The camp can’t find out yet, not like this. We have to buy her time to win them over.”

“How have things been here?” Kyle spotted Kenn getting everything ready to roll.

“Interesting.”

Adrian’s tone caught their attention. They followed his line of sight to Angela, who was sitting at his center table, laughing at something Doug had said.

“She’s one of us—an Eagle. I want you to encourage it; let her have the lead if possible. I need to know how strong she is.”

Both guards wondered the same thing, but neither was able to imagine the Eagles accepting a female.

Adrian knew. "I have it covered." *I hope.*

"What about the slavers?" Neil was still eager to fight.

Adrian's face tightened. "I'm working on it."

Immediately feeling like he'd overstepped, Neil switched back to confidence in Adrian's leadership. "His people won't travel as hard as ours will when they find out Casper's gone."

Adrian was sure the guilt of not trying to save those people would visit his dreams. "He'll send scouts to keep track of us, maybe even try to slow us down. We'll have to clear before we roll."

"My team will handle that personally." Kyle's shoulders straightened; his voice deepened. "We'll take support, but only level Six Eagles will clear the road."

Adrian nodded. Kyle had grown into his destiny faster than anyone else so far. "We leave in one hour. You two should talk to Billy and some of the others before we head out. Catch up on what's been happening here. Talk to Kenn for your driving schedules, then adjust where needed."

Neil frowned. "What about today's route?"

Adrian turned away. "We're not taking a road. We're rolling right through these Black Hills." Adrian spotted Marc and the wolf walking through the small crowds of packing people.

He signaled Marc over. "You have things for me?"

When Adrian wasted no time on small talk, Marc understood he was worried. He didn't like it any more than the rest of the camp. "Yes. After the call, I finished the plan you asked for. It's good."

"How good?"

Marc kept his voice low, making sure even the Eagle guards didn't hear him. "For us, the casualty rate is 3-4%. For them, 90%, but it'll have to be set up perfect to get those results."

The three pages went into his pocket. Adrian would read them while Kenn drove. He'd told Neil no about an attack right now, but they still had to start getting ready for it. The battle was inevitable. *When the time comes, I'll kill every one of them or die trying.*

Angela paused on her way to the vehicle area, duffle bag over her shoulder. She rotated slowly, searching...

Jeremy moved into her line of sight so she would know who to give the warning to. He had already memorized that look of fear. He knew it wasn't good news. Jeremy hadn't freaked out about her gifts the way a few of the Eagles had when they'd been told. He also hadn't needed Adrian's words of caution. Jeremy was as trustworthy as they came.

Angela relaxed even as she frowned. "The shower camper. Personal drama."

Jeremy headed that way. He wasn't on duty right now, but Neil had asked him to watch out for Angela and he was. Neil had called a team meeting and confirmed most of the camp gossip. All of them were now doing it on their down time.

Jeremy saw Wade take over his patrol around the loading vehicles, around Angela. We have a great team. We're not as good as Kyle's yet, but we're closer, more loyal. I don't think anything can come between us.

Jeremy paid attention as he neared the camper. He started to go up the stairs. An angry voice echoed from behind the metal trailer.

"You can say that because you weren't there!"

Jeremy eased around, using the closed supply truck for cover. He peered around.

Jeremy's eyes narrowed. *That's the new woman, Samantha.*

She was surrounded by a group of females; all of them looked ready to fight. Jeremy noticed Samantha wasn't backing away. She didn't give the impression she was scared either, just angry. Jeremy obeyed the instinct telling him to wait and see how she handled it.

The angry ringleader put a hand on her hip. "You didn't almost die there!"

"I escaped after being raped, you snotty twit!" The truth rolled out of Samantha's mouth in a harsh snarl. "And I still say we should fight back!"

Silence echoed for a moment; the other battered women scrutinized her in disbelief.

Samantha read their thoughts. She let out another rough sound of private misery and dangerous fury. “Call me a liar! I dare you.”

Jeremy knew two of the females lurking in the rear of the group were about to accept that challenge. “Is there a problem?!”

He sounded so much like Adrian that all of them flinched.

Samantha stared at the guard from the creek. She hadn’t run into him again since then. He was closer now, enough for her to discover the attraction he already held for her. Sam felt a blush spread over her cheeks in response. *Really?*

The ringleader retreated. “We were just getting to know her.”

The other former slaves also backed up and added support. They didn’t want to get in trouble.

“Yeah, we were just talking.”

“And she got mean!”

Jeremy didn’t buy the excuse. “Play nice. Or you could end up digging toilet holes with Kenn.”

An immediate flare of hatred flashed across their faces, but all of them nodded to acknowledge the warning.

Instead of thanking him, Samantha turned away. *I don’t need anyone to defend me. I’m learning to do it myself.*

Jeremy watched her go, expression thoughtful. *She needs a friend...*

The radio on his belt crackled, echoing the others throughout the camp. “We leave in five minutes, folks. Get in your assigned vehicle and get ready to roll.”

## 2

Angela blew out a restless sigh, braking as the semi in front of her came to an almost complete stop before shifting gears and crawling along again. They were driving through a wooded area with nothing but thin trees and brown weeds. While she applauded Adrian’s choice, it was frustrating and almost painful for her. They were going so slow that the ghosts of the places they were creeping

by were coming to her in strong waves. They were full of death scenes and madness, but the desperation of the living was worse. Angela had to force herself not to reach out to them.

She wasn't sure what to do. This door was usually shut to her. She planned to talk to Adrian about each thing like this that came up, but she couldn't tell him over the radio right now. Charlie would hear and she couldn't allow that yet. Charlie and Dog were riding with the vet. The teenager was giving her, and now everyone else, the cold treatment after his day of hard labor for fighting. Something like this was exactly what he didn't need to know how to do. It would put him at risk because he would use it without caution in his anger and people would discover the truth. That meant toughing it out.

The truck braked again.

Angela clamped down on a four-letter word. She took a fast look at each of the two men riding with her. Kenn's initials on her schedule told her that he had been the one to put her in a vehicle with two older mining men. He hadn't been happy when Neil and Kyle traded their places in sleep-n-bus bunks to those men. It had been a neat switch, with no time for her Marine to argue. Angela had been trying to place the chain of command since they'd arrived. After this morning, she now knew she was looking at third and fourth in command. So what were they doing here with her? Adrian's orders? Marc's cautions? Curiosity?

Angela tensed as a fresh blast of agony hit her. This one was a small group of starving kids; it was a struggle to keep her foot on the gas pedal. She didn't want to pass them up. *I want to help!*

Kyle yawned from the backseat. "Are you okay?"

Angela's eyes flew to his in the mirror. "Fine. Why?"

Kyle sat up, looking at her as Neil stirred restlessly in the reclined passenger seat. "Because we feel it, strongly."

Angela cringed. She switched her vision to the truck that was finally moving faster. "Feel what?"

"Something is bothering you." Neil frowned. "Spit it out so we can get some sleep."

She flushed.

Kyle frowned at Neil. “He doesn’t mean it like that. Tell us what’s up. It’s why we’re with you.”

Both men stared at her expectantly.

Angela kept her eyes on the truck in front of them, not wanting to see their disbelief. “He’s passing up people and supplies, but I can’t tell him over the radio.”

Kyle hesitated, lifted a thick brow. “You can’t...send it to him?”

Angela struggled to breathe at the openness. She shook her head. “And since it’s my fault you’re all in danger—”

“They were already coming for us.” Kyle refused to let her carry that blame. “It’s not anyone’s fault. If we’re passing things you think Adrian wants or needs, tell us; we’ll handle it.”

Angela was stunned. *Where are the questions and snide remarks? The threats, the laughter?* “College kids and fuel tankers.”

Neil immediately sat up and took the mike from its holder. “Three to Base, requesting leave to pull out for a short recon.”

Adrian’s voice over the radio was pleased. “In sight?”

Neil looked at Angela.

She shook her head, surprised they believed her, but also that she could go along.

“Negative.”

“Roger.” Adrian’s tenor wasn’t as confident now. “Cars six and eight will provide escort. Half hour check ins. Happy hunting.”

“Copy, out.” Neil hung up the mike as two jeeps fell out of the line ahead of them. “Let’s go. The fuel, not the people. Adrian will send a team back for them.”

Angela didn’t look at Marc as she passed him and the stinking livestock truck he’d been put behind. Would he follow their deal about protection, or would he stay with Charlie? She hoped he stayed here. *I want to do this on my own.*

“We’ll need you to tell us what you can.” Kyle checked gear in the kit at his feet.

When Neil gave his agreement, hands busy doing the same, Angela felt a large chunk of that outsider shell crack and fall off. Adrian knew how much she had to offer; she would start helping right now, by giving him something he wanted.

Angela didn't see the derelict beef ranches and wheat fields around them as she drove confidently over roads she had never been on. She used her gift, trying to get the kids into position. *Move to the tankers. Help is coming.*

“Angie?”

Kyle's voice was so much like Marc's at that moment that she responded as if he were, forgetting her fear. “Five refugees, three women. One of them is pregnant, but I don't think she knows. The fuel is at an airport near them.”

*Her voice doesn't sound right.*

*She sounds odd.*

Neil and Kyle stored details to report later.

Angela got Kyle's attention in the mirror, sure he would be more sympathetic. “They're just kids. No threat. I want to help them.”

Kyle shrugged, willing enough.

Neil frowned. His orders were clear, and they came from more than one man—keep her unharmed at all costs. “No. We get the gasoline and let a team come back through later.”

Angela frowned. “They'll run. The three of us won't feel like such a threat. I'll be able to talk to them.”

“What about the two jeeps of men behind us?” Kyle wondered if this would be the time Neil finally used his higher rank.

Angela shrugged. “Someone has to get the tankers.”

“No.” Neil didn't like his judgement being questioned. “They'll both be pissed that I put you in danger.”

Angela glared at Neil in tight annoyance that Kyle recognized from his months with Adrian. She would deliver a final blow next. The stories they'd been told hadn't been exaggerations.

“Yes, your ass. Let's talk about that, Neil.” She shot him a quick glare. “Will Adrian take a bigger chunk if we do it now and bring in more survivors, one of them carrying the next generation

of Americans? Or if we don't because I might break a nail and they're gone when you come back, taken by the slavers?"

The silence was deafening.

Kyle regarded her with new respect, shocked that she understood what a powerful weapon that was.

Neil blew out a frustrated breath. The only thing Adrian wanted more than female survivors were pregnant survivors. He began unbuttoning his shirt. "At least put on my vest so they don't think I'm a complete idiot. Pull over. We'll wait outside."

### 3

The Rapid City airport rose out of the gritty skyline like a dark omen. Nothing moved except glints off broken Christmas bulbs framing dark, dirty windows.

Angela felt the tension growing as the wind whined. The Eagle guards didn't like it here at all.

They rolled over pieces of the twisted, rusting, airport gate; the row of fuel tankers were the first things they picked out, all the way in the rear.

"We'll be checking airports from now on." Neil shook his head. "I never even thought about it."

Kyle nodded. "Yeah, makes sense. Have to have normal fuel for their trucks and things."

The two men swept the shadows. When they were near the middle of the vast lot, Kyle held up a hand. "Stop here."

Angela kept her foot on the brake as the two other jeeps flanked her. She tried hard to see what they did.

There were two long, empty, grassy runways, and a large, main terminal building with a lot of dark doorways. Three big, faded, red and white passenger planes were lined up near the fuel tankers like forgotten toys; numerous small outbuildings and vehicles littered the area, most damaged. There were also charred places on the weedy concrete and an overturned security car in front of the burnt frame of a city bus.

Angela saw the two Eagles exchange worried glances.



“We need more men.”

“But they’ll run awa—”

“We cannot secure an area this size with only eight Eagles.”

Kyle’s voice was firm.

Neil handed him the mike, letting the guard do his job.

“Four to Base. We have six A3’s and need drivers, plus two full levels for security. Someone is on the way to meet you where we left.” Kyle motioned through the window.

The jeep to their right pulled away.

“Copy, Four. Cars seven, ten, fourteen, and twenty-one are on the way.”

Kyle felt better knowing Adrian had just sent a few extra men, but it didn’t help them yet.

Angela wasn’t sure what they were so worried about. Yes, there was a bad feeling here, but it was like the other places she’d been. Empty.

*Are you sure?* the witch questioned from her cell.

Angela frowned. No. After the call, she’d forced the witch back into her cage, scared of the camp finding out. Except when she was with Adrian, she hadn’t used the power at all until this drive.

Kyle was watching her expression in the mirror. “What is it?”

She concentrated, but got only darkness. The rustle of her jeans was loud as she shifted restlessly. “Something might not be right here.”

“What?”

Angela turned to look at the driver on their left. “Not sure yet.”

Seth, the driver of that vehicle, shut off his engine; Angela did the same.

The silence was thick as they waited, listening to the nothingness around them.

“The kids are here. I got them to come.” Angela removed her seatbelt. “Don’t let anyone shoot unless I do. The kids are not a danger.” She unsnapped her holster with a smooth movement.

The two men exchanged looks again, thinking of their conversations with the Eagles.

“I can’t wait.” Angela grunted. “They’re about to run. There’s too many of us.”

Kyle saw a single shadow near the planes as Angela opened her door.

“Stay here for a minute so she doesn’t take off. That’s our little mommy. Don’t get out unless you have to. I’ll be quick.” She slammed the door on their protests.

This was the Angela from the hospital, the one who couldn’t possibly have been chest bumped into a corner the night before. She had lived two lives before the war, but now, she was free to be herself. It gave her an unknowing swagger the hiding people recognized in longing. It was the stride of someone who wasn’t living in fear.

Both Eagles were relieved, and instantly jealous, when Seth got out and fell in on her right but wasn’t sent away.

Neil hit the button on his belt. “She never leaves our sight!”

Seth nodded at the order as the doors on both sides of Angela’s Blazer opened in case Neil and Kyle wanted to get out fast.

Angela stopped about twenty feet from the stairs of the first plane, but she didn’t stare up into what was sure to be an ugly scene.

Right behind her, Seth keyed the button on his belt so the other men could hear.

“Can we help you?”

The shadow flinched at her voice, but didn’t respond.

Angela stayed where she was. “We’re from Safe Haven. It’s an American refugee camp. You’ll be safe with us.”

The shadow snorted.

Angela took a step closer, denying Seth this time when he wanted to follow.

They were by rusting gates and an enormous field of waist high grasses where anything might be lurking; Seth’s tired eyes swung continuously.

“I can prove it.” Angela noticed the slender female had no skin showing from her dark, heavy clothing. “He did what I wanted, right? If they were bad, I’d be a slave.”

The girl shrugged. "It could be a trick. Slavers are smart."

Her voice was nervous, hopeful, young. Angela pushed comfort again. "Safe Haven follows the old rules. You and your new family would be well cared for there." Angela hoped she had chosen correctly as the whine in the wind increased.

"How did you know I'm not alone?!"

"Maybe I didn't." Angela's voice became as cold. "You just told me."

"You tricked me!"

Angela could feel the others nearby. The group was warmly dressed and blended well into the surroundings. This fragile chemistry student had done a decent job of teaching them to survive.

Angela switched to an authoritative voice, making the disbelief thick. "You speak for the group?" She hid her relief when the girl stopped her flight instinct, hand going to her hip instead.

"I resent that! I've done the best I could!"

"Then it's time to get them out of here. Hand that burden over to our guardian. In return, you'll work and follow the rules. We have two doctors and none of us are starving." Angela gestured behind her. "They came from all over the country. We can also give you answers."

The girl's eyes lit up.

*That did it.* Angela read the interest clearly.

"You know about Nevada?"

"Doug does. He was trapped under a bridge there for almost a week." Seth smiled at the girl, thinking for a woman who had only been with them a few days, Angela had picked up Adrian's style fast. Seth had snorted at the things he'd heard while Safe Haven packed for travel, but now he was seeing it for himself.

The girl studied them mistrustfully. "You have a lot of people?"

"Yes; doctors, lawyers, farmers, soldiers, housewives. We follow a set schedule; we travel a lot. Most people pick their own jobs, but with your education, you would be helpful to our leader."

"Yeah, in exchange for being allowed in?"

The girl missed the fact Angela knew she had been a student.

“You’re welcome even if you’re not useful at all.” Angela’s tone was just right—a little patronizing, a little insulting, and implying laziness.

“What a load. You’ll take our guns and be in control. No thanks!”

“We are not slavers!” Angela lowered her voice at the girl’s fear. “We help anyone we can, and we’ve risked a great deal to come get you. The rules are simple. Pull your own weight.”

“What’s the crime rate?”

Angela wasn’t expecting the question. “Uh, there’s been one thief since I came. That’s it. No rapes, no murders. It makes bad people think twice when the penalty is death.”

The girl nodded, wanting to believe.

Angela pushed harder as rain clouds rolled in behind the grit. “We’re American survivors who help our own, and you are that, honey. Come with us. We’ll return some of what was stolen from you.”

The girl glanced over her shoulder. “I think we should go with them.”

Shadows next to the plane moved, stood up.

Angela knew by the way the girl flinched that the Eagles behind her were rushing their way with weapons drawn.

“It’s okay. They’re just not sure about you, either.” Angela waved a hand.

Again, there were flashes of jealousy when the others stopped but Seth was allowed to stay.

The two males in the small group of strangers flanked the thin, younger girls who would have been called nerds before the war. Angela was suddenly sure the guys had been athletes, with all of them flying home from some kind of contest.

“They’re right to be worried.” The tallest teenager pulled his gloved hands from his pockets when Seth’s pointed gaze remained there. “We’re in danger.”

The others sent long, worried looks toward the dark main building.

Angela followed their line of sight, frowning. "There are people living there?"

"If you want to call them that." The pregnant girl wrapped her arms around herself. "Radiation victims. They landed like that not long after our pilot stole a fuel tanker and left us here. They don't come out unless we make noise."

Angela winced. "We need to get the gas and go. Now."

Seth checked his watch, then signaled to Neil, who held up one finger.

"Ten minutes for the support," Seth translated.

"The slavers are coming this way. They've taken Casper." Angela pushed her calming gift over the nervous kids. "We are offering you a home. In ten minutes, we're driving those fuel tankers out of here; we're not coming back."

The girl shook her head, ignoring the mutters of her group. "You can't get the gas. It's half the reason we haven't left yet. When you get near the trucks, the radiation victims attack. It's as if they're guarding it. Every time we've tried, we've lost people."

Seth picked out things around the tankers that made his stomach churn. *Three boots, stains, and...is that a skirt by the landing gear?* Seth nodded. This was exactly what it felt like—another place of death they needed to get away from.

"We'll handle it." Angela soothed them all automatically. "Why don't you kids go wait in my Blazer? There's probably going to be some gunfire."

The small group of students moved toward her vehicle and the waiting Eagles. They stayed together as they reached the guards, exchanging nervous greetings.

Angela joined Neil and Kyle, ignoring the coldness they gave Seth. "How does Adrian handle radiation victims?"

Neither man wanted to answer her question because they expected her to have a doctor's outraged response.

"Sorry if I stole your thunder, but they were going to run." Angela tried to get them past it. "You heard everything. I suggest fire. It will prevent further contamination. Got any masks?"

The kids frowned, leery again at her emotionless words.

Angela went to them, using only the truth this time. “We can’t save them, and we can’t leave them to hurt someone else. It’s our duty to do something because we can.” She continued to sing to them as she got them into the Blazer.

The three Eagles exchanged glances.

“She’s a natural. Like us.” Seth stared. “Marc’s right to want her so bad. She won’t just be someone’s woman. She’ll be some lucky man’s other half.”

*Marc’s?* Kyle frowned. He wasn’t sure the man was that good. “Adrian knew she would be. That’s why we have code Raven already. Adrian knew she was like us the second he saw her.”

“No.” Seth met Kyle’s eyes. “She’s like Adrian.”

Kyle grunted in understanding, remembering the sandstorm. “Kenn’s going to shit.”

Neil didn’t echo their mirth. “He’s going to mess it up for her if he can.”

“Yep.” Seth sighed. “Come on. Let’s have a gander. Maybe we won’t need our guns. Be nice not to do it up close this time.”

Kyle followed.

Neil stayed, thinking of the last few mercy missions. They had been messy, ugly; the memories lingered.

The men were back a minute later, resigned. They met the others at the front of Angela’s Blazer, aware of her still talking to the kids, keeping them under control like Adrian would have.

“We’ll do the whole building. She has three full cans, and Seth has two. That’s enough to create a barrier, then we’ll run a tanker in. Bullets after that if any of them make it out.” Kyle looked at Angela, who was listening through her open window. “You should go meet the other men. They’ll be your escort.”

Angela settled into the driver’s seat, not sure if she had missed something important that might explain the warning bells suddenly blaring in her head. She didn’t want to leave, but the Eagles were waiting for her to go.

Angela rolled to the gates, stopping just out of sight. *What did I—?*

“Get down!”

Marc’s order over the radio made Angela duck.

A dart plunged through her window and stuck into the seat instead of her neck.

Angela hit the gas pedal, throwing the kids back in their seats as she sped for the safety of camp.

*Marc!* Her fingers fumbled for the mike as bullets slammed into the door of the Blazer.

She jerked to the other side of the two-lane road, putting up the windows to protect the screaming kids. “*Help! Sniper!*”

The call went over both mental and CB waves. Every man she had a connection with felt it, including those who were too far away to assist.

More bullets ricocheted off the ground in front of them.

Angela jerked the wheel; she dropped the mike as the Blazer’s tires lifted.

Angela turned them in a sharp motion and was relieved to feel rubber slam back into the earth. Before she could get out of the sniper’s range, a faded green army jeep appeared on the narrow road ahead of her.

She slammed her foot against the brake, throwing them all forward as the jeep rolled closer, cutting off her escape. The grinning madman behind the wheel was sickeningly familiar.

*Marc!* Angela slammed the vehicle into reverse, aware of her CB blaring with panicked male voices. *Marc!*

*Get to Neil!*

Angela followed Marc’s order; she flew backwards into the ravaged airport, leaving a cloud of dust.

The Eagles coming to her rescue scattered as the sniper switched targets.

The guards tried to return fire.

Angela slid to a stop in the middle of them. Dillan’s jeep was coming fast and so were the slugs; the Eagles used her armored Blazer as a shield.

Angela searched hard. *Where are you?*

*Tell the boy about me—the good me who wanted to be his father.*

Her heart sank as she picked up Marc's thought and understood what it meant. "No!"

Her scream drew attention. The men followed her line of sight to a muddy Blazer coming toward them from a nearby access road. The vehicle picked up speed, flying at the lunatic who hadn't seen him yet. *I Love you, Angie. I never stopped.*

*No, Marc!*

Marc swerved out of the decaying trees.

The Eagles saw a rare glint of sun flash off his dog tag, bright enough to hurt. Marc's Blazer lunged onto the cracked airport street as the army jeep reached the road.

Before Dillan had a chance to react, Marc slammed into the driver door.

Flames and heavy smoke billowed into the air from the collision.

"Nooooo!" Angela flew toward the wreck, unmindful of the bullets now punching into the debris covered ground around her boots. "Marc!"



## Chapter Fifty-Eight

# Close

### 1

Angela and Neil were there to catch Marc as he stumbled out of the half crushed Blazer; the Eagles hurried over to make sure Dillan wasn't a threat anymore.

“He's dead. Jeep's a total loss.”

Their extra men rolled into view as Kyle's words gave them their answer.

The bullets stopped as suddenly as they'd started, leaving only the sounds of burning, crackling wreckage.

Doug pulled up next to Neil. Before he could speak, Neil pointed at Angela. “Code Raven.”

Doug obediently looked at Angela. “Where do you want me, Lass?”

Angela was too busy to recognize the moment. “There's a sniper.” She helped Marc unzip his jacket so she could assess the damage. “Take care of the kids in my Blazer.”

Doug waited for the next vehicle to go around so he could pull over and climb out.

Marc leaned against Neil, glassy-eyed and subdued as he tried to recover.

On guard duty now, Seth saw a glint of light. “Get her down!”

Marc automatically swung Angela around as the shot echoed; he jerked, grunting.

Marc fell against her as the Eagles returned fire, creating a line of vests between them and the sniper.

“Marc!” Shoving his long coat out of the way, her hands plunged under his shirt, expecting the worst. Angela exclaimed in relief when she felt dry cloth. “You wore the vest!”

Marc tensed against her as his lungs throbbed with sharp, heavy pain from the wreck. “Eagles are...required to.” He wiped the tears from her dark lashes, smiling when the pain in his chest increased. “Anything for you...”

Fresh tears spilled over her cheeks as she gathered energy to try what had failed on her premature son. “I can help! Hang on!”

Marc’s breathing became labored. “Not this...time.” His eyes glazed fully with coming death. “Always love you!”

Angela held out her hands.

Those around her saw a deep blue glow run along her fingers.

*This can be done once without payment. You would continue?*

The Eagles only heard her answer.

“Yes! Quickly!”

Doors in her mind opened. Power exploded from her outstretched fingers.

The Eagles watched in stunned silence as thousands of tiny, bright colored orbs flew from her like shooting water. They hit Marc’s chest and sank into him, covering his body in a constantly changing flash of synchronized red, blue, and purple light.

Those witnessing it were torn between watching his injuries disappear and the fierce concentration shining from Angela’s face. She was the magic Adrian had been searching for!

When her shoulders went from tense to tired, Kyle got the new men up to speed about the airport threat, but he didn’t look away from the miracle happening behind the line of vested Eagles. “Top two up high, next five low. Go!”

His team set up the ordered guard.

Angela stumbled as the magic swarmed back in.

Neil was there to steady her. He drew in a breath. Her skin felt as if it was frying, but there was no sweat. When she trembled under his fingers, the need to comfort her, to hold her, was nearly overwhelming.

Neil retreated instead. *That isn’t in my job description.*

Marc gasped, sucking air into a lung that hadn't had any a moment before. He coughed, doubling over.

Angela felt weariness sinking into her. *I did it! I... used my gifts in front of strangers!* Fear returned.

When Marc rose and steered her toward a truck, she didn't protest.

Marc opened the door, glaring at the driver, Billy. "Take her...to Adrian." He was still trying to refill the lung; it hurt. "Don't stop...for *anything*."

Angela got in without looking at any of them. Her heart throbbed when Marc shut the door. Now he knew what a freak she really was and so did the Eagles. The small moments since they'd met didn't equal this. She knew Marc would stand by her. That's why he'd put her in here, to be safe from the others, but did he need to? Would Adrian's men be able to accept how different she was, or would they drive her—

"Recon team, check in!"

Angela jumped at the radio call. She waited to find out how the men with Marc sounded during the report.

Billy gestured.

Angela understood. Everyone else was out of earshot. He wanted her to answer the call.

"Recon team, check in now!"

Angela picked up the mike with a feeling of authority she wasn't sure she wanted. Being careful with her words came naturally as she hit the button. "We had a...delay run into us. We're okay now. Hang on for one of the guys."

"Do you need more men?"

Angela heard his real question clearly. *Should I come? Do you need me?*

Angela watched the guards, including a limping Marc, pick up gas cans and head for the main terminal. Angela was relieved. They were still going to get the fuel tankers and eliminate the victims who were taking shelter here. The Eagles didn't appear to be treating Marc differently. "No. They're about to blow this place, literally."

“Copy on the noise coming. You found survivors?”

“Yes. I’m sure they could use a healthy meal and a hot shower. What’s for lunch?” Angela wasn’t sure where that had come from, but she knew instantly it was the right way to help him calm the listening camp members and the new kids.

She felt Billy’s satisfaction and realized he’d had her answer the call to calm all of them, including her. *He’s smart.*

“Ham and cheese sandwiches, applesauce, chips. The entire team is 5-by?”

She knew that one. “Roger.”

Doug pulled in behind them, driving the Blazer of nervous college kids.

“Copy. Hurry home.”

“You know it.” Angela hung up, knowing she’d impressed Billy. Better than that, she felt more like herself. The short words from Adrian had told her he would handle whatever had happened.

Angela looked at Billy. “You help train rookies.”

Billy snickered, hitting the gas. “You are as smart as the rumors say. Nice.”

Angela settled back into the seat, suddenly exhausted. “Home, please. You drive.”

## 2

Dark eyes glinting with hatred watched the jeeps and fuel trucks roll out of sight. Dean was hurt beyond words. *My brother is dead!*

It was the first emotional pain he had ever felt. Even physical wounds were viewed with apathy (at least they had been until the witch taught him fear), and Dean was unprepared for how awful it was. The sense of loneliness, of complete failure, was undeniable.

Dean was stunned by the tears that fell. He would bury his brother, and then he would make that bitch suffer! *If I can’t get to her on my own, I’ll take over the slaver camp and attack them.*

Vengeance was on the way. It might take a week or a month, but it burned with a red-hot fury that nothing would calm.

The guards were unable to keep from talking about what they had witnessed; the story flew through Safe Haven despite the mandatory quarantine. Small, worried whispers of magic began circulating.

Adrian headed for the taped QZ shortly after they stopped for a lunchtime meal break. The gossip lacked details and would be forgotten without fresh fodder, but Adrian was curious about the reactions of Angela and the Eagles. The panic in her voice had run through him with horror that he would never forget. Would she now back out of the ideas he'd planted? The life he foresaw for these refugees was no picnic anyway, but as an Eagle, she would face dangers like this regularly.

He spotted her at the center table with the rest of his chain of command. Marc on her right in his crisscrossed gun belts. That man looked like he'd taken the worst of it.

The wolf appeared for an inspection and a quick rub of confirmation. From there, Dog went to Angela and curled up at her feet, letting her gentle fingers stroke his soft fur.

The big animal was bonded with Marc. Losing him might have sent Dog back out into the wild. He was grateful to the woman and her witch for saving his master. She would be well protected, and so would their pup.

Adrian let his gift reach out.

Angela mentally rushed to greet him. *The girl in the parka leads their group. She doesn't know she's pregnant.*

Adrian scanned the new people. They were putting away the food and talking with the Eagles around them. They were thin, strong, young. Smart too, he realized, seeing mended glasses, walkie talkies, loaded weapons, and extra ammo staying in reach. They were survivors.

*And my men?*

Adrian recognized the satisfaction on their faces, the kind that only came from winning a battle. He relaxed, looking forward to the unabridged version the camp would never get.

Surprising only the kids, Adrian went to them first, eager to welcome the first new people Angela had risked her life to help.

It only took a few minutes to realize the kids were already won over. Adrian sat with them, pushing more food toward the girl in the parka as he stored every word of their vivid story. When he began to speak of quiet loyalty, of helping, they hung on every word.

Angela felt exposed. Both sides of the caution tape lining the camp were full of eating, staring people, but Marc had almost died for her. She wouldn't hurt him by moving away. She worried over it though, knowing Kenn would see and be sure there was more than friendship between them.

*He already knows. I'll handle it.*

Adrian sounded pleased. Angela was glad he wasn't upset that she'd risked so many of his men for so few people. She sent him an apology anyway. *I'm sorry. I just couldn't leave them behind.*

Adrian turned to her in silent communication that made Marc's shoulders tense.

*Please don't feel that way. Each life is without price to me. I want them all. You won't be punished. The need to help them is what makes you one of mine.* Adrian looked at Marc. *Same with him. He just can't accept it yet.*

Angela frowned. *I'll work on that.*

*Me too. When they find out he saved your life today, so will the camp.*

*What about the Eagles?*

Adrian didn't answer. That road would be longer and harder.

Hoping to calm things down on that front, Angela looked at Kyle and then Neil. "I'm sorry for putting you guys in a hard spot, and I'm sorry Marc's so pissed at you."

Marc let out a sigh, understanding she wanted him to let it go. "I'm cooling off, but yeah, they fucked up. Adrian wouldn't have let you go back alone."

Adrian slid onto the seat across from them. “No, I wouldn’t have, but I’ve served all my life. I’ve learned the tricks. Now they know better. It won’t happen twice.”

Marc’s response came fast. “Because you’ll train them better or because she won’t be in the line of fire?”

Angela listened to find out if she was as free as Adrian claimed.

“She’s to have full rein among my army, though I prefer only the higher levels know it for now. As her protector, I expect you to teach them not to make these mistakes. Who better for that job than the man who brought her over a thousand miles through hell?”

Marc’s heart fell. There was no way she’d turn that down. Stupid, Angela was not. “Kenn won’t let this happen without a fight.” Marc could feel Angela’s growing annoyance with the conversation, but he didn’t stop. “You have that covered?”

Adrian gestured toward the college kids. “It’s already begun. He can’t stop it. He can only interfere. You’ll have twenty-four hours to act openly, while you’re in quarantine.”

When Marc said nothing, Adrian pushed. “Would you deny others like them the chance at a new life?”

Marc scoffed in scorn at the trap. “I care about her! She’s going to keep putting herself in danger. I’d have that stopped!”

Angela’s protests were ignored by both men; she inhaled a calming breath as they continued.

“I won’t hold her back or tell her no on the things she wants to try here. Neither will my men, unless they have to.”

Marc understood the promises he wanted weren’t coming. “Don’t get her killed, Adrian or the men she’s bonding with might turn on you.”

His warning drew scowls from the Eagles, but Adrian held out his hand. “If I lose her, I’ll resign, and the people here will vote in a new guardian. I wouldn’t be worthy of leadership.”

Marc relaxed the tiniest bit. “You believe in all this that much?”

“It’s everything I am.”

Marc shook with him, sighing. “If I only have a day, I’ll need some boundaries.”

Adrian smiled ruefully. “So do I. We’ll talk, then you and the Eagles will draw up plans. We’ll do switches where we need them. She’s never to be alone.”

“I hope you two are done!” Angela stood up with a deep frown. She was angry enough to fight.

Marc doubted Adrian had adequate leverage to get her to agree. They had both forgotten to account for her reaction, but things were happening fast.

“I have defenses. I’m not some helpless pup you guys picked up on the side of the road!”

Both men thought of magic. They hadn’t mentioned it and they wouldn’t, not in front of so many witnesses. They didn’t need to add fuel to that fire.

“I never said you were.” Marc drew her anger away from Adrian without realizing it.

Angela’s lips tightened into a dangerous line. “Our deal stands!”

Some of the listening Eagles exchanged looks. A deal? There wasn’t love between them, but an arrangement?

“Not above your safety.” Marc squared his shoulders. “If you mean to do big things here, and I can already see that you do, then you’ll accept the protections we come up with...”

They all felt the ultimatum coming. Adrian respected Marc even more for continuing when her eyes narrowed and her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

“...or I’m leaving. Tonight.”

There was a shocked silence as tension crackled.

It was broken by Dog’s low whine.

Angela didn’t try to hide how much it hurt. “You mean that?”

Marc refused to budge. “I do. Next time, the bullet will get through, or I won’t be close enough to save you. I can’t take that.”

The words surprised her, hurt her again.

None of them, Angela included, knew if he was bluffing.

“You’d leave me?”



“Yes.”

“Then I agree!” She sneered. “I need to piss and dunk my head in some cool water before I explode. Should I pick a guard?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Marc and Adrian spoke at the same time. Both males saw flames shoot through her eyes.

Angela chose Seth by giving him a tilt of the jaw and a questioning brow that both Marc and Adrian felt deep in their gut. It said, “*I need an ally and no one else will do.*”

Seth saw Adrian’s expression was harder than he was used to; he tensed at the curt nod, but he didn’t hesitate to follow Angela from the little mess. He would have accepted her invitation without Adrian’s words of giving her free rein. Her pull was strong, though not all sexual. Seth hoped she wasn’t planning on going against Adrian. There could be real trouble if she did that.

Some of Angela’s anger calmed. “He has my support, but I will always fight for my freedom.”

Seth took careful stock of their surroundings, aware of Marc gesturing the wolf after them.

*Paranoid about her safety.* Seth wondered how long Marc would be able to stand watching from the sidelines while she built a life in Safe Haven. It was already clear to Seth what Angela would become, and he couldn’t wait to help her achieve it. “Complete freedom doesn’t exist. It’s a myth, and I think you already know that.”

Seth received silence. He kept coaxing, drawing on that spark of kinship he knew she felt too. “You’re special, and in danger because of it. Adrian will give you as much freedom as he can.”

His blunt words dulled some more of her anger. Seth saw fear take its place.

“You’re all so eager for me to give him what he wants now, but when it gets someone good killed, maybe him, will you still want me then? Because these things always come due in death—he’s right about that.”

“America surviving is what matters, Angie. Any of us would give his life to make that dream come true, including Adrian. He needs you. He knew you were coming, and he hoped you would be strong enough to stand for the women, and you are! Don’t let what might happen, or will happen if you already know, get in the way. The lives we’ll save, change, are worth the price. *Adrian’s* worth it.” Using a part of himself not employed since before the war, Seth pinned her with a sexy grin, oozing charm. Seth was ruggedly handsome at the worst of times, but when he flashed those dimples, he was lethal to the camp’s women and he knew it. “His Eagles need you too, Angie. Together, we’ll keep him alive.”

Angela sighed wearily, leaning down to stroke the wolf so his charm wouldn’t work on her. She would agree and follow like the rest of them, but she had to be careful. For the new life she was creating to succeed, she had to keep Marc around while she put the pieces in place. *If he leaves, I will too, and that may kill all of us.*

#### 4

“Was it the slavers?”

Kyle shrugged, watching both sides of the mess clear out. Set up in the middle of the road, the emptiness was making him uneasy, especially after the airport trouble. “It could have been a part of their group, the tail we’ve had, maybe. It felt like a two-minute plan, and they had no support.”

Adrian wasn’t relieved. Two spies had recognized a mistake and tried to take advantage of it. Just because one of them had died in the attempt didn’t mean it was over, however. In fact, it had probably added more fuel to the fire.

Kyle took out his notebook. Under pressure, their leader was at his best.

“All training and testing will be done indoors for a while. Start rescue lessons for every level. Double the sentries at night and use the disks at one hundred feet instead of fifty. Seamstresses need to be in my tent an hour after evening chow; gather all the steel plates

and green material you can find. Put it in the rear of my rig and have Miller stashed there. He'll know what to do." Adrian paused to light a smoke. Kyle already knew to cover the man's absence. Adrian couldn't let his camp know he was worried enough to have steel plated canopies created, but it still had to be done. "Mention we have openings in the defensive driving and hand-to-hand classes; offer vests. Use the reserves if you need to, but go out of your way to keep them calm. Tell them it was random, not related to the group moving up 25."

Kyle had no problem omitting that part of the story. He'd seen panic in New York before the war. It was usually as deadly as the crisis that had caused it.

"I'd like one of you to stay near her at all times, out of sight."

"We already sorted out a rough schedule for the next two days. There's four of us. Seth wouldn't back off."

Adrian was glad his people were loading up without any obvious signs of being scared, but he didn't care for the way some of the Eagles were staring at Angela. None of this would be easy. "He's like her in some ways, I think, running on a level closer. Maybe he'll catch something we miss. Just make the lower levels believe it was a random attack. Some men saw her alone with the kids and thought they were helpless."

"I'm sorry for it."

Adrian answered with none of the coldness Kyle felt he had earned.

"I don't hold it against you. We will make mistakes. Hopefully, no more like this one. High level security meeting an hour after camp is settled for the night. I want all team leaders present; bring Marc."

Kyle kept his voice low. "She'd search for you."

Adrian didn't pretend not to understand. When he'd told Kyle he trusted him completely, Adrian hadn't lied. "These people can't find out too fast, or we'll lose them all, including her. It's code Raven." Adrian met Kyle's eyes. "You have a better idea now what that means?"

“She’s going to be one of us.” Kyle finally let his awe out. He’d been holding it for this moment. “She was great. Fell right into it like you thought she would, Boss. You’ll get the full in my report, but I’m sold.” Meaning all the details the college kids wouldn’t have noticed, as well as Kyle’s thoughts on what training Angela would need to start with.

Relieved, Adrian thought of the Arkansas dreams that had haunted him last night. “She’ll recognize your loyalty, too. She’ll need it.”

Kyle didn’t really doubt Adrian’s words or Angela’s honor, but questioning both was required now, especially after discovering Kenn’s abusive nature. “We can trust her like we do you? She won’t use it to her advantage?”

“No. She’s almost accepted this as her home, her new family. For the first time in her life, she is valued. She’ll protect that security, this camp, by any means we allow. I intend to give her few limits.” Adrian’s voice deepened in warning. “And Kyle, she’s on the edge with all these new tensions and people. That may make her a little dangerous. Don’t be the one to insist on the changes if you can help it. Marc is the only one who can handle her heat.”

## 5

“You keep up that fake smile, your mouth might crack.”

Kenn turned from glaring at the little mess to see Tonya leaning in the open driver door, big tits almost spilling from her lowcut red dress. *Doesn’t she have any other clothes?* “What do you want?”

His curt tone sent a mean sneer across her pretty lips. “I thought you could use some company now that your woman’s gone and joined Adrian’s super-troopers.”

Kenn’s unshaven face set into hard lines. “She got lucky and found some people. So what? She’s not an Eagle.”

“Then why was she at the center table?” Tonya let snark come into her tone. “Well, maybe we were low on seats. I do wonder why she was the one to check in for the recon team, though. Bet

they were all too busy. But why is she wearing a vest? Hmm... I can't answer that one."

Kenn made his voice sound normal despite the dread in his gut. He'd heard rumors, but he hadn't talked to anyone yet. Obviously, Tonya had. "Adrian covers that."

Tonya laughed cruelly, hawk-like profile turning toward Adrian's rig. "Yes, he does, and you're on the outside now. She's already done more for his dreams than you."

"What are you running your mouth about?!"

Very aware of his abusive notions, Tonya took the smirk out of her tone, but her words couldn't be buffered. "I'm talking about a lot of things. You didn't tell Adrian she's...different, or that Marc was your boss before the war. You didn't tell him about your heavy hands either, but it's more than all that now. She left you...for Adrian."

Kenn was getting hotter as Tonya talked, slamming awful truths into place.

Tonya didn't stop. She needed him pissed for her plans to succeed. It would take guts to eliminate Adrian. "She'll be the first female Eagle, the one who draws the others in. He'll probably give Marc your place just to keep her happy."

"And where does she rank?" Kenn wasn't successful in blocking the tremor from his voice this time. "If she's so important, what's her place?"

"She doesn't have one." Tonya softened her tone, taking pity. Kenn may have broad shoulders and a strong back, but this would be a hard blow. "Your woman will be above the chain of command, an advisor of sorts. Though in time, she might not even answer to Adrian."

"How do you know all this?!"

Tonya revealed an edge of shrewdness the rest of the people, including Adrian, would have been shocked to witness. "I don't. I'm the dumbass, remember?" She turned away. "The dumbass who doesn't play his games, and yet still gets to stay and be safe."

"You're wrong!"

Tonya delivered a scornful tone that said everyone had underestimated her. “How many times have you heard him say he could use a little magic, Kenny? Now, he has it. You and the Eagles are nothing compared to that.”

Tonya left him with those unsettling thoughts.

## 6

Adrian climbed into the seat of his truck; the tension was thick, unavoidable. He didn’t try. “I’m offering them both a place in my army. They’ll be below you in the chain of command, above everyone else.”

“You’re only giving it to him because of her.” Kenn’s protest was rare.

“He’s one of us. If you didn’t know them from before, you’d be impressed. He threw himself between strangers and death.” Adrian tried to avoid the rest.

Kenn knew without being told. “Would he have done it if she hadn’t been in danger?”

“Does it matter?” Adrian shot back. “He saved several lives, not just hers. He helped complete a mission and eliminated a potential future threat, something you, yourself, are adamant about. If you didn’t know them, you’d agree.”

Kenn let the truth slide out. “But...I do know them, and I can understand why you want her, but he’s just here to...” Kenn sighed. “It’s an insult to me and it should be to you too. He’s using your dream to stay close to her.”

“Like you did, when you first got here?”

Kenn flushed.

Adrian laid it out. “You can’t keep them from getting close. Any fool can see it’s too late for that. As for the dream, how or why we join up doesn’t matter.”

Kenn said nothing.

Adrian grew angry at the silence. “Hardly anyone here has a good past, but we all came to believe in the dream. Unless you still don’t?”

“No, I like living on the edge all the time.” Kenn snorted. “Of course, I believe. It’s our future, our duty to try.”

“Yes. Angela and Marc are a part of our future. I need you to cooperate with them, with *me*.”

Kenn wanted his rightful place back more than anything. The desire to be everything Adrian needed hadn’t vanished with Angela’s appearance. “I’ll handle it. The camp comes first, right?”

Haunted pain flashed across Adrian’s face. “Yes. Above all else, and I do mean all. You’re not the only one making sacrifices.”

Despite his warning, Adrian couldn’t have been happier with how things had gone. *I can do a lot more now*. These survivors didn’t know their destinies yet, but he would help them see the light.

Adrian picked up the mike, held it out. “Start the count off. I want the Borderlands before our next three-day break.”

“You’re the boss.”

Adrian nodded. *Until we reach Arkansas. Then, it will be someone else’s headache and heartache. But between then and now, I’m going to teach these people to survive.*

Adrian caught sight of Angela walking by with both Marc and Dog on her heels. *And she’s the reason I’ll succeed. Without her, I might as well turn us all over to the government. We haven’t heard from them in a while, but I know they’re still there. Thanks to Angela’s gifts, we won’t have to surrender. Now, Safe Haven is a super power.*

## **The End of Book 1**

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# Deleted Scenes BK1

December 21st

## 1

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

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

“Where do I give the speech?” Carter had discovered a love of talking to his people.

Ben Seiling, Deputy Chief of Staff, gestured to the radio the president used for the weekly addresses. “It’s not safe in public. The rioting started an hour ago in most places. It’s spreading faster than we can keep up.”

“No cameras? Press?”

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

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

Ben’s curt nod confirmed it, but the sheer number of Secret Service Agents filling the halls of the West Wing, entering his Oval Office, drove it in. As he had the thought, three more uniformed men came in from the doors that led to the Rose Garden, expressions shouting excitement and a touch of fear that wasn’t comforting.

“The agents will take you and your family out as soon as you’re finished here. The Vice President and Joint Chiefs will be in the air shortly, headed for the Essex Compound.”

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

## **Betrayal is the Foundation of America!**

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

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

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

"Not anymore."

"Exactly."

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

Carter hadn't quite believed it when he'd first been informed of the file known only as *DOC*, but it hadn't taken him long to understand how much the world would change if the public suspected the massive secret that had been kept all these years. The days of government rule would be...

"Mr. President, please."

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

Ben, reading some of his thoughts on his face, spoke up. "These men have no families to rescue; they have been paid well

in gold and passes, and all of them voted for you. There are no deserters here. You and your family will make it to NORAD, safe and sound.”

Only slightly reassured, the President skimmed what might be his last address, worry burning. “You’ll activate the sirens?”

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

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

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

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

“What about vitals? Evacuations?”

Ben sighed in frustration, knowing the President would have his report before he did anything. Carter could be pushed, but it had to be gently. “The internet is locked down; only our senior military have the codes needed to access it. As for EVACs, those on the lists are 35% recovered at this point. Ahead of schedule.”

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

“We have reports of massive abandonment of posts already. Media stations in France and China are on it. Daycares, schools, hospitals, radar and traffic towers, police stations, utility plants—they’re already starting to shut down. Citizens will have nothing to depend on, no way to survive after the first few months.” The deputy’s voice lowered. “The draft convoys started out half an hour ago. Waves of refugees have been spotted hitting towns ahead of the trucks. Some of those places are attempting barricades. We’ve covered it. *Our* men will follow orders.”

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

“Carter.”

It was the first time the deputy had ever called him by his first name. Doing it here, in this hallowed place, was such a transgression of protocol that it got Carter's full attention. This was the strategy smarter men than himself had agreed upon, and after, when it was time to come out of hiding, he would still be in charge. The US Presidency was not allowed to change hands during a time of war, unless there was a death. "We're using the rest of our arsenal? Retaliating, even though we caused it?"

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

Carter's finger pushed the button, not asking how that was possible without his approval. He'd learned a lot about leadership in the last few years and one of the biggest lessons was that you didn't ask questions unless you could take the answers. Stomach churning, he began the emergency address to the nation.

As he finished, he was jerked out of the seat at a motion from Ben. The President stopped struggling as the agents rushed him outside where panic was roaring from the streets.

"Warning! Incoming!"

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

The agents literally threw him onto the chopper.

President Carter Heins huddled with his wife and twin boys as Marine One quickly rose into the air. As it ascended, the blades were assaulted with rocks, shoes, briefcases, and cell phones from doomed citizens.

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

Blood splattered; bodies fell.

Marine One reached an altitude that cut off Carter's view of the ground.

"Daddy! Fire in the clouds!"

The explosion was blinding. Carter kissed his wife's teary lips as the shock wave caught up to them.

There were no survivors.

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

Former President Robert Milton slid the disk into the main computer with a sneer of contempt that few would have recognized from his time in office. Once exalted, he was now reduced to message-boy for the current administration. He had volunteered for this part of revealing the centuries-old lie.

Clearly trying to hurry, the traitor looked over his shoulder repeatedly while typing in codes. He placed his hand on the scanner; the lights in the room flashed to deep red.

Stepping over a body, he took a marker from the desk and wrote on the wall before the screen faded to black.

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

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

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

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

# Deleted Scene #2

December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012  
Granite Mountains Complex

Press Secretary Pat Michaels sat in the rear of the large, crowded room embedded in a dank maze of tunnels half a mile under the secret military base. The compound was under attack by terrified citizens demanding the protection they knew the Essex could, but would not, provide.

This bottom level limestone command center was thick with smoke and brass; some of them had been in on the original testing of these weapons. Pat hoped his own punishment wouldn't be as harsh as theirs. After all, they'd known firsthand what a horrible thing had been created. It was so powerful, so unstoppable, that the America above them was about to be destroyed. A new, hostile land would take its place.

The slyest of defenders since Nixon's well used man, Pat was now useless, forgotten in the chaos. He wasn't even sure if he was allowed to be here. His family had been in New Jersey. Someone had been with him when he got the news. They'd brought him along when they evacuated from the Las Vegas convention hall, though he couldn't remember who it had been. *Amanda! The kids! How will I go on? How will anyone?*

Panic was rampant. Officers barked orders, flunkies scrambled to get information, papers floated through the humid air, phones rang nonstop. Thanks to an EMP and a lucky shot from a disgruntled citizen with a grenade launcher, the Vice President was dead. The Speaker of the House was now the legal recipient of the highest seat in the land, but she wasn't here. Neither was the new Secretary of State. No one knew where they'd been evacuated to, or if they were even alive. Those jobs were no longer in demand, and the result was chaos. That would change later, if they survived the coming missile.

This complex had been built in the 90s. It was untested and less than one hundred miles from what was about to be a direct hit. Pat shuddered. *We might feel it.*

Lurking near the wall of air vents and panels, the press secretary broke into a light sweat as one of the remaining clocks on the cold, sterile walls around him slid under the five-minute mark.

Washington, New York, and most of the east coast had been destroyed. Of the seven warheads the long-denied Star Wars program hadn't been able to remove, three were going to find US targets, and maybe the two others they had lost radar on. Their own missiles had decimated countries around the globe. Now, America would pay the price.

The huge, multipicture screen in the front of the crowded room changed when the next clock hit four minutes, flashing to a satellite view of the incoming missile careening toward the Sunshine State.

Why, in God's name, had the former president done this? *This is just a bad dream.* If not, millions more were going to die in...

03:45

03:44

03:43

The computer switched to full alert; alarms all over the vast compound warned of the impending arrival. Pat's stomach churned as the ceiling lights flickered to a hazy red.

America was in the same state as this room, thanks to the convoys of soldiers taking all males, ages 10-60. The public had been told different ages, but the soldiers wouldn't care. Those hard men had been told to get a full truck of warm bodies any way they had to. Gunfire was filling town after town. They had reports of it in nearly every major population center across the country.

02:50

02:49

02:48

Would mankind survive? Had they really blown themselves up? *How much of this am I responsible for?* Millions of lives were already gone... So many cultures and their histories!

01:20

01:19

01:18

Pat cringed from a braying siren in the front of the loud, crowded, tactical room. They'd destroyed the world. Was that the red stain on his hands that refused to wash off?

00:40

00:39

00:38

*When was my last orgasm?* He was too scared to recall what it had felt like or what the intern's name had been. *Greg? Gary?*

00:25

00:24

00:23

*When was my last confession?* Pat struggled to remember. *Did I mean it? Is it too late?*

00:15

00:14

00:13

He shut his eyes and began the comforting litany from his seat on the couch, unable to make himself get on his knees even though the hour of judgment had come. "Please forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

00:02

00:01

00:00

*I did it for my country...*



## Deleted Scene #3

Adrian once again roamed the sea of tents, unable to sleep. He was satisfied with the job Kenn had done, but he hated the aftermath. The land around them was now totally devoid of life, instead of isolated. It was foreign—like what the surface of Mars might be like. Even the smells had changed. The rot was still here, along with a hint of salty smoke, but the strongest was a thick, stomach-tightening mildew he didn't need John to tell him was from all the dead. The sandstorm had scraped away tiny bits of decaying flesh that were then flung about in the storm. It wasn't comforting.

“Did anyone see you?”

A man's voice murmured nearby, one he knew well. Adrian found shadows by a dusty supply truck. It was 1 a.m. The camp was supposed to be sleeping right now.

“No. Let me in.”

The woman's voice was also familiar. Adrian wondered if the guards had noticed them. Probably not, but they would if Kenn wasn't careful. It didn't bother Adrian, but the camp wouldn't like it.

Adrian smirked. *Hell, maybe Kenn can straighten her out a little and put her to use. Tonya has to have a skill that doesn't involve her knees or her back.*

## Deleted Scene #4

Marc finished with the radio while Lenore led Angela through a dark, blanket lined room where five adult women and three kids were sharing a very large bed.

Lenore held open the rear hall door; she saw Angela's expression. "They sleep together for warmth now that their mens are gone and the snow comes so unexpected."

Angela recognized the betrayed tone. "The draft?"

"Aye. Yours too?"

Angela's voice was just haunted. "My son. I'm on my way to get him back."

The giantess lifted a surprised brow. "Just the two of you?"

"Yes. No one will keep me from my blood."

Respect laced the woman's answer. "My prayers will be with ya. Not that God listens any more now than he did before."

Angela smiled her thanks, tensing as the wide bed, lit by a candle in each corner, came into view. She hid it and shut the door in relief. *A few minutes alone at last!*

# **Eagle Teams BK1**

## **Level Six**

Kyle, Cris, Daryl, Billy, Shawn, Morgan, Theo, Crone, Denny

## **Level Five**

Neil, Jeremy, Daniel, Greg, Wade, Ben, Steven, Jim, Jake

## **Level Three**

Zack, Lee, Allan, Frank, Donald, Ozzie, Brandon, Pete, Simon

## **Level Three**

Seth, Jeff, Rusty, Jack, Ryan, Bruce, Tommy, Joey, Robert

## **Level One**

Kevin, Ray, Alex, Dexter, Logan, Scott, Francis, Whitney,  
Josh

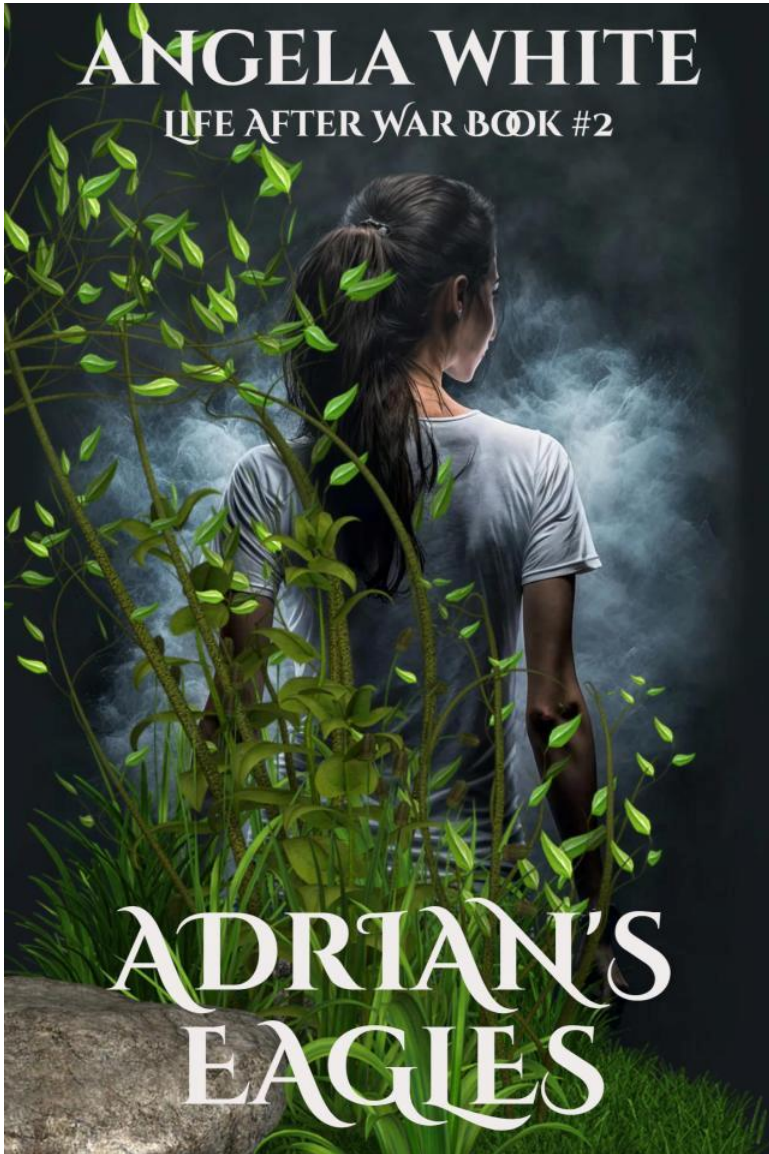
## **Rookies**

A number of camp members are under consideration.

# Place a Review BK1

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 the 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.

# Book Two



ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #2

ADRIAN'S  
EAGLES

Copyright BK2  
**Adrian's Eagles**  
by  
Angela White

**Title:** Adrian's Eagles

Life After War Book 2

**Edition:** 2024

**Author:** Angela White

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# 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 Bk2  
**Pick A Target**

1

**T**he light had begun to fade as the caravan made camp in the middle of 34, out of sight of Sturgis, SD. With a darkened skyline to cast distant shadows, it was another rare place Adrian had found for them. The only signs of the war were ones he couldn't hide, like mold growing up weakening trunks and bodies of mauled pigs. The Eagles would get those out of sight and people would avoid the trees. Adapting had become a part of life for the refugees of 2012.

The center fire and 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.

### 3

A small group of camp members waited at the caution tape. Those who had heard *her* and understood the first female was taking a level test—Tonya, Hilda, Cynthia, and Becky—were in the front. The rear included Eagles who had heard the stories but hadn’t gotten to go along for the rescue.

Kenn casually joined those rear men. Unwilling to miss Angela’s first test, he stood stiffly with the others and tried to hide his worry. If she failed, he was safe. If she did well, everything he had built here might fall.

Angela’s emotions were boiling. The horror-filled day and new restrictions had her feeling as if she was on fire. She stood where they told her, nodded when they said something, and waited impatiently for the release she needed. She cared little for their words of having to give up her gun if she failed. After all the time



alone with no rules, it was suddenly too much. She couldn't wait to fight back in the only way she was allowed. *Calm down and get some sleep, my ass!*

Marc noted the furious heat lurking under her cool gaze, and knew she was about to do some of the best shooting he'd seen from her. When she got into the groove, things rolled.

"All right, let's do this." Kyle set a box of ammo on the table. "We'll give the lady a few warmup shots. As a level two, Alex doesn't need it."

"Neither do I!" Not waiting for them to give her a clear line of fire, Angela's hand felt like it belonged to someone else as she drew and shot from the hip.

Men froze in training positions, apprehensive as she aimed and fired, slid to the right, fired, fired.

Counting off six shots, Angela deftly reloaded on the move, using the speed loader positioned on the left side of her belt where it could be grabbed by her free hand. With a practiced precision all the men approved of, she snapped the cylinder of the Python shut with a flick of her wrist and fired off the last two shots.

"Bulls-eyes in all 8 targets!"

"Damn."

"Wow!"

The Eagles were shocked.

Angela's furious rage melted into cool anger as her fingers reloaded the two expended rounds, then topped off the speed loader.

The males noticed her automatic reload as well.

"She shoots like Adrian. You see that hip action?"

"And with a gun too big for her hand!"

The level men cheered again.

Kenn tried to appear proud as people slapped him on the arm, but his stomach twisted. It came as no surprise she was so good, though Marc had only had weeks with her. Hadn't he known it would be this way all along? *It's part of why I didn't want her here.* Now everyone would know it all came down to male

insecurities and pride. *To hell with Marc! Angela is the real threat to my place.*

Kyle shook his head, smiling. “Shoulda known. That’s a pass and then some.”

Angela didn’t return his grin. “Move ‘em back.” She saw his jaw tighten at her tone. “Providing Alex can match?”

Kyle looked at Marc.

Marc snickered at the mobster’s helpless expression. “I didn’t challenge her. I know better. A higher level shooter maybe?”

Alex cleared his throat. “I’m a level two Eagle, but I’m a level six shooter.”

The teacher turned and fired, matching her quickness with grace.

“Bulls-eyes in all 8 targets! Matched!”

The men cheered again at Neil’s call.

Angela refused Alex’s apology. “Don’t be. It’s all or nothing with me too and I’m not a sore loser.” She beamed. “I am a sore winner though. I plan to rub it in.”

It was a loud, tension-relieving hour for most of them. Angela and Alex matched each other shot for shot until she finally missed at 100 feet. It also had a good effect on the camp. The normal noises gave proof to the tale of today’s chaos being a random attack on an easy target.

Most people on both sides of the caution tape enjoyed the competition, but others worried. Their fears ranged from isolation and betrayal, to the future and how to prepare for it. They were all wise to be concerned. It was almost fate’s turn to flip a card.

#### 4

“Don’t like the movie?”

Angela hadn’t heard Adrian’s approach. She tensed, hand dropping to her gun despite the two guards hanging back to give her space, and Dog pacing a perimeter. She was sitting in the middle of a moldy picnic table, smoking a joint. She stared at

Adrian for a long moment. Was he here to scold her for leaving the QZ? *I'm really not in the mood.*

When he only stared back, she finally shrugged. "Not really. That one bothers me." She offered him the smoldering weed.

Adrian hit it hard as he sat down next to her. It was closer than either of her men would like, she was certain. The sky above them was black, with no stars or moon visible. It was depressing. The dying leaves rustled with the breeze in a sad howl of mourning. Angela shivered. *Our enemies are closer now. Their hatred is too clear!*

Adrian followed her thoughts as much as he could with his weak mental gifts. "Is it because they burn the witch at the end?"

She didn't pretend ignorance. "Yes."

Neither did Adrian. "That's why I picked it. That scene will bother the hell outta my men and make them determined to keep it from happening here."

Angela was too tired to be upset. "Is there anything you leave to chance?"

Adrian blew out a steady stream of smoke. "Not if I can help it, and you shouldn't either. There's too much at stake." He scanned her, noting Kenn's ring hanging from the thin gold chain around her neck. The Marine was using it as proof that she was his wife. "You going to watch the next movie?"

"What is it? Witches of Eastwick? Harry Potter?"

Adrian's tone deepened. "Excalibur."

Angela broke the connection, feeling the hunger, the witch inside, stir. "What's the camp viewing?"

"Bruce Almighty, then Independence Day."

She chuckled, able to recognize the usefulness of both films, but also the irony.

The wind dropped suddenly. They could almost make out the words of those in the big tent before it gusted and they were alone again. It came to her then, what he needed, but couldn't openly ask her for yet. She felt no reason to delay him discovering her other gifts. She had basically brought a man back from the brink of death. If that didn't freak him out, nothing would.

Adrian felt the change in the slender woman next to him. He stayed still as the soft hum of electricity filled the air. Her breathing was shallow, a bit faster than normal. Adrian stored the details as cool wind brushed her hair against his arm and filled his nose with vanilla.

“They will come in the darkest hour of the wake.” Her words carried to the guards. “They hate you. They will behead your men while you watch.”

“What should I do?” Adrian was ready to grab his notebook.

“You’ll know when the time comes.” Her eyes flew open in the darkness.

His pulse sped up as the witch studied him.

Angela was helpless to control the actions of the hunger inside when the witch surged forward. “You have great secrets, but there is more support for honesty than you’ve given them credit for. Tell the truth now, before it all comes out.” The witch spoke to him directly, dripping need. “I’d protect you.”

Angela tried to pull the witch in, but it continued to remain in front.

“Or find you a new herd to care for...”

The lust rolled off her in waves. A hundred times stronger than in the training tent with Seth. Adrian froze, too aware of her as a woman to turn away. He had time to notice she wasn’t wearing a bra under her tank top, unable to keep his eyes from dipping, and then those red orbs locked onto his. A current of need ran the length of him as her nostrils flared; the woman inside scented him.

*Sweat, fresh cut straw, and underneath, man.* The witch ignored Angela’s protests as she inched forward.

Adrian stared, drowning in her glowing depths. He knew he had to stop this. A single word would help her regain control, but he couldn’t wait to taste her, to claim her.

The witch slipped into his mind. *I’m hungry.*

It was something Angela would never have said. The spell broke. He became immune to the lust. “I feel her fighting. She’s not willing.”

The witch sent erotic images through his mind. “She wants this as much as you do. She fears a bond with a man she can never have.”

Adrian opened his mouth.

Angela fought to get through. *Think!*

The witch flinched.

Adrian froze as flames shot up around them.

“I will have this!” The witch leaned in.

It cleared the final layer of haze for Adrian. “No.”

The witch and her fire faded.

Angela slid onto her knees, winded and mortified at her lack of control. She had never been around her own kind before and Adrian was definitely that.

When he would have helped her up, she flinched. “I’m fine!”

Adrian guided her to her feet anyway, making her look at him in the process. “Is this you?”

Angela snorted at the serious question. “No, it’s the Sandman.”

Adrian kept full eye contact and hands on her skin. “Take what you need. I give it willingly.” His words had an instant effect, as he’d known they would.

Thunder crashed as she drew energy from him, followed by the angry waves of a salty ocean, and then it was just them, the dead night, and two very curious Eagles.

Angela’s voice trembled with renewed energy. “I’ll show you something beautiful as a reward for your strength.”

Adrian felt her cool, soft presence in his mind, so unlike the feverish heat of the witch. He struggled to control his thoughts, to keep her out of his desires.

“This is what I see.” She blew into her cupped hand.

Her sweet breath rushed into his lungs. A map of their country appeared in his mind, black as death.

*Gone!* There were only charred outlines of apocalyptic landscapes...but as the brilliant sun sank, thousands of tiny lights appeared, scattered across the states.

“Campfires.” Adrian blinked as the vision panned out and even more flickers appeared in the darkness.

“My people!” He struggled to memorize their locations. “I’ll never get them all!”

“We’re not meant to.”

The map vanished at Angela’s words.

Adrian kept his eyes shut, able to see it in his mind.

Angela resettled on the table, letting him work. In the distance, lightning flashed violently.

Adrian was in heaven and hell at the same time. *So many! How do I know the ones I remember are the right ones?*

Angela exhaled. “Fate controls that, not you.”

Finished with his mental imaging, Adrian joined her on the table, frowning. “You use a lot of energy to do these things.”

“Yes, and to keep the witch in line.” Angela was mortified. “I’m sorry.”

Adrian was thrilled. “It’s the energy she wants?”

Angela frowned. “Yes, but it creates a bond and I think you already knew that.”

“But having it confirmed makes the choice easier. It can be done in dreams?”

She sensed where he was going. “Yes. Don’t you worry about keeping things under control?”

Adrian shrugged. “Good leadership is control. Let her have their dreams. You’ll be in some of them anyway. Pretend you don’t know. With her satisfied, you’ll be in charge and your gifts will grow.”

Angela regarded him coolly. “If I let her loose, your men won’t be good enough. She’ll go straight to the top.”

Adrian felt need rise back up to lash him with stinging flares. “I won’t turn her away twice.”

Angela shrugged, but he understood she was against that as lightning flashed again, illuminating her features. “What about time alone with Marc? I can make some arrangements.”

She brightened at the offer before going dim again. “No. I’m fine without it. I always have been.”

“You’re doing more now.” Adrian motioned toward camp, sure the electrical storm would make the herd uneasy. He was glad when she followed. “Let her out at night. It’s just a dream.”

“Maybe.” Angela wasn’t sure she was strong enough to keep the witch in line anyway. The power inside liked it here and Adrian had given her free rein.

Chapter Two BK2  
**Hook, Line, And Sinker**  
Near Union Center, South Dakota  
**April 6th**

1

**“D**o 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.”

“Ready?”

“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."

# 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.

“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.

## 6

“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 BK2  
**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.*



*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."

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.”

## 6

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 BK2  
**Island Drama**

April 7<sup>th</sup>  
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! Tire 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.

“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.”

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 BK2  
**Troopers And Trackers**  
Near Plainview, SD  
**April 8th**

1

**A**drian 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.

### 3

“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.

#### 4

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.

# 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.

## 2

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.”



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 BK2  
**Fists At Dawn**

1

**O**f 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.

## 2

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.

### 3

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?”

Horrified... “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 BK2  
**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 BK2  
**Liquid Steel**  
Near Howes, South Dakota  
**April 10th**

1

“**E**agle 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.*

## 2

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."

### 3

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 BK2  
**The Madness Spreads**  
April 11<sup>th</sup>  
**Pitcairn Island**

1

***T**hey 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 BK2

# That's A Pass

Paralleling 73 near Buffalo Gap, SD

April 12th

1

“**H**e’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.*

“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-crusting 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 BK2  
**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.”

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 BK2  
**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.

## 2

“Ready?”

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.

"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 BK2  
**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.”

## 5

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...*

## 7

“So she's gonna be an Eagle, huh?”

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.”

# Snap, Rumble, And Wait

1

“**R**epeat 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 BK2

# Let Freedom Ring

1

**A**ngela 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 played 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.

## 5

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.”

## 7

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 BK2  
**Best Served Cold**

1

**D**awn 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.*

#### 4

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.



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 BK2

# 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.”

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 BK2  
**Tropical Heat**  
Pitcairn Island

1

**K**endle 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."

"Impossible." 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.

# 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.

## 2

“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.

## 5

*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 BK2  
**Playing With Fire**

Safe Haven

April 24<sup>th</sup>

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.*

“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 lifeforce 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.

# 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 snot 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.

# I Challenge You

1

**M**arc 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—

“*Whhooooo...!*”

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!*

"Whhoooo..."

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.

### 3

“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.”

## 5

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?*

## 6

"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 BK2

# 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 BK2  
**The Killing Fields**

100 Miles Southeast of Chadron, Nebraska

**April 28th**

**1**

**S**hortly 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.

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."

### 3

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 gazing 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."

Foiled, 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 BK2

# Following Orders

### 1

**A**ccompanied 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.

### 3

“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.

"Wwwoooooooooooo!"

"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-whoowooo...”

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—”

“Whhhooooo!” 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 BK2

# Timing Is Everything

1

**S**tanding 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.*

#### 4

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.*

# I Want Her

## 1

**B**efore 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 BK2  
**X Marks The Spot**  
Swanson Rec. Area Nebraska  
**May 1st**

1

“**Y**our 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.

## 2

"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.

“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.

# Adrift In Hell

Kraft Cave

## 1

**K**endle 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.

"GGgrrraaaaaaaaaaa!"

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 BK2  
**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.

## 5

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.*

## 7

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 BK2  
**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.*

## 5

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.

## 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 army. “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 BK2  
**All Hells' Night**  
The Slaver Camp

1

**J**ennifer 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.

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 the 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.*

# 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.

## 2

"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.

# Rockin' Rough

Ellsworth Country Club

May 13<sup>th</sup>

## 1

**A**drian 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 calmativ, 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.

## 5

“We’re being watched.”

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.



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 BK2

# Ghosts

Just after Midnight

May 16<sup>th</sup>

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.

## 2

"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.

### 3

"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 grimier 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.

## 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.

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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## From The Author BK2

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 BK2

“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 BK2

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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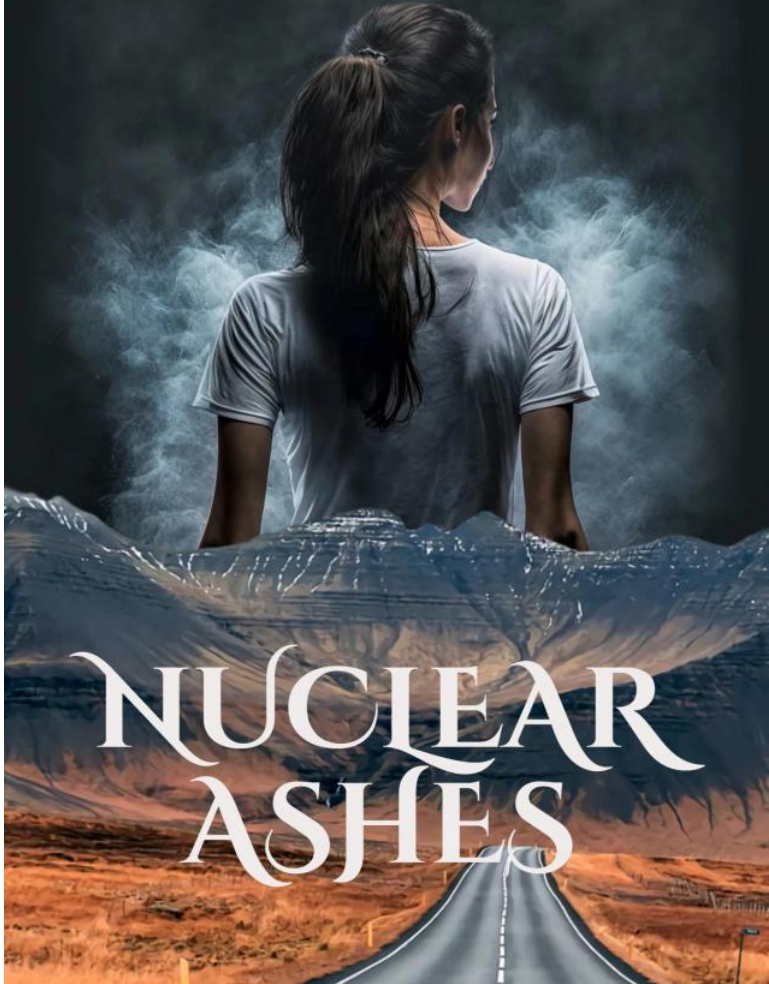
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## Book Three

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #3



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**Nuclear Ashes**  
by  
Angela White

**Title:** Nuclear Ashes

Life After War Book 3

**Edition:** 2024

**Author:** Angela White

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# Strong Enough

Are you strong enough?  
Can you hold your doubt?  
Do you care enough  
To take the untamed route?

Is your heart beating faster?  
Are your muscles tensed for flight?  
Did you bring your gun?  
That's the only defense against the night.

Have you locked up your loved ones?  
Seen to your things and self?  
Have you begun to understand?  
There's no such thing as wealth.

Are you tired of the lies?  
Are you ready to show your skill?  
Do you have what it takes...?  
Can you kill?

The battle is nearly here;  
Our road is fraught with danger.  
In each apocalyptic street,  
Lurks a desperate stranger.

Are they a threat?  
Maybe, a friend.  
Someone's clean slate;  
Yet always, the same old end.

Are you strong enough?  
Can you control your fear?

Are you ready to feel alive?  
'Cause Mother Nature's here  
...and she's pissed.

Part One BK3

**Aftermath:**

The consequences of an event.

Chapter One BK3  
**Settling Down**  
May 17<sup>th</sup>

1

**K**enn 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 her power, but he'd thought he was immune to her charms. Then the war came, and he'd even tried to leave his past 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 flanked Zack. “If you had your own team, it might have already happened.”

“That's why he doesn't.” Lee joined the impromptu jury. “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 the men 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 belt radio, 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.

### 3

"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.

#### 4

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.

Chapter Two BK3  
**It Was My Honor**

1

**T**he 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 the 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.

Angela tensed when Marc's hands went around her, under her, but she didn't protest the gentle move from the ground into his strong arms. He tucked her close and advanced, cushioning her body from the jarring climb.

The pain of remaining straight subsided. Angela rested her cheek on his shoulder. "Mmm. Thank you."

Marc was bathed in soothing light. He had Angie, a son he was bonding with more every day, and a set place in the chain of command. Life, for him, was amazing.

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.*

## 2

Kyle and Jennifer made the short walk from the medical camper with slow steps. She'd just found out that twins, at least, were in store for her. John wasn't sure how many heartbeats he'd heard.

Aware of Eagles and camp members watching them, Kyle still couldn't stop stealing glances at Jennifer. In his robe, she was all soft brown hair and glowing skin that smelled even better than Angela's vanilla.

Across the QZ, a group of former slaves were talking with a few of the camp women lingering on the other side of the caution tape. The way their cruel glances stayed on him and Jennifer told Kyle their topic. It wouldn't take long for this to get out of hand.

Jennifer, who was picking up the mistrust of the men and the dislike of the women, sent out a wave of distress.

Kyle stopped, turning to her. "Yes?" He waited, dazed, for her order.

Jennifer pulled back, realizing she had hit him too hard. She was getting more food and energy. Her gifts were already stronger.

Now that she wasn't pushing that bright light, Kyle could think again. It only took a few seconds of replaying his thoughts to discover what had upset her. "You don't have to pull me in that way. I won't abandon you."

While she stared at him in concern, Kyle strained to build the mental block Angela had told him about.

Jennifer slipped into Kyle's mind, needing to know if he meant it. She found the stack of bricks. He was building a wall against her. *Cute.* He didn't understand that there was no barrier strong enough to keep her out.

Jennifer dropped her empty water bottle on the ground.

Kyle frowned.

Jennifer looked at him questioningly.

Kyle glanced toward the slowly burning garbage can.

Understanding these people took care of their trash, Jennifer retrieved the bottle and tossed it into the can. She automatically glanced to Kyle for approval.

Plans and terrible ideas began forming in Kyle's mind, one of which he immediately tested. "Good girl."

Jennifer smiled at that—not a grin of contentment, but a grimace of familiarity that made Kyle snap his head toward the tents. She had a weakness. She was conditioned to respond like a slave. He could use that. *But I won't. I'm not like him.*

"All men are like him." Jennifer was still snooping in his mind. "It's why the world fell."

"I'm not. I serve the greater good." Kyle ripped his attention from her light. What would Adrian do with this one? Unlike Angela, Jennifer would use her gifts to get what she wanted.

*Unless someone takes charge of me...*

Jennifer's voice in his mind was young and lost.

*I don't want to be bad.*

Kyle was snared, but not for the reasons Jennifer assumed. He heard the evil behind the manipulation and responded—it was an echo of his. Adrian had almost passed him by. Kyle had always known, and the wound had never healed. What would Adrian do with Jennifer? Would he curb her light until she could control it? Would he recognize her value the way he had with Angela? That thought was ugly. Jennifer, who'd clearly already been through too much, could be the next female Eagle lying in a deserted warehouse with a bullet hole and lighter burns. *No!*

"Women can be fighters here?"

Kyle groaned at the eagerness. *Damn it!* Adrian would put her to use as soon as he could.

"Yes." Before she could comment, Kyle blurted the first distracting question he thought of. "Does Cesar have a lot of kids?"

"No. They kept turning up dead. He thought it was his men

trying to take control, but the mothers made the choice. They'd rather their children were smothered than to have them live as slaves."

"Cesar's the father?"

"...yes." Jennifer didn't know for sure who the father was, him or the Kelly brothers, but the odds on Cesar were the highest.

Not calling her on the evasion he picked up, Kyle let his thoughts run where they wanted as he stopped by the door of a large camper.

"This isn't a tent." Jennifer was instantly reminded of the semi she'd called home for so long.

"This is my new place; I haven't even slept in it yet. Help yourself." Exhaustion was pulling at Kyle. He opened the door for her and pointed to a large green tent nearby. "I'll be in that canvas."

He left before she could protest or thank him.

After a minute, Jennifer climbed inside, closing and locking the door with a flash of pain. She hadn't been inside walls since the war.

Jennifer noticed the dome light over the small stove. They'd had one like that at home, before the war had destroyed her.

A thick layer of homesickness and grief swept the teenager, crushing her all over again. She sank into a chair and didn't try to stop the tears that came.

Kyle got a change of clothes from his pre-stocked tent and went to the shower, glad no one else was there. All of the women and kids had been checked out by the doctors, cleaned up and fed, and given a place to sleep while waiting for their test results. Kyle hoped they were resting comfortably, but he doubted many were. Being freed physically was a lot easier than escaping mental prisons. Like the graves waiting for him to pay his respects, and the men waiting for comfort on their future as Adrian's top team. Kyle planned to do those things as soon as he'd had some sleep. He would still cover his duties, but his heart was no longer in them. He only wanted one thing now.

Kyle stayed in the water for a few minutes over the time limit, letting the water beat on his tired, sore muscles. His body was ready to sleep for about twelve hours, but his mind was racing. He was going over it, planning it all out, but one thing mattered more than anything else.

*What if she doesn't want me, even after I give my all?*

When Angela grilled him, Kyle would say the expected thing—he would let her go. But he'd known, lying there with Jennifer's big stomach moving against his hip last night, drawing out hidden longings, that it was a promise he wouldn't be able to keep. If Jennifer couldn't love him, he would have to leave Safe Haven or ask Adrian to handle it. Come boots or bullets, she wouldn't be held against her will again. *Not even by me.*

### 3

Marc studied the medical camper through his scope, uneasy as he waited for Angela to come out. Kyle and Jennifer had been gone for a while, and Anne too, leaving Samantha and Cynthia to restlessly prowl the QZ. Angela had insisted on stopping in. With her multiple guards, Marc hadn't argued about leaving her there while he took a short shift. He'd expected her to come right back out.

“Should have known better.” Wasn't she in pain? It had only been days since she'd been shot. She shouldn't even be... Marc keyed his mike. “Rookie to the medical camper.”

“I've got it.”

Cynthia sounded like she'd been looking for an excuse to check on Angie. He spotted the reporter a second later, coming around the corner of the camper.

*She wasn't far away to get here that fast.* Marc was pleased.

The good vibe faded as radios crackled.

“John to the medical camper! Now!”

Marc leapt to his feet and ran down the hill with his rifle still in his hand.

Angela opened her eyes to see several people frowning down at her.

Realizing what had happened, she groaned. “Aw, shit.”

“Yep.” Adrian glared at her. “You are hereby relieved of *all* duties until cleared by John.”

“And that’s going to be awhile.” John washed her blood from his hands for the fourth straight day. “You’re gonna heal, even if it kills you.”

“Thank you.”

Marc’s gratitude drew agreement from the rest of the worried people in the room. Charlie, Cynthia, and Samantha had refused to leave.

Angela let out a harsh sigh, too weary to fight. Her top stitch had loosened again. When Kyle left with Jennifer, she’d tried to replace it herself. She had passed out during the procedure and left a bloody mess for them to walk into.

“Okay.” Angela conceded wearily, eyes closing. “You’re the boss.”

“Yes, I am.” Adrian felt the heavy weight of the last months begin to ease. He turned toward the door. *I think I can sleep now.*

Chapter Three BK3

# The Younger Generation

Near Hutchinson, Kansas  
10 days later

1

“Ugh!”

On duty outside, Marc listened to the muffled grunt with a hardened heart. After two weeks, he was handling Angela’s pain better. John had just checked her wound and headed for the QZ camper, where they now did the things that required access to heat or water. The convenient upgrade made things much faster when testing the new arrivals.

“Uh!”

Marc still winced at the second low moan Angela couldn’t smother while she dressed.

“Did you take a pill yet?”

Anne’s voice sounded strained to Marc. He was sure the nurse wanted something.

“No.”

“I think half of one of these would be all right, then.”

Marc heard the sound of a bottle rattling.

“If you think it’s okay, that would be nice.”

The edge of submission, of being in agony and knowing relief was finally coming, had Marc knocking back his anger again. He hated it that Angie had been reduced to surrender, that she was hurting, and he couldn’t help.

“Spit it out.” Angela’s voice demanded it weakly.

There was a pause, and then a soft snort.

“Marc is mine, not John’s or Adrian’s. He won’t carry tales.”

Marc grinned. *So much for eavesdropping.*



Anne's answer was so low that Marc had to replay it to understand what she'd said. *Will you help me become an Eagle?*

"Yes."

"The men won't like it."

"No."

"It'll be hard for the camp, too."

"Yes."

"Do you think I can?"

"Anne..."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, control it."

Marc heard Anne sigh.

"I'm not sure about doing this."

"I know."

"Then why would you—"

"Because you need to survive. They all do."

Marc saw John look his way and met the man's gaze with sympathy. John still didn't realize how fully Adrian meant the word *we*, despite being here all this time. It encompassed every living, breathing member of his herd. *Charlie*.

It was a thought Marc hadn't allowed until now, but it was obvious what would happen. Charlie would be in Adrian's army too.

"I already am." Charlie came from the shadows, looking and feeling better than he had before they'd defeated the slavers. Keeping Matt's betrayals to himself hadn't been easy.

Marc didn't scold him for not revealing the duty sooner. He slung an arm around his son's shoulders. "We'll get through it, boy—together *this* time."

Charlie closed his eyes, absorbing his father's light, his comfort. Having a dad meant a lot. Before, when he'd had Kenn, he hadn't cared one way or the other. Now that Marc was in his life, Charlie understood why his mom had grabbed him and refused to let go even at so young an age. Marc was goodness and light, more so than Adrian was, and Charlie already knew the difference in that power. Society might need hard, ruthless men,

they might follow them willingly during times of crisis, but most humans would only give unflinching loyalty to those they could trust during peace. Marc would have been that type of leader.

“How long have you been in Adrian’s secret service?”

“Almost since the beginning.” Charlie didn’t feel the need to keep hiding it. “He has this way of drawing you in.” Charlie looked up at his father’s frowning profile, speaking low so his voice wouldn’t carry. “He wants her. As much as you do. I’ve read it.”

Marc winced, arm dropping to his side. Had he really been hoping that only he and Adrian would know? “She’s not interested.”

Charlie wasn’t able to get directly into his mom’s thoughts—she had them locked against his tinkering and prying—but he’d caught flashes that concerned him.

“Would you like proof?”

The teenager nodded, bracing for a memory, but Marc only leaned down and whispered, “She calls for me in her sleep.”

It was simple, but the heat behind it made the boy recoil.

“Yuck!”

Marc smirked. “That’s valuable information for a man to have about the woman he wants.”

Marc noted a whirl of dust rising near the QZ, and mentally calculated how long before senior Eagles would move closer. That much dust meant more than just one car.

Charlie stored the words. “You got anything else like that? Stuff I could use now?”

As much as he wanted to, Marc didn’t grin. “Sure. Depends on what you’re searching for, though.”

“There’s no one I like that way, just curious about reading them, like you a—” Charlie’s head snapped toward the incoming trucks.

Marc adjusted the volume on his radio, gut boiling. Wanting to know how Angela really was, he’d turned it down when he took up a position outside her tent so he could listen to her conversation with Anne.

“I’m warning you! We will open fire!” Mitch’s frantic voice echoed over the radio.

Marc’s free hand went to his holster.

“No way...” Charlie’s eyes grew foggy as he stared at the four trucks speeding recklessly around the west entrance to the QZ. “Not good.”

“What is it?” Marc responded calmly, as if he were training a recruit. He forgot to use the alpha tone he’d learned with Angela, not accustomed to handling Charlie as a descendant.

Charlie went that way as if being drawn by strings, ignoring Marc and everyone else.

*Need you!* Marc’s concern made the connection easy to find.

Angela came from the tent behind Marc.

Nearby camp members surged her way; they demanded her attention.

Marc quickly took her right.

“Stop at the tape!” Mitch ordered over the radio, sounding sober and scared.

Marc was glad to see Adrian come from his tent and head toward the QZ, after a fast glance to verify that Angela was protected. She had heard the message, but Adrian had been the recipient. Marc wasn’t leaving Angela’s side yet. The last time he’d allowed that, she’d almost died.

Marc slid a gentle arm around Angela’s waist. “Easy, folks. Let her breathe.”

Eager to find out what had pulled their son, the couple deflected the crowd’s excited well wishes as quickly as they could, both casting anxious glances toward the now over guarded quarantine area. The sense of trouble arriving was clear.

The QZ was now a permanent fixture in the back corner of the camp. It was outfitted with a shower and bathrooms, a supply truck and three extra guards that moved closer as the new people neared. Off duty Eagles also picked up on the unease. A full complement of men waited in that deadly V formation as the trucks finally stopped in a wide spray of gravel and dust.

Charlie went straight to Adrian’s right, not waiting to be

called. While his mom recovered, this was his job. It hadn't been made official, but the teenager knew.

The scruffy newcomers got out of the trucks with hands near weapons and wolfish leers slanted across sore-riddled mouths.

"Well, ain't this a sight!" The largest among them grinned, resting his huge hands on double holsters. "It's gonna be a good day, Badger!"

The men getting out of their dusty trucks around him cackled at the reference to the old world, at his scornful joke.

"Told ya I saw a lot of lights last night!" Badger picked at a scurvy sore on his lip. His other hand twitched restlessly as he waited, but his eyes stayed on his boss.

The man in charge broke away from his group, strolling toward Kyle, who was in the front of the V with his Glock in hand.

"I'm sure glad to find a group this size." The man leered, sharp glance going over what he could see of the camp. "Thought there wasn't any survivors 'round here we hadn't supplied yet!"

The traders wore worn guns that Kyle assumed had seen a fair amount of use from the way they were slung low and ready. These were killers. *But you're not trained.* Kyle saw how the men left themselves open as they swaggered closer. *Not like we are.* "This is a military refugee camp. State your business!"

"We're merchants." The big man sauntered closer, thick rings flashing in the dim sunlight. "We roam the wastelands and offer things that men need—for the right price, of course."

"Things like what?" Kyle waited for the kill order he felt coming. Adrian hadn't sent Charlie out of the area yet. That meant the boy was picking something up. Blood was about to spill.

"The future." Badger flicked a scab into the dirt. "You guys don't have one without owning at least a few of what we're selling."

Kyle saw Charlie's lips start moving, telling Adrian what it was that the men were guilty of. An icy chill of battle came down over the QZ.

*Until he knows when to keep the match from the fuse, there won't be any mercy while he's on duty.* Kyle got ready to react.

*These men were dead the instant Charlie felt them.* Kyle chose to help things along. “Okay. What are you selling?”

Adrian studied the traders while Kyle listened to the list of supplies the men claimed they could lay their hands on. It was all wrong; Adrian hadn’t needed the teenager at his side to verify it. He would use the boy, though. Adrian leaned closer. “They sell people?”

“Yes. They didn’t bring them along... Don’t always deliver, either.” Charlie’s words were full of disgust and anger as he searched.

“We can get a whole silo of corn or a barn of tobacco, but not both in one visit,” the trader leader told them.

Kyle and the trader continued to barter.

Adrian found Angela nearby. When he raised a mental brow, she gave reluctant agreement, watching from the tape with Marc and Dog. Consent or not, Charlie was already looking through their evil.

Given permission, Adrian entered Charlie’s mind. *I need you to figure out where they’re holding the hostages. Then the Eagles will kill them.*

Instead of the fear or revulsion he and Angela were both half expecting, Charlie’s surprised expression changed to eagerness.

*I don’t hide it as well as my mom. You’ll have to distract them so I can search for the kids.*

Adrian’s hiss of fury was covered by the sound of arrogant footsteps on the gravel as the other traders flanked their leader. *They’re selling kids!*

“We have three locations for water towers, but like with the silo, only one big purchase at a time. And you’ll have to pay up front, of course.”

Adrian felt the inevitable coming and didn’t fight it. This was his job. He asked the last question that mattered. *Weapons or women? What do they want?*

Charlie’s mouth twisted as he began breaking through deeper mental barriers. *Their females are in trouble...* Charlie shoved harder.

The man he was reading became aware of him, but it was too late to stop.

*They came...*

***I'll kill them all, boy. Tell him to give me what I came for!***

Charlie flinched back in stunned panic. That wasn't Adrian thrusting an order into his mind. *The trader knows! He...he...*

Seeing the panic of youth, Adrian put a hand on Charlie's shoulder.

The calming blast of energy allowed the teen to speak through his rage. "A doctor. They came for our doctor!"

Adrian drew his gun, stepping in front of the un-vested teenager.

"Damn you!" Exposed, the leader of the traders spun toward Charlie.

Adrian shot the man in the head.

The Eagles opened fire.

Adrian shoved Charlie down as the man's partners returned the favor.

"Men in the beds! Men in the beds!" Charlie crawled to where Adrian's leg kicks were directing.

A second group of traders appeared from under tarps in the beds of the trucks, shooting and shouting in abandon. This group ran into the QZ as if they'd been in it before, firing at the Eagles and camp members in view. They found cover behind a tent, a camper, and the water trucks.

*"Intruders!"* Mitch screamed from the nearby com truck. *"All off duty Eagles to the QZ!"*

Radios and alarms blared across Safe Haven, interwoven with shouts and gunfire. Under that, the sound of furiously running feet thudded across the dusty Kansas ground.

Kyle fired, breaking the formation as he advanced into the QZ. There was only one tent left there—his. Two of the traders were using it for protection.

No longer shooting, the men were without their leader and looking for an escape. Despite the visible security, they hadn't

counted on anyone fighting back.

Kyle walked straight at the two men, picking out what he needed—a leg exposed, the side of a shoulder he could hit, and those amazing golden eyes lying at the bottom of the flap.

*She's clear. Fire!*

Two heavy thuds echoed as the men fell.

Kyle slung his arm out, taking down the center pole. The canvas collapsed, clearing his line of sight.

*Fire!* Kyle pulled the trigger an instant quicker, slug hitting the man by the medical camper. The trader's bullet slammed through the edge of Kyle's boot and ricocheted out the other side.

Kyle barely noticed the lucky miss, busy putting another round into the man—his chest this time.

The trader dropped to the ground in a bloody sprawl.

Kyle fired again, rage demanding it. This shot went into the skull.

Around him, Kyle's team picked off the wounded.

Kyle turned, training in control.

Left? *Clear!*

Right? *Clear!*

Adrian and the others? *Clear!*

Anyone left to kill?

Kyle searched.

The influx of Eagles was more than the traders had been prepared for. Hoping to do a quick shoot and snatch from the QZ that they'd probably studied for the last week, the attackers were now pinned down behind the water truck instead.

Kyle scanned again.

John was watching from under the shower camper, along with Anne and Charlie. Adrian stood in front of them, firing quick slugs that kept the remaining infiltrators pinned down from that side. No other threats remained.

The other side of the water truck suddenly exploded with shouts.

“Hands up!”

“Drop ‘em!”

“Surrender or die!”

*Bang!*

“Fire!”

*Bang! Bang!*

*Bang!*

*Bang!*

Kyle nodded in satisfaction. Neil and his team would make sure there were no survivors and it would happen in full view of the camp. *The time for hiding how good we are is over.* If the people living here in safety didn't like the protection that was provided, they were able to leave, mostly because of how lethal Adrian had taught his army to be. Death was always the price required for freedom. No war could ever change that.

Satisfied the QZ was clear, Kyle motioned his team forward to take care of the cleanup. “Wear the gloves.”

Before he joined them in the nasty chore, Kyle found Jennifer's wide gaze. She was still on the ground, waiting to be comforted and then told what to do.

Kyle turned to his duty instead of responding to her silent call. *She'll be fine without me. She'll be fine without me.*

Jennifer watched him walk away with wide eyes and stomach cramps. She wasn't in labor. She'd just dropped to her knees too fast and pinched something, but her mind was in chaos. She'd come to depend on him so much in just two weeks and he was every bit the killer that Cesar had been.

Kyle didn't look back.

Jennifer didn't send out a second wave of need, but it was a struggle. What if he woke up during the times that they were apart? What if he realized what a burden she was?

Jennifer dropped her head. *I'll be fine without him. I'll be fine without him.*

Adrian jerked a hand toward the panicking camp. “Shut off the alarms and sing to them!”

Kenn rushed to obey.

Neil came from the second battlefield behind the heavily



leaking water truck, soaked and splattered in hard dirt chips that were melting into muddy furrows.

“Double the watch and do a full perimeter check—inside and out.” Neil directed his team. “On the way, organize a catch-and-carry for whatever water’s left here.”

“Why did you do that?” Charlie glared from Adrian’s feet.

Adrian ignored the worried parents to answer their child. “Because of Rick, I can’t take the chance.”

Charlie didn’t move yet, though John and Anne were being helped out from under the camper. The teenager was trying to handle the newest emotion to grace his hormones—bloodlust. He wanted to be drawing it himself. “What about the kids they’re holding? I didn’t have enough time to get a location.”

Adrian’s heart squeezed into a hard knot, but he forced his mouth to provide the answer that was expected. “Your mom will help me find them when she’s stronger.”

“And if she can’t?”

“Then I carry that guilt, not you.” It was enough for now, while youth and shock had him distracted, but Adrian knew a more detailed answer had to be in place for next time.

Charlie’s young gaze flicked over the bloody bodies. He slowly crawled out and stood. “They’re not all dead. I might still be able...”

Not asking Angela this time, Adrian moved aside. “You follow orders or go no farther in my army—ever.”

Adrian stayed close, gun in hand, as Charlie walked onto the battlefield without responding.

Badger was lying on his side near the supply truck. Blood pooled under him from wounds in his stomach, leaving a path. He’d been hoping to play dead and crawl away later.

The heavily bearded slaver flinched at the crunch of boot steps, hand coming up. “Don’t!”

“Tell us where they are!” Charlie hoped the location was the first thing the trader would think of. His death was close.

The man’s face was ugly with sores and fear, but there was no remorse. “Fuck off, freak!”

Adrian lifted his gun.

Charlie knelt in the line of fire. "I can heal you."

Adrian started to jerk Charlie back; Angela stopped him with two words.

*He's lying.*

Impressed and absolutely horrified, Adrian dropped his hand and made sure only the closest Eagles would see whatever happened.

Frustrated by the man's panicked, painful thoughts, Charlie let his inner witch bleed through for the first time, blue eyes turning deep crimson. "Your life for theirs. Where?"

The man sucked in a lungful of air through the terror and the agony. "Outside Wichita. Kids like you, locked in a boarding school."

Charlie didn't pull the heat back. This man was bad, and the hunger of the witch he'd let come forward was incredible. It rode him in heavy, gut-twisting seduction...

*Charlie.* Angela's voice in his mind was careful, cautious. *Must you become a killer already?*

The boy groaned. "I can just take a—"

*But should you?*

It was a hard battle.

Adrian waited, wondering if he'd made a mistake by bringing the teenager in so soon.

Badger sensed what was coming. "The school's guarded. You won't get in without me!"

Charlie slowly pushed the hunger away, barely aware of the trader now trying to cover his tracks. He turned around with a faint tinge of red still lingering around his pupils, set to ask Adrian for what everyone else wanted.

"Not yet." Marc denied it.

Charlie's tinted gaze swung around. "When?"

Marc shrugged, voice set. "A year, at least, maybe two."

"And until then?"

There was none of the rebellion they'd all, except Marc, expected. "A few of us will donate time. We'll give you layers of

training above what your mom received. That fire has to come under control.”

As he stepped back, Charlie didn't flinch at the single shot from Adrian's gun. Knowing he would be an Eagle and fight alongside his parents was all he cared about right now.

Marc trailed the teenager after exchanging a quick look with Angela. The intense dismay in it said he didn't want Charlie fighting, for her to find a way to slow him down.

Angela understood the feeling, but she didn't start searching for another path. Charlie had made his choice, and like her, he had the right to it. Angela realized she was going to get what Marc had gone through while watching her make a team, and grimaced. She had a feeling she would have more sympathy afterwards. Charlie was just as determined as she was.

“What would Adrian have done, if I'd killed the trader?” Charlie asked as he and Marc left the area.

Marc frowned. “You'd probably be considered a threat and put under guard.”

“Why?” Charlie's voice rose. “The man was bad!”

“Two wrongs. That phrase makes sense.” Marc steered them toward the empty training tent so Charlie could work off some heat. They would start doing this regularly.

“Not usually to Adrian.” Charlie pointed. “*He* makes his own choices without worrying over the consequences.”

“Not true, boy. Adrian doesn't order a single damn thing without planning it out five levels beyond.” Marc grunted, loading weights onto the smaller bench. “He accounts for everything that can go wrong and makes his choice after he has it all covered.”

It was clear by Marc's body language that he didn't want to defend Adrian to his son. The Eagles close enough to hear the conversation respected him for doing it anyway.

“But he hasn't had it all covered. Look at what's happened.”

Marc grunted again, bitterly this time. “Believe me, I did, and I was wrong. I hate his methods, but sometimes things happen that no one can account for.”

Charlie sighed. “Adrian calls them fate’s wild cards—like Kenn and my mom.”

“I’ve heard that. Wonder what he calls himself?” Marc switched on the power for this tent.

Charlie’s tenor lowered into adult concern. “Damned.”

Marc didn’t know what to say. The truth (*He is, boy. More than anyone I’ve ever known.*) seemed out of place.

They fell into the workout, listening to the sounds of the camp being put back in order while worrying over what could have been.

Marc was concerned about his son getting hurt.

His son was afraid he might like hurting others.

Left out because of her injury, Angela had time to study the scene. Her heart was still trying to regain a normal rhythm.

She watched Billy and Kyle drag the lead attacker’s body to his own truck and heft him into the back of it. Kyle didn’t speak to his men and they weren’t including him in their looks of victory.

Kyle slid into the truck and followed the others out of camp for the dump and burn. As he drove by, he swept his knocked down tent with enough personal torment showing to make Eagles frown at Jennifer.

“They won’t accept her until they have their team leader back. I hope he knows that.”

“He knows.” Adrian was also watching that team. “It just doesn’t matter to him right now.”

Angela wasn’t okay with the situation, but Adrian seemed to be, so that must mean it was for the good of the camp. Angela planned to watch and see how this newest mystery fit into the intricate puzzle. She had no doubt the illegal couple was about to be at the head of a sharp change for Safe Haven. *Hope I get to help.* Angela stretched her sore shoulder carefully. *Can’t take much more of just staring at my damn tent.*

Adrian looked at Angela, at her ugly but healing stitch line, and gave a reluctant nod. “Light duty, in here.”

Angela smiled. “Finally!”

The recovering doctor immediately moved deeper into the QZ,

making Adrian chuckle. He didn't bother to assign her a guard. This was the safest area in his haven right now.

John and Anne were busy tending a camp member who'd been trimmed. Angela moved toward Jennifer, her mind was still half clenched in a ball of terror. Charlie being in the battle zone had rattled her so badly that all she could do was smother him in protection. It was what she should have tried to do for herself at the rest stop and then she probably wouldn't have been shot. *I'm a rookie. It's a mistake well-learned.*

"What should we do?"

Angela's gun was out before she had a chance to think. She hadn't realized Samantha and Cynthia were on her flank.

Angela pulled the fire in and holstered as the two women hastily retreated. *My Eagles. My first orders.*

Samantha and Cynthia had reached the QZ at nearly the same time but stayed by the tape. When Angela headed in, they'd shared a stiff look of agreement and followed.

Worried heart easing a bit more, Angela began looking around. "Um. John will need his bigger bag... Have a new water truck brought in for the QZ shower so Kyle's team can get cleaned up after they burn the bodies. Send someone else to deliver trays for Charlie at lunch mess..."

Angela offered a few more small things and let the two females awkwardly divide the list while she went to make sure Jennifer was okay. Her change in status was open now, but Angela doubted many people would recognize it yet. There were too many other things to distract the camp, like Kyle and Jennifer, and even Seth and Becky, who were finally beginning to draw notice by how often they were together. Everyone was still adjusting to surviving the slavers.

Pleased with Samantha and Cynthia, Adrian turned toward the camp, certain his calming words were needed there. He wasn't upset over the attack, not like he would have been a month ago. Their progress was obvious, but since eliminating the slavers, more and more of the future was becoming clear. The offspring of his army would be incredibly strong—even more so than their

sires—and he had the honor of training them. Fate might be a fickle bitch, but when she was pleased, her generosity was staggering.

Neil came to his right. “Permission to go to Wichita and search for the kids?”

Adrian shook his head, thinking if they didn’t find water soon, it could mean trouble. The liquid was precious and that QZ tanker had been full this morning. “I need you here.”

Neil opened his mouth, and then closed it without saying anything. He left with slumped shoulders. Unlike the rest of the teams who were excited about the coming level tests, Neil and his men weren’t taking them; They had little to look forward to.

Adrian understood the need to go, but they were only fifty miles from Wichita and already gearing up for a trip into that city. The camp was hoping for a new load of convenience supplies, like batteries and music, but Adrian was hoping to find fuel and water. They would add a search-and-rescue for the kids, but Adrian wasn’t sending a team out yet.

Neil still hadn’t settled down, though it was all over. Finding out about Becky’s rape had screwed with his sense of worth. He’d been leaving camp every chance he got. Those opportunities were frequent, as calls from survivors needing escorts were coming in almost daily. Many of these were minorities. Now that they’d beaten the slavers and proved they were capable of defending their members, other races were finally starting to join. It was helpful that anyone considering asking for shelter could see a few other dark-skinned refugees in this mostly white camp. It went a long way in calming old fears.

It was also helping Joseph, one of the few black men in Safe Haven, understand Adrian’s words to him back in Wyoming. Guilty of expecting their leader to fix it all quickly, the professor had also become a convert. He was now regularly seen escorting the nuns. Camp rumor said he had a thing for Missa, who had recovered enough to occasionally join the group for their morning activities. Scuttlebutt also said she wanted nothing to do with Joseph or any other man. Only time would tell if she might recover in that way.

The kids from the airfield were also a mix of races and fitting in well with the camp's younger crowd. The college kids liked to have fun, but they were also old enough to want to help with the dream. It wasn't uncommon for them to show up at the workouts and meetings—hopeful shadows in the background that Adrian would bring into the fold. Mixing races together before the war had been a trial-and-error process that had to accommodate the chains of the past. To fix centuries of such negligence and abuse wasn't something Adrian expected to achieve in six months or even six years, but he was incredibly proud of the progress he had made so far.

The women and children from Cesar's camp had been cleared and put with a small group of camp females for their day-to-day lives, to help them settle in. That was the way Safe Haven had always handled new arrivals who were abused. The few exceptions to this were either Eagles or leadership. It wasn't missed that Kyle's camper and tent hadn't left the QZ even after he and Jennifer were clear.

The camp members had found out that Jennifer was carrying Cesar's children, but it was pointed out that several of the new kids were offspring of the enemy. It hadn't taken long for the majority to accept them as what they were—victims. In the next few months, Jennifer would give birth. If it came sooner and the babies didn't survive, that was fate. New life was always welcome in Safe Haven.

Adrian realized he'd misjudged a bit though, thinking the herd wouldn't be able to handle that or all the awful things the Eagles did on his command. Part of their acceptance was pride. Safe Haven had come out on top, but the rest was the effect of the former slaves telling stories and convincing people without meaning to. There honestly hadn't been another choice.

The rest stop had already been looted when Adrian led the camp by it, but the carnage was clear. For Safe Haven, it was the sight of the sombreros and the bullet-ridden rest stop that finally made the end of the slavers feel real. For the Eagles, it was the stains from Angela's blood lingering near the door.

For the former slaves, it was that once golden corvette, charred and crushed under Adrian's semi. These things sank into people's hearts and unlocked the chains to their terror. It was over, thanks to Adrian. A few people still viewed him with resentment—Tonya, Mitch, Peggy—but the Eagles and the camp were firmly behind their line-walking leader. He had brought them through the fire with only a slight burn. If Angela had died, things might have gone differently, but fate had been kind; Adrian had saved them all.

## 2

“We're not taking the level tests this time around.”

It wasn't a surprise but hearing it from Kyle sent fresh tension through the team that was disposing of the bodies down a hillside a few miles from camp. Other than curt answers, none of Kyle's team had spoken to him in a week. He hadn't expected their support, but the isolation was nearly intolerable. “Let Daryl know what event you want to oversee.”

Daryl, who was smothered in guilt over the way he'd graduated to second in command, said nothing. He thought their team was being unfair to Kyle, but if he spoke out, it would be viewed as sucking up. Right now, they were reluctantly accepting Kyle's decision to have Daryl replace their fallen XO.

“What event are *you* covering?” Shawn sneered, implying Kyle wouldn't be there.

Behind them, bodies burned hotly.

Kyle's tone didn't change. “I'm not.”

Shawn tried again. “Got better things to do now, I guess.”

“I have duty over Angela.” Kyle moved toward the trader's neat truck. “Marc is testing this time around and he doesn't trust anyone else to keep her safe.” Kyle climbed into the driver's seat and got set to roll back to where his heart now waited.

His men exchanged worried glances. The team leader they knew would have struck back at the open challenges.

“What the hell's wrong with him?” Morgan had never expected this from Kyle.



“We need to talk to Adrian.” Shawn hated his own suggestion. Going to the boss over your Eagle leader was a huge no-no that violated their unspoken code to handle things in-team.

“Maybe call a vote?” Crone was the only one eager to see Kyle replaced.

“I’ll handle it.” Daryl chose to do what he thought was right. Seen as sucking up or not, it was part of his new duties to support their team leader.

“How?” Shawn thought he should have been given the XO slot.

“I’ll start with talking to him instead of throwing challenges.” Daryl’s tone was pointed. “We’ve looked up to him the entire time we’ve been Eagles. Why does that disappear without him even getting the chance to explain?”

“You think it’s all innocent?” Crone was snotty.

Sure that it wasn’t, Daryl didn’t lie. “No, but I do think there’s a reason to his madness.” Daryl slung the bag of tinder over his shoulder, glad it didn’t smell like the small pellets of shit that it was carrying. “He isn’t breaking any rules, you know. We’ve watched the shadows on that tent more closely than we ever did Rick’s. We’d know.” Daryl’s tone grew harder as the others absorbed that light blow. “Kyle may want her, but he won’t cross that line until it’s legal. And yes, I’ll bet my new place on it for those of you taking notes and wanting the slot.”

The six other men shared leery glances. They were relieved not to have to talk to Adrian, but it was obvious they didn’t trust Daryl as their XO yet. They all wanted life back the way it had been before winning had taken away a third of their team.

# Protection

## 1

“Judging by the lack of marks, I’d guess it was Eagles this time, instead of camp members.” John ignored the sudden nausea that sank into his stomach as he gathered a tray of supplies. It had been a busy day for medical care. “They don’t leave me as much evidence.”

Dale’s shoulders slumped further. “Yeah.” He and Ray resembled each other enough to be related. That helped with rookies and new arrivals until they saw the lingering glances and soft brushes, and then they understood. Most glared, but more than a few would remark on it. Only once had there been a different reaction. When the vet had seen them, he’d started joining them for evening meals. Dale had assumed the vet was also gay, but he would never ask. He was just glad to have someone else sitting at the table with him and Ray.

“Eagles did this?” Ray was furious. As Kevin’s XO, he had a lot of interactions with the other Eagles and Adrian; he no longer had problems with the senior members. It was the incoming rookies Ray usually had to set straight.

“No, not since you got hurt...”

“Saving Adrian,” John finished.

“Explain *this time!*”

Dale and John both shut their mouths.

Ray scowled. “Don’t worry over it. I’ll know before I hit the rack tonight!”

“No.” Dale put a hand on Ray’s wrist. “Don’t do that, okay?”

Ray tried not to relent. “Then tell me.”

“Sometimes the rookies say shit to me.” The failed Eagle couldn’t hide his hurt. “And sometimes they want to see a little

queer blood.”

“Who?!”

“I won’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s like you said the other night while we were at the movie. I don’t have a real place here yet. When I do, they’ll leave me alone.”

“They should anyway!”

“Yeah.” Dale dropped his head, chest heavy. *Isn’t there ever going to be even a little happiness for me?*

Ray felt Dale’s misery peak and moved closer. “Hey. Damn. Are you okay?”

John left the tent to give the couple a moment of privacy—one Ray would take advantage of to offer comfort. John personally believed the males had the right to love whomever they chose, but the idiots getting a free ride in Safe Haven weren’t about to accept that view. The three men who’d beaten Dale in the shower didn’t have a set place here either.

John was angry, stomach aching loudly. His feet took him straight to Adrian’s tent.

## 2

“Is it a variation of Stockholm Syndrome, in either case?”

In the hour that John had been here smoking and relaxing, they’d moved onto other topics.

“Improbable.” John was calm now, but his mood was still sour. “Bonding after a crisis takes strange forms. In time, they’ll both recover and choose what suits them. I expect they’ll stand by their men, as well. From what I’ve heard from the other freed females, Jennifer is much harder than any of the men are giving her credit for. We already know how determined Rebecca is.”

“And my camp?”

John blew out a tired grunt with the lungful of smoke. “Will fall in line, so long as you approve.”

Adrian didn’t respond to that. Yes, they would, but not without

causing problems first by testing the strength of those underage bonds. “How about you?”

John stubbed the roach out. “I’m surviving.”

“Angela wants to try.”

“She’s not strong enough yet.”

“That’s what Marc said, but she makes *those* calls.”

John didn’t argue. The pain was becoming intolerable without the pills. He was spending too much time stoned on them. “She’s healing well.” John wanted to ask Adrian how she was recovering so quickly and stopped himself. That would reveal a faint edge of envy that the doctor didn’t want known. “When?”

“In the next week or so. She’ll tell me.”

“Okay.”

As they stood up, Adrian clapped John gently on the shoulder. “How about cutting off early and getting some rest? Bags that dark under your eyes are not a good advertisement for our doctor.”

John looked at him without amusement. “When will we head for Arkansas?”

Always a quick thinker, Adrian stared back steadily. “We have been all along.”

John frowned. “I mean openly. When will the Eagles start gearing up for the fight waiting there?”

“Sometime after Wichita.” Adrian pushed back the heavy worry. “Right now, they still need that break too.” Adrian left to do his rounds.

John returned to the medical tent.

Ray and Dale were gone.

John headed straight for the medicine cabinet.

When the flap rustled a bit later, the doctor was in his chair, waiting for the pills to work.

Anne didn’t say anything as his angry gaze went over her muddy clothes and new bruises. She set her broken glasses on the table and grabbed a bottle from the medicine cabinet. *He has his demons to fight and so do I.*

Marc found Angela in the usual place as full dark settled over the dystopian Kansas views—perched on top of the highest, sturdiest structure inside their perimeter. This time, it was Adrian’s semi.

*It’s like she can’t get close enough to the sky.* Marc noted her shadows, and the newest layer of awning on the outer edges of the perimeter. It was a deflecting glint that would interfere with the sights on a scope and make it rough to pick out a single target. They only had one side of the camp covered so far, but it was something they were adding to every day that Safe Haven wasn’t on the road.

Marc nodded to Kyle, Angela’s senior shadow.

The mobster quickly vanished toward the QZ, no doubt to check on Jennifer, who he hadn’t been able to get near since returning from the dump and burn. It would be a fleeting moment. Kyle had duty over the farthest perimeter from the girl for the next five hours. Now doing schedules together, Marc and Kenn had agreed that a separation was needed. This first day of it had to feel like it wasn’t ever going to end. Tomorrow wouldn’t be any better for Kyle.

Marc only held a bit of sympathy. He had always been a little leery of Kyle, but he’d honestly thought the man was one of the good guys. *It’s like he and Adrian switched places on me,* Marc thought with a resentful frown.

“Permission to come up?”

Angela smiled. “As you would, Grunt.”

Marc cleared the top of the truck and stopped, stunned at the sight of the shield above the camp. Right over Angela, it was pure purple.

Marc was glad the camp wasn’t paying attention yet. For now, only Adrian and a few of his Eagles knew of the magic building itself around Safe Haven.

“Watch this...”

The colors above them faded, and then began to change like a

rainbow.

“It feeds off emotions, reacts to them.”

Marc sat down next to her, mind racing for a response. “What is it?”

“Can’t you guess?”

He flashed to their clubhouse in the snow. “Protection.”

Angela flushed at the thoughts now rolling through his mind. They’d experienced something like this once before. The shield had been a lot closer then, almost hot to the touch, but so strong that nothing could have gotten through. It was right after he’d said *I love you* for the first time.

“It’s so nice to be able to remember those moments.” Angela slowly leaned against his arm.

Happiness settled into Marc’s heart. He had Angie and Charlie. He wanted little else.

Angela didn’t bat a lash when his arm slid around her. She was making the shield fluctuate in small ripples. *Sort of like a pond...* “Brace.” Angela inhaled deeply, pulling energy from the bubble.

“Noise coming.” Marc let off the button an instant before a crackle of harsh static went through. It was loud enough to make camp dogs start yapping.

The wolf emerged from under the truck.

Curious, Marc waited.

Radios lit up again with her voice. “Just a pulse. At ease.”

Marc’s mouth dropped open as Angela let go of the mental link.

“There’s something new for ya!”

Marc didn’t say anything, working on accepting it. She was able to send her thoughts over the radio. What would she be capable of in a year? Or ten?

Angela had been lying low about her gifts over the last two weeks. She wasn’t too weak to use them anymore. She wasn’t sure she was strong enough to control them. Seeing Charlie in the line of fire today had reminded her how serious the challenge ahead was. Complete control or not, she wouldn’t be sitting back anymore. “Is that frightening to the big, bad Marine?” Angela

joked to break the awkward silence.

“A little.” Marc’s expression darkened. “For you.”

“Me too Marc, but for our son. He’ll always be a target. First, to trap me, and then, to trap him.”

Not sure how to change that, they sat in silence as the camp slowly settled down from the pulse of energy she’d sent.

Neither of them was surprised when Adrian came through the shadows a minute later. His expression said he wasn’t happy about what she’d done. A sharp glance passed between them.

Adrian left soon after, delivering a hard, warning sweep of her guards as he vanished.

Marc stifled his jealousy. “What was that about?”

Angela leaned closer to Marc’s heat. “He wants to be sure I’m not preparing for a suicide run that I haven’t told him about.”

Those words sent Marc’s profile into an instant storm. “Are you?!”

“No. One gunshot wound at a time, please.”

Marc wasn’t amused. He was still too hurt from the near loss.

Angela didn’t offer ear candy. He had to deal with it, just as she did when the nightmares woke her up gasping for air.

“Are you sleeping through yet?”

Angela winced at his accuracy. “Some nights.”

“You can wake me. I’ll stay up with you.”

“And still work your shifts as alertly?”

“No.” *That’s the line, he realized. If it will hurt the camp, or even distress them, it’s too far. That’s her limit now.*

“Yes, it is.”

Marc’s mind kicked into high gear, picking out the mind reading and the things she knew, but shouldn’t if she were too weak. Not only had she caught his conversation with Charlie, she knew that he approved of the downtime she was being forced to take.

“You know that I can block them, right?” Angela viewed him through shuttered eyes. “Your thoughts.”

Marc wasn’t sure where she was going with this. “...yes.”

“I can stay out of your mind.”

“No, please, don’t.”

His fast response had her brow lifting. “Why not? Most people find it to be—”

“I’m not most people!” Marc’s voice dropped into flames. “And I can love you there, baby cakes.”

Angela giggled.

The bubble above them flashed into a deeper purple. It drew their attention back to the shield.

“Why can’t the camp see it, but some of the Eagles can?”

She shrugged. “Belief, mostly.”

“But it’s always there, even if they don’t believe in...magic?”

“Yes.”

Despite talking to Adrian, Marc had to ask. “What happens when they find out?”

She stiffened, making the shield switch colors again. “Then I will have run out of time.”

“And you’ve considered...”

“Not letting them know? Of course, but it’s improbable this would remain a secret, Marc. It’s growing too fast...and I have to put it somewhere.”

Marc was unable to lock down on the jealousy this time. “*He* could find things.”

“He will now that he knows what you do, that I’ve been laying low, but it won’t be enough. I’m still evolving. So are my gifts.”

*Still evolving.* Marc connected the threads. *Like something else...* “What’s coming for us?”

The witch’s red eyes blended with blue, matching the color of the bubble above them. *Everything you fear and more.* The witch yawned. She’d been dozing contentedly while Angela played.

“When?”

“Not long.” Angela refused to let the witch start revealing painful truths. She planned to fight that fate.

“What can I do?”

She took a chance. “Help me with my plans?”

“You know it, honey.” Marc tugged her closer. “We’ll start in the next week.”



“Tonight would be better.”

Marc didn't care. “Sure. At the mess?”

Angela drew in a breath. She'd missed his heat last night while he stood duty. “My tent, in an hour.”

Marc's body flared to life. He gave a jerky nod. “Okay.”

Catching his sudden nervousness, Angela snickered. “To make plans.”

Marc tried to snap out of it. “Yeah, plans.”

Angela laughed.

The shield responded with a wave of deep violet.

She had run a few simple tests on it, and suspected Adrian had, as well. It didn't let the bugs in or the smaller flying debris when the wind gusted. The bags and trash were caught on an updraft and disappeared into the clouds. That was something even the Eagles hadn't noticed yet.

Fascinating, it had caused Angela's nightly routine to end in a high place, studying it. She had the sense that the shield was important for more than just their protection; she was determined to figure out what it was in time to use it. She was positive Safe Haven had been gifted with the barrier for their next fight.

Marc caught the thought and felt his stomach drop. *Not again...*

## 4

“I'm Leslie.”

“Uh-huh.”

She'd come from the shadows in silence, but what she wanted shouted from her arched back and painted face.

“Nice night.”

Kyle grunted. She sounded nervous; she should be. Need to accept one or not, he was in no mood to turn down yet another offer to replace the sleeping girl in his tent. None of them stirred anything in him now, not even lust.

“Do you... Can we talk?”

Kyle stared pointedly. “What do you want?”

Leslie stepped a little closer, top artfully sliding off one shoulder. “I’d like to help.”

There was no response from his body, but Kyle forced himself to reply. “Why?”

It was more of a conversation than he’d given any of the other women who’d tried. Leslie grinned, encouraged. “You’re high up here is why most of them chase you, I guess. I like it that you look after the pregnant girl. It shows you’re a gentleman.”

Kyle heard the lies as much as sensed them. She was off the list from that moment. “I’m busy. Get back to camp.”

Leslie gaped... Then let her true opinion out. “You’re making a fool of yourself. I hope you know that.” Her painted face twisted into ugliness. “Be careful.”

“What are you referring to?” Kyle led, eager to hit back. He’d become as good as Kenn at delivering an insult.

Leslie didn’t back down, though she did back up. “I’m talking about you chasing Jennifer like a dog that’s found a bitch in heat. I’m talking about the way you’re not helping Adrian take care of this camp with all that attention on her. I’m talking about your hypocrisy—doing what others can’t, being alone with her all the time. People see the double standard. How long do you think they’ll put up with it? Everyone else has to follow the rules. Why not you?”

Kyle opened his mouth to fire back, but Leslie vanished into the shadows.

He snapped it shut. He’d expected the jealous tirade that some of the others had delivered, not the truth, and if one of the camp cliques had the sand to say it to his face, then everyone was thinking it. The line he was walking had just narrowed. The camp women would interfere next. Was there anything he could do to ease their tension and buy more time?

“I’m pretty sure you stung her pride. She’s not sure what turned you off.”

Kyle turned to see Tracy standing behind him, long, black hair flowing on the dry wind. It was the first time she’d ever spoken to him that he could recall.

“She’ll figure out that lying was a bad idea and get over it. She just didn’t expect you to respond. It rattled her, I think.” Tracy, normally an extremely quiet woman, took a step closer.

Her generous curves pulled Kyle’s eye. With those hips, in that short dress, from the front or back she was shaped like...

Tracy gave him a slow smile, the kind that made Kyle’s mind scream duck, *this* one knew what she was doing.

“If you need a friend, I’m usually out on third shift. Catch my eye before mess and I’ll find you.”

Kyle stared at Tracy, running through what he needed, how long it would take, and if he would ever use her that way. *Can I?*

Tracy knew he was evaluating, but she didn’t say anything to convince him. Instead, the high school teacher trailed her wrist near his nose as she stepped by.

Jennifer’s sweet scent slammed into Kyle’s gut. He grabbed the camp whore’s arm. “Wait.”

Tracy delivered a sultry look over her shoulder, aware of his eyes on her lips. “Maybe a taste? To be sure?”

Kyle let go as if burned. Yes, he could pretend with Tracy if the need got bad enough. “I won’t claim you.” Kyle’s tone lowered into misery. “I may never touch you.”

Tracy shrugged. “You need a friend—one the camp thinks you’re using even if you aren’t. You know that. It’s why you gave us both a chance tonight.”

Tracy moved away slowly, loving the heat in Kyle’s gaze as he stared at her. He would think about it for a while, but in the end, he would come to her. They all did because she gave them what they needed. With Kyle, it was wide hips and a maternity-like scent. For others, it might be a piece of clothing or a certain makeup style. It was the small things that a man appreciated, remembered, and rewarded.

The same was true of females, usually, but in this case, Tracy had big plans. She’d been studying leadership since she joined Safe Haven and if there was one thing she understood, it was the needs of men. It was something she had gotten good at while moonlighting as a stripper. Continuing the tradition after the war

had felt normal. Apocalypse or not, everyone needed physical contact. It was what kept the human spirit fighting.

## 5

*He will be ripped from your arms like grass from the earth.  
Do not cross that line!*

Angela gasped in terror, jerking awake.

“Are you okay?”

Angela tried to remember how to breathe; crushing desolation wanted to overwhelm her. *The dream was so vivid!*

Marc assumed it was one of her old nightmares. He shifted, wrapping his arms around her. “I’ve got ya.”

The long day and pain pills had caught up with her, knocking her out while they were working on plans. Watching her in the flickering light had been so perfect that Marc hadn’t been able to make himself leave.

Angela let him rock her. The feel of his warmth eased some of the panic. They needed to get Safe Haven ready to leave. Not this area or even this state, but this *country*. It was a lot to take in, even for the witch. They both huddled in the protection of Marc’s thick arms.

Marc tried not to notice how good she felt against him or how sweet she smelled. Even after twenty hours, he could still catch a whiff of her vanilla soap. That scent and Angie went together like butter and toast.

Angela shivered at the draft coming in through the flap.

Marc gently dislodged himself to go zip it. He clamped his lips shut to keep from asking if he should leave. All he wanted was a couple more quiet hours alone with her.

Angela watched him come toward the bed, glad she’d chosen to keep the inflatable mattress that John had insisted on once she’d abandoned the warehouse for her tent. That had been a week ago, their first moving day after the final battle. “Will you hold me?”

“Anytime you want.”

Angela folded the blanket back. “Now, Marc.”

Marc eased onto the mattress with a body that made it difficult to get comfortable until he reached down and made an adjustment.

Angela looked away with red cheeks, but she sank into his warm embrace as soon as he motioned, eager to be close. All the thoughts in her mind were pushing and shoving, trying to get to the front to be solved, and all she wanted was—

Angela sucked in a breath as Marc settled her against his chest, letting their bodies press close. The hardness in the center of him sent fear into her mind, but his musky scent also filled her nose with ghosts.

“Angie?” Marc waited for her to speak, worried she’d frozen.

“Workin’ through it, Marine. At ease.”

He grinned in the dim light. She was still growing, changing, and much of it was attractive. Especially with her hair wrapped around his fingers and her body pressed snugly against his hip. Was she ready for the next step?

They’d been spending so much time alone together the camp thought they already had an arrangement. Marc knew that wasn’t the same to Angela. If he wanted her against his back at night, he had to make a commitment. That wasn’t an issue on *his* part. Marc sucked in a tight breath. “Will you move in with me?”

“Yes.”

“Because the camp already thinks we’re living together.”

“I said yes.”

“And Charlie won’t mind, so we’re all good there.”

“Yes, Marc.”

“And I don’t expect sex or—”

“Damn it, Marc!”

Marc chuckled. “I just needed to be sure, baby.”

Realizing he’d been teasing her, Angela shoved him off the mattress. “Damn man.”

Not expecting it, Marc tried to find his balance, but landed on his side with a loud thump.

Rising to his knees, Marc’s laughter mixed with hers. Heat sparked as their eyes locked. “You sure? No rush.”

“Yes.” Angela held the blanket back again, grinning. “Now

get under here. My toes are cold.”

Marc wrapped her up as closely as she would allow, thinking this would be perfect but for her injury and him wanting to—

“Would you like to kiss me goodnight?”

Marc groaned. “Oh yeah, baby.”

Angela flushed. “I could stand a little of that.”

Marc’s body woke, insisting she knew what she was ready for. He denied them both. “You still have two more weeks before you’re allowed any physical...”

Angela tilted her chin up, lashes fluttering closed.

Marc surrendered. He pressed his mouth to hers, trying not to groan again. *My Angie!*

Chapter Five BK3  
**Lines In The Sand**

Outside Wichita, Kansas  
May 31<sup>st</sup>

1

**A**drian paused outside Kyle's tent, openly eavesdropping.

"Who said it?!" Kyle was clearly upset.

"It doesn't matter." Jennifer couldn't help the nervous tone. Kyle was furious. It was filling the tent.

"It does to me. Eagles don't act that way!"

"It was a quick remark. Please let it go."

Adrian knew the mobster wouldn't. Someone had crossed his line.

"Do you need anything before we roll?" Kyle suddenly sounded calm and collected. "The trucks are still open."

"Not really."

"Jen..."

"Fine! I need some pads because I keep pissing when I walk. Happy now?"

"What else?"

"Can I write it down?"

"You can come and point."

"I had enough fresh air at the shower line yesterday where they all stared at me and didn't talk. No thanks."

"That will get better."

"It's been more than two weeks, Kyle. If it was going to get better, there would be signs of it."

"Give Adrian time."

"Time for what? If he's as good as everyone keeps saying, then won't he banish you for wanting to claim me?"

Kyle didn't answer.

Adrian chose to break the tense silence by tapping on the flap.

“Anyone in?”

“Yeah, Boss.”

“Oh, great.” Flustered, Jennifer concentrated on folding and packing the mound of baby clothes into the trunk. During the time she'd been in Safe Haven, moments like this were all she had accomplished. She was learning how to act normal again, but she wasn't sure she would ever feel it.

Adrian swept the mix of personal items in the tent. Kyle's usually neat home had become a chaotic mess of Eagle gear and baby items. It spoke volumes about how his top Eagle felt. Adrian stared at him for a long minute.

Kyle had known a sit-down was coming. He and Jennifer had remained in the QZ the entire two weeks, getting to know each other while avoiding everyone they could. The camp had finally expressed enough displeasure that Adrian was being forced to step in.

“It's time.”

Kyle sighed at Adrian's words. “Our next break day?”

“By evening mess, *tomorrow*.”

Kyle's expression tightened, but he didn't argue. Once they were outside the QZ, Safe Haven would separate them more than Kenn and Marc already were. Kyle had duty over the QZ again as they broke down for travel and then only a short break before taking over point until dawn. After that, he would have to sleep, but it was better than not seeing Jennifer at all.

“It's the right thing,” Adrian reminded his top killer.

Kyle nodded stiffly. “I know.”

“Good. You'll take care of it?”

“Of course.” Kyle turned to Jennifer. “This is our leader.”

Jennifer reluctantly stood up.

Adrian noted the pink cheeks and the tense body language, but also the way she subtly put Kyle's body between them. *She's already learned to use him.* “I'm Adrian.”

“Jennifer.” She leaned forward instead of coming closer,



wobbling awkwardly.

Kyle's tanned hand was there to steady her. He immediately let go.

Jennifer grabbed his arm, staring up anxiously.

Adrian felt the pull of her magic, and the layers of selfishness that coated her.

Kyle used the will of an Eagle and pushed the glare back to think. "I told you that's not needed. Stop blinding me. I won't abandon you."

Jennifer cringed at multiple secrets being exposed.

Kyle gently slid her under his arm. "Shh... He already knew."

She didn't ask how; she just sheltered against Kyle's side and waited to be punished or taken advantage of.

Adrian wasn't upset upon discovering the extent of the situation. Kyle knew what was going on and the girl obviously wanted him close. The camp was reacting to the ugly rumors of the other former slaves. The camp needed Jennifer's side of the story, but they couldn't have it until she had herself, her magic, under control. That's why Kyle had kept her here.

Kyle rubbed Jennifer's arm as she trembled, looking down in protective tenderness.

*Okay, it isn't the only reason Kyle sequestered her. But Jennifer was encouraging it. To use him? Maybe. Her plans after the babies came were shielded.*

"Because I don't know what I'm doing yet," Jennifer confessed. If Kyle said Adrian was worthy of complete trust, she would give it, but her head stayed buried under her mobster's thick arm. "I was going to take the kids and leave after the birth, but they've settled in here now and..." She drew in air. "They don't need me anymore."

Kyle fought to keep from saying anything.

"This camp needs you." Adrian's words gave Kyle permission to start bringing her in. The sooner she was under control, the better.

"You could just chain me up!" Jennifer spat, fearing Adrian, but also drawn to him against her will. He was the first person like

herself that she had ever met. Her mom hadn't been able to do any of the things she could—no one had.

“There are dozens of us here.” Adrian watched fear come into her face first. Resentment was second. Adrian understood Jennifer would be harder to blend into his herd than the others he had settled. Being tossed into the wild without her baby, or worse, before she could give birth, seemed to be her biggest concern. Adrian didn't pick up fear about anything else.

“That's because I don't have any.” Jennifer stood up straight, allowing this man to meet the real her. “I stay back because I loathe your people for their weaknesses. It's noble that you try to change them, but I only have scorn.”

Kyle's hand fell away. He automatically took a step to the side at the tone, repelled in the same way that he was often pulled to her light. She was dangerous. He respected that.

Adrian studied the newest addition to his ever growing goodie bag of power. *Where does this one belong?*

Jennifer's eyes went straight to Kyle.

Adrian shook his head, quickly developing an edge of respect for this young girl. “You need a goal. You don't need a handler.”

“No, I don't, but...” Jennifer sighed. Why hold back now? “I do better if I have one.”

Kyle stiffened, again fighting to remain silent.

Adrian decided Neil was completely wrong. The mobster hadn't been blindsided at all. Kyle knew what he'd found, what kind of love they might share if he had the strength to fight for her. “Why him?”

Jennifer flinched, but didn't give an evasion. *He wants me.*

“Many men will want you.”

Kyle stiffened.

*...not the way he does.* Jennifer answered slowly, thrilled and scared to be communicating this way in front of Kyle. He didn't seem to be confused or angry at all. *He wants my babies, too.*

*Ah.* Adrian understood that choice, approved it even, but that didn't stop his usual words to all the battered females who came to his refugee camp. “I'll keep him away from you. You'll be safe

here without him.”

Kyle’s hands clenched, but Jennifer actually blanched. Adrian only entered those young mental halls as far as he had to. He needed to be positive she wanted this. The future depended on it.

*...be alone here. No Kyle to keep me from going crazy while I wait for the birth. No Kyle to hold me while I cry or make me laugh to start the day. No Kyle to help me raise Cesar’s children, to help me make them good!*

Panic was beating in her head. Adrian withdrew, satisfied. “So long as you want it, Kyle will be your settling partner during the day. In the evenings, it will be one of the females.”

Jennifer smiled in relief, looking directly at Adrian for the first time. “Thank you.”

Both men tensed, instantly lured by her happiness.

Adrian had no trouble pushing it away, but he was aware of Kyle having to fight her unconscious draw. “Are you sure you can do this?!”

Adrian’s tone said if Kyle snapped, he would face the same punishment he’d dealt to so many as Safe Haven’s top Eagle.

Kyle stiffened. “She has a gun. She’s never to be without it.”

Adrian understood that was for defense against the men in camp. Jennifer hadn’t told Kyle she could control the strength of the draw. Adrian raised a brow. “Can you?”

Embarrassed, Jennifer slowly shook her head. “Not always. I try, but it...”

“Gets hungry,” Adrian filled in when she paused.

Jennifer’s eyes blazed for a moment of searing heat and desperate longing. “Starved.”

Adrian felt that protective need finally hit and gave her a comforting smile. “Dream walk. They won’t know.”

Kyle, who’d had Angela’s witch in his dreams on more than a few nights, growled. At Adrian.

Adrian’s demeanor turned curt. “Should I separate you now?”

Kyle backed down, loathing the idea of her taking energy from any man but him. *Where did this side of me come from?*

Jennifer’s head dropped again. She slowly slid back under

Kyle's arm. *Why am I made this way?* She didn't want men to notice her. *Maybe if I never smile again...*

Picking up the thought, Adrian effectively manipulated things. "You have one of my highest men, pulling him away. His own team already views you as a threat. Find something useful to do for me, soon. Without that, the camp will get ugly."

"And if we can't find her something they'll accept?!"

Adrian responded to Kyle's challenge with the truth. "They'll hate her. I'll have to send her out of here or she'll be hurt. We won't tolerate one of *us* hurting the dream."

Meaning the other gifted people here would run her out, not the camp. Against that, she didn't stand a chance.

"I'll leave now." Jennifer was scared of hurting people.

Adrian was still looking at Kyle. "You're going too, right?"

"Yes."

"No, I'll go alone!"

"I'll track her."

"Are you claiming her, Kyle?"

"No!"

"No."

Adrian studied them, picking up the fear and the attraction. "This could go bad. You've considered it?"

Kyle was tortured. "If I'm already damned..."

Adrian grunted, allowing his disgusted side to show. "Stay close to her as long as she says it's okay, but hear me, Eagle. The second she says no, you'd *better* back right up!" Adrian left the tent.

Jennifer sank to her knees. Unlike Kyle, Safe Haven's leader scared the hell out of her. "I'm bad. You should stay away from me."

Kyle tensed. "Is that the official request? 'Cause once you make it, Jen, I'm gone."

"Why don't you have a woman here?"

Kyle's mouth dropped open, stunned by the quick topic change. "What?"

Jennifer flushed. "You don't, do you?"

“How do you know?”

Jennifer peered up at him. “I read people—men—very well.”

“What?”

She quickly lowered her eyes. “If you had a woman here, you might have raped me and then let me die.”

Kyle wasn't sure what to say. She was almost certainly right. He'd never felt anything this strong, this primitive.

“Why haven't you picked a woman here?”

He tried evasion. “Why does it matter?”

Jennifer didn't look away. “I'm not sure. I just know that it does.”

Despite being uncomfortable, Kyle refused to deny her anything, even information. “I feel nothing for them beyond lust. I never have. You've woken something else.”

“What?”

*My humanity*, Kyle thought, but he wouldn't share something so dooming with someone he needed to keep an advantage over. She couldn't understand how dark his soul really was until she had the desire to fill it with her light. “I'm not sure,” he said finally, fascination bleeding into his tone. “I only know that I've never had it, and there isn't *anything* I wouldn't sacrifice to make you willing.”

Jennifer blushed, feeling very female as her breasts tingled. Being pregnant had its own side effects, but the heat in Kyle's gaze made her body stir against her will. She'd been Cesar's main puta. There was little left for Jennifer to understand about sex, and that included desire and her reactions to it. She'd never felt closer to the evil man than while she was shuddering in his arms, forced to enjoy his touch, his painful attention. It was terrifying to think of going through that with Kyle.

“I would have already said no to anyone else.” She was unable to completely refuse what he was begging her for.

Feeling guilty for manipulating her, Kyle grinned harshly in the dim light, allowing her to see a bit of the animal he thought of himself as.

Reading it, Jennifer stiffened her chin. She'd been with evil

long enough to recognize it and Kyle wasn't that. He would never get as ugly with her as Cesar had. As for Kyle's promise not to force her, she was old enough, had been devastated enough, to understand that fate didn't usually let people keep rash words. She'd been hurt before and survived. What was a little more pain if it meant her children would have a good life? "They can't find out what I am. The lies we'll have to tell will keep the rumors growing."

"Yes." Kyle admired her even more than he already had, but he feared her too. She now held the power to destroy him.

"You're not worried about trouble over me?"

"Counting on it." Kyle gave full honesty. "Because everything they'll say will push us together. In time, you won't be using me. You'll want me around for more than just my protection or the sense of safety that I provide."

Fear, sharp and thick, welled up in Jennifer's throat. *He knows!*

Kyle stayed still, giving her time to read that he wasn't angry, that he'd counted on her reacting this way. "I know what I signed up for with you...witch."

Jennifer didn't say anything. There was a bond between her and this killer with the lonely soul that she wasn't sure about, but there was no denying the strength. She didn't want to be away from him.

"I have to go again. I have duty."

Loneliness settled its familiar claws into her chest, but Jennifer didn't protest. "I'll be fine."

She was looking better, sunken face starting to fill out, skin taking on the healthy glow that came from the development of life. Kyle didn't think he'd ever seen anything more beautiful. "You can't hide in here."

Jennifer shrugged. "I know, but it's safer."

Kyle's heart broke. He stepped closer but stopped at her instant flinch. "Everyone's busy getting ready to roll out."

She didn't answer.

Kyle pushed. "The babies need fresh air."

“I’ll go,” Jennifer agreed miserably. Another shower would feel good, but the taunts would just recover her clean skin in shame.

Kyle hated forcing her to do things that she didn’t want to, but the boss was out of patience and so was everyone else. Kyle reluctantly left, torn between her and his duty over the QZ. He moved through the packing camp with a scowl that discouraged eye contact and forbade conversation.

## 2

“Can I have a minute?”

Adrian didn’t pause on his rounds. “Walk along.”

Cynthia fell in, hiding her soreness. She’d been attending classes every day. The workouts were hard.

Always known for looking like a reporter, as well as acting and sounding like one, it drew attention to see Cynthia striding across the camp in calf high black boots and an Eagle jacket. She wore her gun low on her hip, hair high on her head, and she didn’t hesitate to speak her mind. The camp was used to that last part, but not the words. Hearing Cynthia defending a camp rule, or Adrian, was a shock still flying though Safe Haven.

“I need to say something.”

On his way to the kids’ area to help carry and direct, Adrian moved them away from the passing members who were busy loading their vehicles. He knew what came now. “Go on.”

“I was wrong about you.”

“Yes.” Adrian met her eye. “And no.”

Cynthia was startled, unable to speak. She was so used to being on the outside! This feeling! *More!*

“I didn’t know you were supposed to be one of us, Cyn.” Adrian delivered another revealing wave of light, making sure she was firmly where he needed her. Once the options had been mapped out, he’d easily found a place for their reporter. “I’m sorry for missing it.”

The last of the bitterness rolled off her shoulders. “I’m on the

right side now.”

Adrian grinned, reminded of their hours together. “Side, front, top...”

Cynthia smirked. “I knew I had *that* part of you pegged right.” She lowered her voice, sweeping the content people around them. “Wonder how many of Safe Haven’s females have fallen for it?”

Adrian’s affectionate gaze lingered here and there, some surprising, some expected. “Enough to keep me fighting for the future.”

“What about the ones who conceive or become obsessed?” Cynthia asked carefully.

Adrian sent out that magnetic draw, the one that had pushed her over the edge as he whispered his gratitude. “I love them.”

Cynthia let him go, trying not to hope for it, and failing. Being the mother of Adrian’s child would guarantee a woman priority whenever shit hit the fan. But more than that, it was an eighteen-year bond to the leader that any of the females here would kill for—including herself.

*Not Angela*, the reporter corrected, sweeping the training area. That Eagle was slowly walking by on her way to direct traffic. Marc was on her heels; their occasional warm look was a confirmation that Adrian’s desire wasn’t going to make any difference. That one had made up her mind. Cynthia applauded the choice. Adrian might be the more powerful of the two, but Marc would give a woman his all.

Cynthia nodded at Zack as he neared her on his rounds. Her mind had never been clearer. Her relationship with Jeremy had been as close as she could get to the Eagles, to Adrian. She hadn’t cared for Jeremy until he’d shown an interest in Samantha. Now, she didn’t want him at all.

Cynthia’s attention swung to the parking area, where Samantha was on duty with Doug. Like her or not, there was no denying that Samantha was worthy of the slot on Angela’s right. The choice she’d made to stay single for the greater good was huge.

Angela and Marc, along with several camp members, stopped



to view an outdoor training session. Cynthia studied them with her newer, already more observant eyes.

Neil and Jeremy were holding their own against the rest of their team as those men tried to get to the laughing hostage in the center—Charlie. It was uplifting to watch, to see the teenager happy, but it was also wonderful because the two men trying to rescue him had spent months tearing their team apart.

As the set finished, Jeremy yanked Charlie clear, while Neil used kai to disarm and then disable the last enemy standing. Neil and Jeremy were bruised and dirty, layered in side-by-side triumph as they high-fived. Cynthia felt the respect for Samantha go up among the Eagles. Sam had sacrificed her needs to make this happen; the distress it was causing was obvious. The storm tracker's hair was always slightly wild now, gaze the same, and there was a hardness to her body that said she needed a release.

Cynthia wondered who it would be with. Neil and Jeremy were mostly even in her opinion. *Tall, lean, and arrogant.* Wide shoulders dripped sweat into waistbands around lean hips and thick arms.

The camp members clapped and went on about their loading, except for two of the former slaves. Those two stayed, hoping for a chance to talk to any of Neil's team.

Eagle groupies were following Adrian's army now, hoping for more details. Camp men congratulated them in envy that they likely wouldn't have been able to handle if the situations had been reversed. All survivors were welcome in Safe Haven, but not just anyone could be an Eagle.

The two former slaves, Sheila and Grace, were staring at Neil and Jeremy as if they were gods. Cynthia hid a grin when the two males walked over to talk to them.

The two women gushed from the first word, showering praise and admiration in amounts meant to send male egos through the clouds and prevent actual thinking.

On duty nearby, Samantha's face hardened as she noticed her men being fawned over. Instead of a fight, Samantha turned her back to them.

Cynthia nodded her approval.

Sheila and Grace, encouraged by Samantha's uncaring behavior, moved in for the kill. They invaded personal space openly, trying to stake a claim.

Neil and Jeremy both sent subtle glances in Samantha's direction.

Disappointment crept in and cut the conversation short. A minute after Samantha turned her back, Grace and Sheila were standing alone and the two males were walking dejectedly into the training tent. They had been trying to draw Samantha's interest with jealousy, working together on it.

*How sweet*, Cynthia thought. *And extremely naive*. Samantha knew she didn't have anything to be jealous about. Her men would come when she wanted them, even if they were in someone else's arms when she sent the call.

### 3

Angela stood stiffly as the camp began to load into their vehicles. She was directing them, if needed. *Make work*. Angela rolled her eyes. This was their last travel day for the next few and she was glad. She had big plans for her team. Adrian would camp them outside Wichita—not so close as to be overrun if the city was occupied, of course—and she would hold her first meeting.

“How's the shoulder?” Zack slowed as he came by on a patrol.

“Sore.” It really was. “How's the nose?”

The trucker snorted, stopping. “Still stings when I blow too hard.”

Angela chuckled, but lightly, not about to destroy their friendship by wounding his pride. “Blame Marc. It was one of the first things he taught me.”

Zack didn't respond. Marc was picking up the slack and most of the Eagles were okay with it. Zack's hesitation was only in that it made him continuously reexamine his loyalty to Kenn. “When are they letting you back in?”

“Unknown yet.”

Zack tried to soothe her angry tone. “Plenty of ants to practice on in the meantime.”

Angela chuckled as expected. Moving targets were a more effective training tool, so Adrian now had his Eagles using the ants to sharpen their knife throwing skills. So far, she could hold her own while shooting with her left, but throwing was another story. Thanks to her bad aim, a number of ants were only minus a limb instead of their lives.

Zack stubbed out his stale smoke against the truck she was using for cover and a subtle leaning post. “I’ll be around.” *Call if you need me.*

Zack’s follow-up thought came through clearly. She nodded, accepting the newest shift in their relationship without an obvious reaction. She scanned the mess as he left. *Clear.*

Zack was still serving as Kenn’s right hand, but it was obvious he didn’t want the job anymore—which was bad for Kenn, who finally appeared to be coming around. Kenn was even supporting the rookie females who were proudly wearing their own Eagle jackets. That was another mark against him, considering the trouble other men were having with the situation. Women showing up for tryouts was an adjustment anyway, but to suddenly have them at every training session, every workout, at every duty post, was a severe disruption. Unlike Angela, who had wanted to win the males over, these rookies didn’t try; they didn’t care. They only wanted one thing—to make XO on the first all-female team in Adrian’s army.

Chapter Six BK3  
**We're Special**

1

**S**afe Haven began to roll out of the area a little after noon. They were a line of hope stretching for two miles behind a red, white, and blue semi with a shotgun behind the seat.

Seth slid into the passenger side of his assigned vehicle, one of the last dozen to leave. “Good morning, Rebecca.”

The girl turned to glare at him, exposing deep bags beneath bloodshot eyes. “It’s cloudy, my head hurts, and there’s a rock stuck in my shoe. Again. What’s so good about it?”

Seth blinked. For some reason he sometimes still expected cheerful little Becky. “Uh...not so much, I guess.”

They drove in silence for a few minutes, noting the ugly signs of their world gone by. It had been six months since the war. The dead were everywhere, bones showing through tattered cloth. Most horrors didn’t upset the Eagles anymore, but occasionally, a scene was above the usual nastiness and drew haunting pain. Like the stack of rotting corpses that they were passing.

The bodies stretched the length of an entire cornfield. On the top, the decay was current, but the bottom layers of the structure were in tatters. What wasn’t dragged off by predators or shifted by storms would fuse together and remain for hundreds of years. Six feet tall and two bodies wide, it was the beginning of a skeleton wall.

“Why would someone do that?” Becky was horrified.

“Marking their turf, I think.” Seth squinted, looking for causes of death.

It was easy to miss the rotting frame of a house in the corn behind the human wall. Of the entire convoy, the animals and Angela were the only ones to feel the menace inside it. They

shifted restlessly in response.

“I don’t understand men at all.” Becky slumped against the seat.

Seth tried humor. “How do you know it was done by a man?”

Becky couldn’t find an answer, and it made her angrier. That was something she didn’t have an outlet for, didn’t know what to do with.

When she guided the truck toward the wall and stopped, Seth frowned.

Becky took her mom’s secret bottle of whiskey from the glovebox and fashioned a quick Molotov cocktail with napkins.

Seth was impressed by the finished product. It was definitely usable.

When she held the small bomb out, waiting patiently, he grudgingly lit the tip for her. John wasn’t even allowing the girl a lighter right now.

Becky hit the wall, but the bodies didn’t want to burn. Tears streamed down her cheeks as the struggling flames were extinguished by the wind less than a minute after she’d thrown it.

Seth let her go for a minute, and then whistled lowly.

Becky’s head snapped up at the noise. “What?”

Seth motioned toward the wheel. “Let’s go—forward or back, but one of the two.”

Snarling, Becky hit the gas and forced them back into the line of vehicles. It shoved a Blazer over and earned a nasty gesture from the driver.

Seth sighed. *If she’s already angry, a little truth might not hurt as much.* “It’s time to rejoin life, Rebecca; start talking to people again.”

She didn’t answer.

Seth didn’t push harder yet. Right now, he was the only one she was letting stay close. The other guards and observers were often shouted at, sometimes even used for target practice with whatever she found in reach. When Becky said *leave me alone*, the area cleared.

“I’ll think on it.”

“Good.” Seth gave the teenager an approving smile and directed them back to the oral lesson they’d begun yesterday. “Eagles rejoice in life. The best moments are to be clung to as a shield against the ugliness that comes with this job.” Seth paused. “Do you understand what that means?”

Becky shrugged stiffly, following Kyle’s truck while ignoring his glare in the mirror. “It’s how I felt when I s-saw you over Rick’s shoulder.”

Seth watched a tear trail down her cheek. His heart shuddered.

Becky turned her head. John and Angela said so much crying was good, but it felt awfully heavy to be healthy. Some nights the sobs were so hard that her stomach hurt the next day.

“That’s not exactly what it means.” Seth tried not to absorb any more of her pain. It was making him worry over her too much, distracting him from his duties and drawing fire. People were starting to think he was doing what Kyle was. Very few people knew of Becky’s rape. It was easy to misunderstand the help Seth felt compelled to give. He wasn’t like Neil or Kyle.

“What did you mean?”

*That’s why she responds to me. Because I let her lead.* “I mean good moments that are not a result of something bad. Watching kids play, petting animals, even enjoying Kenn and Marc doing challenges at the shooting contest. Good things rarely happen outside our borders anymore. You know that. Hold onto the light and it will ease the hell in your mind.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes.” Seth didn’t back down from her cool tone. “I have my own horrors to handle. All of us do. I’ve just told you how we survive it and I think it will help—especially if you want to be an Eagle.”

“After all this, I’d never go beyond level one.” Becky scoffed. “And that won’t be enough.”

*She’s growing up.* Seth hated Rick even more. “Not if you convince Adrian.”

Silence.

“Do you want to be an Eagle?”

“Yes.” Becky sighed unhappily. “And yes, I know he’ll give it to me as a reward and to ease his guilt, but I don’t want it that way.” Becky dug through her pockets to find a tissue, taking her attention and both hands away from the road.

Seth hurriedly grabbed the wheel and straightened the truck, heart pounding. John was right to still have her under suicide watch. “Did you take the pills John gave you?”

Silence.

“Be...Rebecca, you need to take the meds until you feel better.”

Becky glanced over at him in fury. “Pills won’t fix me. My life is over now.”

Instantly furious, Seth yanked the wheel and sent the truck back into the muddy cornfield next to them. The tires hit a rut; the vehicle flew up into the air, tilting dangerously.

Becky jerked the wheel from his hand, tugging lightly, and easily regained control. “What the hell, Seth?”

Seth leaned back in satisfaction. When he wanted to play with fire, he knew how to light a tightly twisted fuse. “Why stop us from rolling if your life is over?”

“Why are you with me all the time?” Becky glared, jarred from her depression by panic. “Don’t you have other duties?”

“You are my duty!” Seth sent right back. “And I’m telling you it’s time to step up or Adrian really will overlook you.”

Silence...and then, “Angela.”

Seth frowned, eyes going to Marc’s Blazer, far ahead of them in the line. “What about her?”

“It’s Angela’s team. She’ll pick it.”

“And you want a slot?”

“Oh, yeah, just any slot.” Becky’s snort was derisive.

Seth grinned, vaguely aware of vehicles moving closer. Their driving incident had caused concern. “Well, you just proved you can handle an out-of-control vehicle. What would you like her to see next?”

Becky didn’t think she had much of a chance at getting the XO slot, but it was all she had to hope for now. The bright dreams

she'd had for the future were gone, left on a charred mattress stained with her blood. She was rolling through the motions as best she could, but there was only pain in her heart. She didn't feel anything else.

## 2

"That's where we're going." Charlie felt eyes on the convoy as they rolled. He sent the information directly to Adrian and was shocked when his mom didn't react. Had he slipped that by without her noticing?

"No, boy."

Charlie grinned, but just as fast as she sometimes did, he fell back into that hazy place between then and now.

Angela closed her journal, staring at the battered billboard.

The island paradise being advertised was one Marc had heard of, but only distantly. "Pitcairn... That's thousands of miles south." Driving, a quick glance told him Angela wasn't surprised. Marc swallowed the denial that wanted to fly out. Where she went, he did.

"Are there other people there?" Angela directed Charlie like Adrian usually did for her. It felt odd and right at the same time.

"A few. One is a woman with scars all over her body. She's the one he needs."

Angela frowned, trying to decipher. Charlie had her glazed eyes from the trance that she was so familiar with. "Who needs her?"

"Adrian," Charlie answered slowly.

"Is she from the dream you told me about?" Marc had his own list of questions now.

"Yes. She will come to mean a great deal to all of us."

"But especially Adrian?" Marc reinforced.

"Yes. He needs her more than he knows."

Angela smothered her unwanted flare of heat. "Are we supposed to go find her?"

Charlie shook his head, lying against the seat. "No. She'll save



us.”

Marc and Angela exchanged worried looks. To need saving, meant danger was coming and they'd already had more than their share. “Do you know when?”

“As we recover.” Charlie's pitch began to normalize, breathing evening out. “With her comes salvation and blood.”

There was silence as they pulled into the main parking area of their campsite and waited for the Eagles to secure it. Marc never stopped scanning the cloudy, corn littered farmland around them.

“All clear, folks.” Mitch gave the okay over the radio, after Adrian gave it to him.

“Charlie to the livestock truck.” Billy's voice didn't sound encouraging.

Charlie sighed, hitting the button on his new rookie belt. “Copy.”

Charlie liked how the guards were eyeing him, paying more attention to his moods, and even calling on him for things. It was what they did with his mom and the feeling was outstanding. Except for calls like these. Calls like these were hard on him.

Marc was aware of Angela's worry as they climbed from their vehicle, stretching and watching Charlie head into the lengthening shadows with Dog at his heels. Marc wanted to offer her comfort, but he wasn't sure what would help.

Angela placed a light hand on his arm. “Together, right?”

Marc nodded. “You know it.”

“I turned in my tent.”

Marc grinned, leaning forward to press a gentle kiss to her mouth. “I'll get a larger one and set it up.”

Angela smiled against his lips and reluctantly moved away.

The setting sun glinted off her long braid, sending a jolt through Marc's body. He forced it down. He'd always been attracted to Angie, even when it was forbidden, but he didn't think he had ever wanted her more than now.

Marc slowly moved toward the perimeter. At some point, he would get to help her conquer *those* fears, not Adrian.

As he got to the livestock truck, Charlie saw Matt in the shadows of the moldy trees. He motioned him to come along, ignoring the nearby guard.

It took Matt a full minute to gain his feet.

Charlie grunted unhappily. When would Matt shape up? “Where’d you get the bottle?”

“Paid Zack’s boy to lift it from the supply truck.” Matt was drunk enough to not care who got in trouble. “Said it was for his old man.”

Matt pulled the bottle out.

Charlie snatched it away.

“Knew you were ready for one!” Matt cackled.

Charlie’s arm drew back. “I should hit you with this!”

Matt flinched and fell clumsily back to the dirt.

Charlie tossed the mostly empty bottle to the concerned guard. “Tell Adrian where it came from.”

Billy pocketed it with an approving nod.

Charlie looked at the confused boy on the ground. “If I catch you with another drink, Matt, or even smell it on you, I’ll never speak to you again.”

Matt watched him go through hurt, blurry eyes. He couldn’t do anything right these days. His dad was talking to him again, but it was only in short scolds and the words were always the same.

*“Why don’t you try out for the Eagles, like Charlie?”*

*“Why can’t you be more like Charlie?”*

*“Charlie’s parents don’t go through this shit with him.”*

The tears restarted. Matt ducked away from the hard guard now hitting the button on his radio. *You can all go to hell. What do I care?*

Charlie stomped toward the shower campers, and then headed for the area behind them. He ignored the other teenagers always trying to get his attention these days. There were thick trees here and the privacy to think. He had to find some way to reach Matt...

Charlie stopped at the waves of fear and anger coming from a small group of women standing behind the campers. Six of them

were surrounding one, but all of them were former slaves from Cesar's camp.

Charlie inched closer, wondering who he should call. When he recognized the girl in the center of the mob, Charlie reached out to the one who would care the most.

Kyle's response was tormented. *New group arriving. Can't get away. Do what I would.*

*Can't,* Charlie replied. *I'm not allowed to kill.*

Jennifer kept an arm around her stomach as she faced her attackers, cursing herself for not bringing Kyle's gun. These females had only been a small threat in the Mexican camp, but here, where women were allowed to come and go without restraint, they were dangerous.

"You didn't think we'd let you off the hook, did you?" Lilly smirked at Jennifer's fear.

Jennifer trembled. "None of what he did was my fault. I wasn't willing."

Lilly, who had cigar burns dotting her exposed skin, leaned closer. "I told you no magic, and you went and claimed that Italian man anyway! He's in the chain of command. Ain't that a surprise?"

Jennifer was aware of their loathing, but also their jealousy. "It's not my fault they're avoiding you. I didn't force anyone. In fact, you begged me to do it because you didn't have the guts!"

Knowing they couldn't have children had caused Safe Haven's males to exclude these women as their future mates, due to the need to repopulate. Cesar had cursed them beyond death.

"I told you no magic!"

Jennifer's weak control teetered. "You think I can't do anything because we're outside, but keep in mind that I'm being fed regularly now. I'm stronger than I've ever been."

Lilly, once a children's therapist who'd lost two sons in the war, slapped Jennifer. "Not if you're having a miscarriage!"

Jennifer was ready to fight as she was shoved down at Lilly's feet, but the two shocked shadows in the grass behind her attackers

encouraged her to form a fast, more useful plan. “Don’t hurt my baby!”

Lilly hadn’t noticed the witness. She drew back to punch. “Knew you were too weak right now!”

“If you do that, I’ll have you thrown out of Safe Haven.”

The male voice made all the attackers turn, caught. The fear fled at the sight of Charlie and his crossed arms.

Lilly approached him with her hand on her hip. “I know who you are. You won’t do anything, boy, or I’ll slip inside your mom’s tent while she’s still off duty and gut—”

“Grrrrr...”

“Now you’ve done it!” The bushes parted next to Charlie.

Dog’s expression was ugly as he padded forward. The wolf’s body had filled out with the extra food and constant exercise. His flanks and haunches bulged with muscles and gave him an even stockier appearance. It was enough to keep rookies jumping back when he came by on a patrol.

The women moved away from Jennifer.

The wolf snarled at the thoughts Charlie flashed.

“We’ll leave her alone.”

“We won’t bother her again.”

“We were only talking.”

“I think they’re lying.” Charlie pointed. “Teach them some manners.”

Dog snarled obligingly, still advancing.

The bullies fled back to camp, with Lilly in the lead.

Charlie walked up and patted the wolf. “Nice.”

Dog nudged his hand in agreement. They both turned to look at Jennifer, who was pushing herself up off the ground.

Jennifer had already heard enough stories about the animal that she hadn’t been afraid of it before now. After this, she was grateful. “Thank you. Both.”

Charlie shrugged. Kyle would be pissed about the handprint across her cheek. “They deserved worse, but our rules are strict on not hurting women.”

“He wouldn’t have attacked them?”

Charlie stared at the wolf thoughtfully. “I don’t think so, but it was my mom that Lilly threatened, so I’m not sure. She and Dog are close.”

Jennifer realized who her rescuer was. Rumors of Safe Haven having their own witch were fleeting here, but in Cesar’s camp, it had been public knowledge.

“She’s who he wanted.” Jennifer felt Charlie should know. “That’s why he attacked you guys.”

“He paid for it.” Charlie’s gaze hardened. “Unlike some people.”

Jennifer knew that wasn’t directed at her. She carefully knelt, extending a hand toward the wolf. She was thrilled when she was allowed to stroke his soft fur.

“Star had a litter last week.” Charlie thought Jennifer would be a good master for an animal. She had a lot of compassion for kids and creatures. He could read that without going deep. “You could probably play with the pups.”

Jennifer smiled at the thought. “Maybe.”

Distracted from his troubles by hers, Charlie stayed close as they moved into view of the camp. Dog stayed on her other side.

The trio drew attention from the camp people and the Eagles, but also from the former slaves as they realized she had more protection now.

The hard glares she received in return were enough to make Charlie silently ask Dog to travel with her for a while.

Hearing the request, Jennifer declared her plan a success. She hadn’t been able to ask for protection because she had no proof of a threat, but thanks to Lilly’s ambush, she would now have it.

Charlie directed them by the area Kyle was guarding and was showered with his relief and gratitude upon seeing that Jennifer was all right. Charlie sent a quick signal to forestall the questions about the handprint. *Tell you later.*

Kyle stared until they were out of sight.

“Busy?”

Kyle grunted at Daryl’s question. His new XO hadn’t had his say yet about Jennifer, but he was going to now while they stood

watch together.

“Go on.” Kyle braced. “Get it off your chest.”

“I like her.”

Surprised, Kyle swung around with clenched fists. “She’s just a kid!”

Daryl shrugged. “That’s part of why I like her.”

Kyle tried to stay calm. “In what way do you mean that?”

“As a person, of course.” Daryl was glad he could say that and mean it. “She’s tougher than the others we rescued. She’ll make a good addition...to *Angela’s* team.” Moving off to do a patrol, Daryl left Kyle standing there, speechless, with that thought beating in his mind.

In one brief moment, his new XO had given him the answer to getting Jennifer accepted, and a vision of the future Kyle already wanted. If Adrian gave Jenny a place among his army, the rights of an adult came with it. It would be her choice from there, with the full support of the camp. It completed the plan he’d begun in the farmhouse during their first night together.

Kyle hit his radio mike. “Sit with us at mess, Daryl. I’ll treat you to a beer.”

Daryl’s satisfied tenor came right back, “You got it, Boss.” Daryl had chosen not to confront Kyle at all, but to watch and see. He still had faith that the mobster was one of the good guys.

### 3

“I have to deliver trays. Want to help?”

Jennifer nodded, happy to have the distraction while Kyle was busy. The people they were passing were giving her appraising looks now instead of only hostility. She understood it was because of her escort. “What were you doing behind the female showers?”

Charlie picked up a large box of trays that Hilda had waiting.

The German woman scanned them both with open curiosity.

“I was headed for the trees to think when I found you. Call for Adrian next time. He won’t tolerate stuff like this.”

Jennifer nodded, positive she wouldn’t. Kyle was the only one

she trusted that way.

“Give Adrian time.” Charlie understood her reluctance. “He comes through.”

Hearing that a second time in the same day allowed Jennifer to overlook Charlie’s mind reading. “For what? What does he do with new people?”

“He’ll find your purpose, what you’re supposed to be doing.” Charlie led the way to the tents closest to the medical camper. “After a while, you’ll settle in here. It’ll become home.”

Jennifer held the flap after Charlie’s tap and call. She heard that a lot in the thoughts of the camp people. *Maybe it’s true...*

“This is Rebecca.” Charlie sat the box down and lifted a tray from it. “Rebecca, this is Jennifer.”

The flashes in Becky’s mind were ugly. Jennifer paled, recognizing the main player. It sent the former slave straight back to her life with Cesar. Jennifer trembled. *Rick hurt Becky too.*

Becky stared at the girl everyone was whispering about, feeling sympathy and a bit of curiosity. After the help her own Eagle was now providing, Becky understood. “What’s the slop tonight?”

Charlie grinned at Becky’s joke, aware that the tension seemed to be building. “Ham sandwiches, juice packs and peanut butter crackers. We’re back to things that don’t use as much water for cooking.”

Becky took the tray with a grimace. “Better than nothing.”

Charlie wasn’t used to being around females his own age. He lingered over the stop, sensing there might be a lot to learn here.

Jennifer stayed by the flap, reading Becky’s thoughts, her pain. Rick’s ghost was in the back of it all, whispering awful stuff.

Becky frowned. “You got a staring problem?”

Jennifer shrugged. “Sorry. Trying to figure something out, is all.”

Becky crossed her arms over her chest. “What?”

“If we could be friends or not, because we’ve been through the same hell. You’re fourteen, right?”

Becky nodded, surprised out of her anger. “Until November.”

Jennifer's eyes lightened a bit. "I'm the day before Halloween."

"I'm the day after." Becky hated being by herself, but it was even worse when Seth was in the training tent. She still had the urge to sneak close and watch. She just wasn't sure she could handle seeing Neil in there laughing and living like nothing had happened.

"Maybe we could hang out." Jennifer offered a smile.

*She's trying to make friends, Becky realized. She's wasting her time. I don't need one.*

"Everyone needs friends."

Charlie tried to interrupt the coming fight. "I'm on. It makes me temperamental."

Both girls turned to look at him with incredulous expressions.

"You're what?"

"Excuse me?"

Charlie picked up their thoughts about periods and shook his head, cheeks reddening. "Not like that. I mean my birthday is on Halloween. Girls always think the grossest stuff."

Both females caught his mind reading. Becky traced it back to Jennifer.

Charlie realized what he'd said, and then picked up their shocked awareness. *We're special, all of us.*

The trio stared at each other in stunned surprise.

Jennifer recovered first. Adrian had said there were many people here like her, but she hadn't considered that Charlie was one of those, despite who his mother was. Her own mother hadn't had a gift. "Shoulda known by the wolf."

Jennifer waited for Becky to get upset. She clearly didn't have the same power, though Jennifer thought maybe the redheaded girl didn't need a mental ability to be dangerous. She wasn't sure what power Becky did have, but Jennifer automatically assumed the girl had something deadly.

"So what happens now?" Becky looked around. "You guys tell Adrian?"

*She is hiding something.* Jennifer shook her head. "Not me."



Charlie was way ahead of them. His own gifts were known and being used. Their abilities were secret. He grinned suddenly. "Maybe Adrian will put us in classes together."

It was something the girls hadn't considered yet. The food trays sat undelivered as the teens began to discuss sneaking over to the training tent to observe.

Seth would have told them it was a bad time. The Eagles weren't adjusting to the changes as well as Adrian had hoped.

#### 4

"She refuses to even try. She waits and runs the set alone every time."

"Same way with the other one. She won't listen, won't do it our way, unless a team leader insists."

"I don't know how he thinks this will work if they refuse to cooperate with us."

The training tent was full of Eagles who were supposed to be preparing for their upcoming mission and level test. Work had been delayed for complaining.

"They aren't like Angie."

"They won't work with us at all."

"Have you wondered why they won't?" Stopping by the flap on his rounds, Zack waited as his question filled the long canvas with loud, crude responses.

"Would you bother with a bond if you'd never use it?" Zack snorted. "Stop thinking of them as women bent on infiltrating. Think of them as a new generation of Eagles, searching for where they belong."

His repetition of Angela's words right before her first test drew attention from those who hadn't known. Since when did Zack support Angela?

"What do you mean, they won't work with us?" Seth gave backup to Zack when it appeared no one else was going to.

"They will," Kenn confirmed from a back corner where he was sorting through equipment and being ignored. "They just don't

know it yet. When they do, you'll get their cooperation."

"They think they'll be on all female teams!" Lee exclaimed. "That's why they don't care."

Kenn was grateful his days of blind rage were over. Now, he could do his job. "Yes. Angela hasn't gotten to settle their places yet. She'll handle it. In the meantime, make it clear that they will work with you and things will improve. As soon as they know they need a bond with you, they'll make one. They want to be here as much as the rest of us do."

Kenn ducked out of the tent behind Zack, hiding a smirk at the stunned silence. *Wait until they find out about the other females who are going to join the mix. Then they'll really have something to adjust to.*

Movement near the medical tent drew Kenn. He watched the usually invisible bubble over Safe Haven glow brighter. He'd noticed the shield not long after the senior Eagles had, a couple weeks now, but it was hard to ignore. The curiosity it caused was maddening. *What is it for? Will it work if we're attacked?*

The bubble was shielding the camp in small ways, like keeping the cicadas out of the trees inside their perimeter. The camp hadn't noticed the insects leaving, but the Eagles had. Even wildlife on the ground avoided the shield.

As he had the thought, Kenn noticed a small brown snake slither to the edge of the bubble and immediately flinch in another direction.

The snake ignored the migrating cicadas that littered the grass, coming straight toward the shield a second time, only to repeat the same behavior.

*But we can walk through the shield.* Kenn headed for Tonya's tent with wild thoughts flowing. He was hoping to steal some time alone, but Kenn knew where his mind would be even while he was enjoying Tonya's mouth. *Will the magic shield work against bigger problems, like other people? 'Cause that could be awesome.*

Chapter Seven BK3

# That Sinking Feeling

1

“**H**ow long have those been in the ground?”

“Since the week after Angie and I came.” Marc finished writing down the last of Adrian’s instructions. They’d been on rounds for hours. For once, Marc was glad that their leader always set up camp out of sight of the horror. Thanks to it, his feet were on rollers instead of concrete. The mellow hills with casual ups and downs were a pleasant change, even if nothing wanted to sit exactly level.

“Is that a pumpkin plant?” After starting the garden, Adrian had moved on to the hundred other important projects on his list. He’d known the garden was finished, and that Samantha and others were caring for it, but the vine at the door of the truck caught his attention.

“I’m not sure.” Marc was ready to check on Angie and then have a cold beer while the camp settled in for the night.

Samantha climbed out of the first garden semi. “Yes, pumpkin. That’s corn on the other side.” She unlocked the door to the second sheared-off semi and hauled herself up into the small, cool jungle. A narrow space of floor had been left in the middle. Samantha used it to get to the rear of her flourishing garden.

“Add canning and dehydrating equipment to the supply lists.” Adrian followed Samantha.

Marc stayed in the doorway, taking notes and guarding. Adrian had begun to use him openly. Before, it had been FND work. Now he was front-and-center, and the camp liked it. Kenn was still Safe Haven’s XO, but the change in status was clear. Kenn was being punished.

Adrian was amazed by the growth in the semi. Healthy green

plants bushed out everywhere, a little crowded as they twined around each other, but clearly not suffering for it. They appeared to have been thinned and evenly spaced for maximum growth. Tomato plants with small green balls covered the first patch on the right, their weak stems tied to stakes with red yarn. Wide cabbage leaves occupied the five feet on the left, roped off with stakes and blue yarn. Corn came behind both of those, the pointed stalks almost to Samantha's shoulders. Laminated drawings were stapled to the walls, detailing the entire semi and its contents. The planting dates and watering schedule for each one was also listed. Neil's tiny scrawl at the bottom confirmed who'd taken the time, probably to please Samantha.

Adrian joined the woman who was kneeling, pulling the occasional weed, and taking large, oval rocks from beneath the soil. The bean plants were two feet tall, with small sprouts. In a week or so, those would be ready.

Adrian saw the base of the pumpkin plant that had caught his eye. The vines reached the top of the truck's shorn sides and circled around the staked rails that were covered by a thick green tarp. A small number of insects were flying through the truck, one of them a bee. It landed in a yellow flower on the pumpkin plant.

Adrian pointed. "That is a very good sign."

"Yeah. No bees, no crops." Samantha stood, wiping her dusty hand on her hips. "We weren't sure the insects would come in, but we hoped maybe the pumpkin plant had already been pollinated. It was one of the first things we put in here. Found it in a greenhouse. Thought for sure the shock of digging it up would kill it."

Adrian smiled. "You've done well, Samantha."

Samantha's face glowed. *What an incredible feeling.*

"I'd like to return something." She held out a familiar object. "And I'd like to make a donation."

Letting go of the past was hard for Samantha, but she was making progress. She hardly ever dreamed of Melvin and Henry anymore. The man she'd killed in NORAD, however, still visited her often. "Give these to the next woman who needs them. I don't

anymore.”

Adrian took his gun, her Taser and the cartridges, and stowed them away with a small amount of pride. He’d helped another battered woman. It was a tiny payment made on an insurmountable debt.

Samantha walked lightly into the dirt to retrieve the end of the vine that was out of the truck. Bright green with thick leaves, the stem was the size of a man’s thumb. She carefully fed the vine over a wooden rail on the wall where thick circles of it were already coiled, wincing at the sharp, tiny spikes. She leaned the flowered tip into the corner where it would start trying to regain the sunlight come dawn.

“Have you checked the carrots or potatoes yet?”

“No. Afraid to disturb them.”

“You use chemicals to keep the bugs away?”

“Not directly on the plants,” Samantha knelt to dig in the dirt. “Miracle-Gro pellets were mixed into the soil, and we use Sevin Dust on top of the truck and around it to keep the pests out while we’re camped.”

Adrian was more than pleased. He was relieved. The food that would come from this garden could be canned, dehydrated, and frozen. They would have vegetables and fruit this fall.

“What do you need to keep this going?”

Samantha peered up with a nervous flutter in her stomach. “If I had more water, I could have three times as much growing.”

Adrian’s mind groaned. Water was something they couldn’t spare, but they had to have the food.

Samantha stood, eager to score points toward her goal of being chosen as Angela’s XO. “I know where we can get *clean* water, but it’ll be dangerous.”

“Do you still need me?” Marc asked from the door, still thinking about Angie and a beer. *Let Neil and Jeremy worry over this one.*

“No.” Adrian waved him off. “Sitrep at morning mess.”

“You got it.” Marc left them alone.

“Okay, Sam.” Adrian settled against the only clear spot of wall

in the truck. “Where’s the water, and why should I let you go along to collect it?”

## 2

Moving through the camp members, Marc couldn’t stop the grin that drew the attention of every woman in sight. He’d played in Angela’s thick tresses for long, erotic moments last night while tasting her, keeping them right there, doing only that, for almost an hour. He’d left her with swollen lips and the sound of her own ragged breathing ringing in her ears.

He was looking forward to doing it again, only this time, he would hold her afterwards and sleep. She was in their new tent now, resting. He was going slowly, making sure she was more than willing, and he didn’t think he’d ever stayed so horny in his life. He’d been a clumsy kid the first time he’d slid between those legs. He’d only managed to control himself long enough to please her because of his guilt over her age. Now, he was a man, sharing every bit of sexual ecstasy that he knew, including anticipation. By the time he finally took her, the pleasure might kill them both.

“How does it help to make them wait?”

Marc jumped, and then snorted out laughter. In his fantasizing, he hadn’t heard Charlie and Dog come up behind him.

Dog’s auburn coat had begun to show a bit of gray near his mouth and ears. Marc wasn’t surprised when the filthy animal curled up near them and laid down. Even wolves grew weary.

“Well?” Charlie’s mind was still spinning from the new friendship that he’d found today. It had been a shock to discover that Jennifer’s gifts were like his, but it was even more of a surprise to find out that Becky had known about him all along.

“Anticipation makes it better when you…” Marc stopped himself, changed it around. “You know how you look forward to your training sessions, but the gun classes are your favorite?”

Charlie did. Being taught by his mom while she also worked with the female rookies was great. He was learning all sorts of things about women.

“It’s like that. If you got to go straight there before you did any work, it wouldn’t mean as much to you; it wouldn’t give as much pleasure.”

“I’m glad you came now. I’ve never seen mom this happy. Thank you for making her stronger, and...for loving her.” Charlie had wanted to say that for a while.

Marc’s heart melted. He swung an arm around his son’s shoulders. “Love you too, boy. Just as much.”

Charlie leaned against him, hugging back. He didn’t say the same, but he felt it, and that was enough. Matt was right to envy him a little. He had a great life now.

The two males moved toward the tent area in peace, both sending out good vibes that made most people want to be closer to them. It also made some people long to *be* them.

### 3

“When are *you* gonna sign up?”

“I d-don’t know.”

“I’m tellin’ you, boy. That’s the only place you need. Become an Eagle and we’re set here.”

Matt didn’t answer, too busy worrying over the fragile sheet of paper in his father’s clumsy hands.

“What the hell is this?”

“Just s-something I drew.” Matt had been sketching happily until Mitch grabbed the book.

“Haven’t I told you not to waste your time on this garbage?”

“Yes.”

Mitch glared with bloodshot eyes. “Then quit doing it!” The radioman crumpled up the drawing and tossed it out the com truck window.

“That w-was mine!” Matt got out and slammed the truck door, drawing attention from the guards over the area. “Why can’t you l-leave me alone? You and Adrian have tak-taken everything else!”

Mitch got out of the truck, stumbling after his son. “Don’t talks

to me that way!”

“You’re d-drunk on duty again, after he t-told you no more!” Matt sneered. “You need to be guarded too.”

“I’m a grown man.” Mitch glowered, holding onto the door for support. “I’ve earned the right.”

The pimply teenager bent down and grabbed his paper before the wind could blow it away. He shoved it into his pocket and scowled at his father. “I only came around b-b-because Charlie thought it was a good idea. Now, all I can think about is t-taking your bottle when you pass out!” The teenager stomped around Mitch. “And that means I shouldn’t be here.”

Too drunk for parenting, Mitch staggered back to the com truck. He’d been drowning his sorrows for most of the day, and he was beat. He climbed back into the truck, squinting at shadowy shapes in the distance. *Is that the vet, alone in the dark, carrying a body over his shoulder?*

Mitch snickered at his crazy thoughts. *Damn good Wild Turkey.* He’d have to hit the next bottle a little slower and make it last. He shouldn’t be seeing things already. That usually came at the finish of the nightly bottle, not midway through.

Cynthia was having trouble sleeping. It happened so often since the rest stop that she’d developed the habit of finding something useful to do during those hours. Tonight, she’d been close enough to overhear Mitch and Matt. Cynthia trailed after the teenager but sent a quick hand signal to Kyle as they went by his post. *Mitch is drunk.*

*I got it.* Kyle stomped toward the com truck.

Cynthia didn’t envy Mitch the chewing out he now had on the way. Kyle hated to be apart from Jennifer, so these shifts on third were hard for him. It gave the mobster a stiff, no-nonsense attitude that Safe Haven’s radioman was about to be beaten with.

“He’s too far gone for thinking or regret.”

Matt sounded bitter for only being fourteen. Cynthia studied him as they walked. Matt was a good kid but for the drinking. “Adrian will handle it.”

“Tell him to handle this, while he’s at it.” Matt held out the



crumpled paper from his pocket. “If my dad takes that away, I’m leaving. It’s the only thing I care about.”

Great at ferreting out details, Cynthia noticed the boy’s stutter hadn’t shown up in his conversation with her. *Maybe it only happens when he’s upset.*

The boy split off toward the supply trucks as Cynthia stared at the picture. Hand drawn in meticulous detail, the reporter didn’t think she’d ever had such a vivid view of cicadas. Feasting on slaver corpses, it was gruesome, but so well drawn that it was also a bit frightening. Those bugs were realistic enough to fly off the paper and attack. Had Mitch even looked at it?

“Too damn drunk to recognize his son’s talent.” Cynthia wasn’t sure what to do. Matt wouldn’t trust anyone right now. *How can I help him?*

“Things okay?” Samantha hadn’t wanted to ask, but that was another part of being an Eagle that would help boost her self-confidence. Interactions with other people were still rough on her.

Cynthia paused at the question from the bruised blonde woman, having one of those introspective moments that said she also needed to act more like what she was now—an Eagle in Adrian’s army.

“Not really.” Cynthia joined the blonde. “Maybe you can give me some advice?”

Also off duty and roaming, Samantha stopped in surprise. “Uh, sure. About what?”

Cynthia quickly filled her in on the situation.

Samantha fell into it as if she’d been hoping for something to do other than to search for bad weather and ignore her men each time they passed by her on their rounds.

Twenty minutes later, the two women were still talking, but not about Matt.

“I wondered if it was something like that. You don’t seem the type to play two ends against the middle.”

“I’m not, but this damn heat! It’s in the food here or something. I’ve never...” Samantha stopped, staring at the lone

camp member now climbing the stairs to the shower camper.

Cynthia followed her line of sight, but neither of them acknowledged the woman, though she flashed longing their way. Lexa was one of them. Sam and Cyn knew it, but until the gun shop owner accepted the rules and asked to be signed up, they couldn't treat her like it.

Lexa vanished into the shower camper.

The two females returned to their conversation, one that now included thoughts and comparisons on multiple areas of camp life. Both of them still wanted the XO slot, but the rivalry had been put aside for the moment. Magic took its place as the women began to communicate like team members need to.

“No, I never would have expected that either.”

“It's so simple, the way he controls them all.”

“And they ask him for it.”

“Exactly. You can't have leadership...” Samantha trailed off, distracted again.

Cynthia watched the storm tracker's face tighten in the light from the burnt-down can fire. “Are you okay?”

“No...” Samantha moved toward the tent area.

Cynthia didn't hesitate to follow.

#### 4

On point over the camp, Kyle was occupied with finding a replacement for Mitch and tracking down Zack's youngest boy, who he suspected was the one now stealing bottles for Matt. He missed the sight of the two rookie females heading for camp at a fast pace.

Kyle's mood was ugly. He'd gotten used to being with Jennifer at night, to watching her sleep after she drifted off against her will. He loathed the time away. It made for a surly point man that only his new XO was able to approach without fear of nastiness. Daryl and his team leader had gotten closer since he'd given Kyle a possible solution.

The radio crackled. “Point man to the supply truck.”

Kyle switched directions, grunting. After the fight with his dad, Kyle could guess who had just shown up wanting a bottle. The highest Eagle stormed that way with a scathing lecture ready. Kyle heard them before he got there.

“No.”

“Just l-let me have it. No one g-g-gives a shit about me anyway.”

Kevin frowned. *I hate third shift duty.* “That’s not true. Go sleep it off, Matt.”

Matt punched the side of the truck. “I want a d-drink!”

“You’re asking to be banished. Go to your tent, little boy!”

Kyle stomped toward them.

Matt spun around with a raised arm.

The mobster gave him a solid clip to the jaw that sent him to the ground.

“Oww!” The boy groaned, holding his mouth.

Kyle knelt down to talk some sense into Matt, whether he was ready to listen or not.

“*Ssscchhhhhh!*”

Thick static went through every radio in Safe Haven that was turned on, jarring an entire camp of refugees.

The leaders inside its borders waited tensely for the next sound.

“*SScchhh-ssshhccc!*”

The second wave was stronger. Electrical components began to short out.

Kyle ripped his radio from his belt and hit the button. “Shut ‘em off! Electrical storm!”

“*Schhrr!*”

The radio sparked. Kyle dropped it, using his feet to stomp out the small flames trying to grow.

Dogs began to bark.

Birds fled from the trees above them in a flurry of panicked wings. There was a clear sense of danger, heavy and unavoidable, coming fast.

Kyle looked at Kevin in horror as the squelching sound echoed through the darkness again, further upsetting their camp. The sky above them was dark and calm except for the retreating wildlife.

Kevin's return glance was just as terrified. This was no electrical storm.

"Tent fire!" The shout echoed across camp.

Matt slowly picked himself up as the adults ran toward the call, full of bitter, self-pitying hatred. *What do I care if there's a storm?* He heard the chaos starting, but his gaze was on the now unguarded door of the supply truck. *Whole camp can die. I just want a bottle.*

Matt staggered inside the rig.

## 5

Under the ground by the edge of the protective shield, a quarter-sized hole opened up and started to fall in on itself. An old mining shaft below provided no foundation, no brace to stop the sinking... The hole began to grow on all sides, sending ripples through the dirt.

A minute after it opened, the hole was five feet wide and still expanding as the dirt continued to cave in on all sides.

*Crunchh.*

On guard over new arrivals in the QZ, Doug registered the newest noise with concern, but he didn't leave his post. He kept people from breaking quarantine by holding up his gun, glad the small group was being reasonable. They were all gathered at the edge of the tape, watching fearfully, but not running blindly like many in the main camp were doing.

*Thud...thud...crunccchhh!*

Doug rotated toward the tilting shower camper he could barely see through the trees. *Tilting?*

His feet shifted against his will as the ground rumbled. Doug grabbed the nearest tree as the dirt under his feet fell.

The new arrivals were thrown to the ground as the tremor grew stronger. Trees shook, sending down stiff, moldy leaves.

*Thudddd! Riiipppp!*

A full row of port-o-lets next to the tilting shower camper dropped into the ground.

Doug's mouth fell open. *Holy shit!*

Doug stumbled as the ground shifted again.

The shower camper plunged into the sinkhole, sending up a thick cloud of dirt. Behind that, a line of moldy trees followed with ear-splitting grinds and cracks.

Dust showered the area, obscuring it from the light of their can fires.

“Help at the showers!”

Doug's shout was swallowed by the static. He tossed his headset away as it sparked, catching his vest on fire. Slapping at it, he rushed toward the shower camper he could no longer see any part of through the falling grit.

Above Safe Haven, the shield glowed brilliant red.

## 6

Strapping on her gun, Angela hurried from her tent; she found Samantha and Cynthia rushing her way.

“Look after Adrian so the Eagles can work.” Angela scanned the camp.

Samantha motioned to the reporter to handle it.

Cynthia changed directions.

Samantha stayed on Angela's right.

Angela tossed an arm around Charlie's tense shoulders as he and Marc arrived, concentrating. Together, they swept the camp and found the biggest problems.

“Shower campers, mess for control, fire crew to the tent area.” Angela concentrated, catching the feel of more trouble coming.

Marc copied it down.

“Charlie can handle the mess. Just keep them calm.”

Charlie took off running, eager to prove he was old enough to help.

Angela sent him where he would be safe while they worked.

That's where most people would go. Adrian's drills had them trained to take shelter there.

Angela rattled off more instructions.

Samantha copied them, also making her own notes. Without radios, the Eagles were using hand motions, but those on the outer perimeter were moving in to see what the problem was. People were stumbling, fleeing, radios were sparking, burning, being stomped out, and the ground under the entire camp gurgled ominously. Samantha hid her sudden case of nerves and swallowed the secondary grin that wanted to flash next. She was an Eagle. She was supposed to be cool and calm, even in the face of chaos.

Angela found another problem and turned to Marc. "Perimeter men are leaving posts!"

Marc went into security mode and began grabbing running Eagles, sending them out to keep those places covered.

*Sscchhhrrriipp!*

Around them, panicked camp members fled, screaming as another crack tore through the ground. Animals began to run by, telling them there was also trouble in the vet area.

Seeing Adrian move through the din was a comfort. His men fell in around him, waiting to be told what to do. He headed for the area that had enough grit hanging over it to make people wonder if they were being bombed again.

Before Angela could go to him too, Samantha shook her head. "Hang on. Something's not right."

"Can you tell what?" Angela had to shout to be heard over the new noise of Eagles shooting the wild animals now chasing camp members. She was getting nothing except panic and chaos from her own searching. The witch was tiredly trying to decide which open doors were threats and which had only jarred loose from the emotions spewing across the camp.

"I get sensations, not images."

"I get both, but fuzzy..." Angela grabbed Samantha's wrist. Maybe they could merge...

Samantha jerked as if she'd been stung. The door opened.

“Trap!”

*Damn it!* Angela followed Sam as she took off running.  
*Adrian! Marc!*

“Get this under control.” Adrian spun around to take up a place behind the running women. He didn’t know where the trouble was, but Angela’s call had been urgent.

Kenn didn’t bother answering, instead stepping forward to flank Doug as the calmer camp members crowded each other for a view of the still growing sinkhole.

Doug waved a hand. “I might be able to lift that corner enough to move it.”

Kenn paused in determining where to make his descent. The shower camper was only partially in the hole; the front end was crushed against the jagged dirt edge.

“Okay.” Kenn wanted to be able to tell Adrian there hadn’t been anyone inside, but he was almost certain that he couldn’t.

## 7

“Shit!”

*Crruusshhh!*

Samantha and Angela arrived in time to see a kid camper drop heavily into a new sinkhole and then keep going. The ground shifted on all sides, falling in on itself. Young screams from the swallowed camper echoed across their hearts.

Adrian and a swarm of Eagles rushed straight into the danger. They grabbed whatever they could reach—bumper, door handles, window frames—trying to stop the camper from sinking deeper.

Inside, women and kids cried for help.

“We need Doug!” Adrian shouted at Eagles coming their way.  
“Get Doug!”

*Crunchhh!*

“I’m here!” The big man had come as soon as he’d lifted the shower camper, leaving Kenn to supervise bringing up the body.

Another large chunk of dirt broke off near the camper edge

and disappeared into the black hole.

“Help us!”

“Please!”

Surrounded by helping Eagles, Doug grunted in effort, lifting with his legs. The small camper slowly came up enough for them to slide a steel plate underneath.

Almost the entire kids’ area had been lost, but only this one camper was in danger of being devoured. Alert Eagles had driven the other campers away with their precious cargo inside.

“Get them out of there!” Adrian waved Eagles forward as the camper was dragged away from the danger. He put a hand on Angela’s arm when she would have gone in. “No.”

Covered in axle grease, Marc nodded his approval and went to finish securing the perimeter.

Angela didn’t like it, but she didn’t argue as Kyle and Daryl began calling for what they needed to get the crushed door open.

Minutes later, bruised and bleeding kids were carried out to John.

Doug came forward as a small Mexican boy was brought out, taking him from Kyle’s surprised arms with a gentleness everyone noticed.

“Come here, boy. We’ll wait for your brother together.”

The four-year-old hid under Doug’s big arm. The man patted his little shoulder as they waited for Kyle to bring out the rest of their people.

The females of the camp were gathering here too, taking the uninjured children to the mess as they were cleared, offering what comfort they could get the kids to accept. Most were stunned, too dazed to keep crying, but a few were already laughing again at adult efforts, telling their guardians they were strong.

Doug took the shaking boys toward the mess after the elder one was led out.

Adrian watched them. Doug was a gentle giant in his army and very needed.

Searching for her charges, Peggy also saw Doug and the boys,



and crossed the pair off her list. She spared a quick glare for Adrian and then went to help Kyle and Daryl with the rest of the trapped children. Adrian had refused her request to make Becky talk to her. The mother was still steaming over it.

“He’s good with them.” Angela smiled at Doug, who was calming the two boys who may not have gotten much consideration from the others because they were Cesar’s sons. “Maybe they should stay together?”

Adrian shrugged distractedly, busy scanning the camp for the next issue to be handled. “Maybe.”

“Wow.” Angela pointed. “Speaking of changes, check that out.”

Adrian turned, ready to conquer the next challenge.

Tonya approached the fire crew hesitantly, being careful not to get in their way as they put out fires caused by sparking radios and panicking residents.

Tonya darted closer before she could lose her nerve. “Is there something I can do?”

Sent by Adrian to help hold the hose, Cynthia was covered in soot and sweat. “No! Get lost.”

The Eagles around were surprised, but Tonya was hurt. She and the reporter had almost been friends before, bonded by their determination to have Adrian removed from power. “Oh, okay. Sorry.”

Cynthia heard the misery, but she didn’t take it back. Tonya had done enough to hurt the dream. Cynthia wasn’t letting her do more.

“I think I can find something for you.” Adrian’s words brought silence as he joined them. He smirked in its wake. “You won’t mind getting dirty, will you?”

“No.” Tonya was shocked into honesty. “For a change, I actually want to help.”

Adrian stared at her for a long minute, feeling Kenn’s silent plea from across the chaotic camp.

“Is it over?” Adrian demanded.

Tonya didn’t pretend ignorance, but it was a slight struggle to

give him what he expected in front of all these witnesses. “Yes and...I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Amid the murmurs, Adrian pointed toward the shadowy figure of the vet, who was trying to calm the remaining animals. “Go help. He’ll think you’re being punished, so expect to work.”

Tonya didn’t care. She was glad Adrian was giving her a chance. She wanted it now. Not as much as power, but that need was starting to ease. If Adrian would make it so she wasn’t an outcast anymore, Tonya intended to forgive and forget. Kenn, along with watching Cynthia and Samantha, had converted her.

The vet had noticed Adrian pointing and waited. Tonya’s words as she joined him went a long way in soothing the vet’s growing panic.

“He said to help you, and I’m not being punished. I volunteered.”

Chris wanted to sneer at the whore, but he was too relieved to do more than nod. He’d thought Adrian knew something. He would already have to do something about Mitch. If Adrian had seen him too, the vet planned to flee.

“Sing to the animals, if you can carry a tune,” Chris instructed grudgingly. “It calms them. If you don’t sing, then hum. You can do that, right?”

“Yeah.” Tonya followed the surly veterinarian, smothering a crude remark about not wanting to get her knees dirty to deliver a hummer.

“Come on, sing.”

Tonya sighed. *Can’t I just fill a water bucket and feed them a brownie? They’ll mellow right out.*

## 8

“I can cook for you.”

Adrian and Angela turned to see one of the new arrivals standing nearby.

Angela studied the short man as flickering shadows moved

through camp. “He’s okay, just old and wants to be around people.” Too busy to be gentle, Angela caught Li Sing’s hurt expression and grunted. “We do need you.”

The man lit up. He held his hands together as he bowed to them. “Let me know. Li Sing grateful to have a safe place for family.”

Adrian waved him toward the mess, where the crowd was gathering. “Help get them settled down. Ask for Hilda.”

The man went that way, motioning for his large family to go back inside their QZ tents. They quickly obeyed.

Adrian was struck by the newest part of the camp’s integration plan. Li Sing was spry, and he had his family in line. If a few of them joined the Eagles, might not more minorities do the same?

Adrian grunted, having a personal moment. With the situation, he shouldn’t be sparing time on thoughts for the future, but progress on the camp’s reform was something he tended even at the worst moments.

All around him, long shadows flickered restlessly. Most were straggling camp members going to the mess like they’d practiced during drills, but some were rushing away from that crowded area, still searching for loved ones or friends. Not everyone was accounted for.

Adrian flipped his radio on, hoping the sparking was over.

An immediate buzz and smoking told him the radios were useless. He quickly unsnapped the box and let it drop to the ground to finish smoldering.

Kyle joined Adrian, spotting Jennifer at the mess with Dog. He knew he had Charlie to thank for that. “We’ll have the perimeter men write down who they’ve come across. What’s next?”

“Roll in camp and slide us south as you do it. We’ll go from there.”

Making their haven smaller would allow them to keep track of everyone, while helping anyone who may still need it. The sinkholes themselves appeared to be slowing, and nothing new had opened up. Even the animal noises were calming, though

Tonya's singing left something to be desired. Adrian hoped the chaos was over.

Samantha moved to Adrian's side, conscious of the many eyes watching her. Neil and Jeremy were a few feet away, writing the names of those they had seen on perimeter duty; she ignored them.

"We need to be on concrete for a while." Samantha cleared her throat and spoke up louder. "That or overtop of something deep enough to hold us in place if the bottom drops out around it."

Adrian felt Samantha's concern for the camp, but also the lingering fear that she wouldn't be believed. He looked at Neil. "Recon for an area according to her specifications. We move at daylight. Sooner if the holes grow faster."

Neil motioned to Jeremy.

The two men left the area without glancing at Samantha.

Samantha was glad to see them working together and feeling like teammates again. Her plan had worked, but it didn't stop the ache in her gut. That continued to grow.

Suddenly becoming aware of another potential threat, Adrian let his feet carry him away from the crushed camper. Thanks to the way fate had gifted him, competent people were tending the issues, but there was a smaller problem that wasn't being guarded during the chaos.

Ten minutes later, Adrian and a few of the men were out patrolling with the dogs, using the wolf to relay commands and keep the canines interested as they searched for intruders. It wasn't a coincidence that the threat had come from under the ground. Nor was it a coincidence that they had all been distracted by the first sinkhole so nature could take a cut of their kids with the second hole. Things would get uglier now.

Adrian found himself longing for Little Rock, but also dreading it. Once they reached that famed city, he might get a break from this constant stress. *I'll be dead, but that's still a break, right?*

Chapter Eight BK3  
**Honor Guard**

1

**W**hen Zack reached the first sinkhole, he spent a minute helping direct people away from the edges, then delivered messages to Kenn, who was keeping watch over the area.

Zack wasn't part of any of the aftermath scenarios taking place across camp. It gave him time to watch some of these people without Adrian's calmness to shelter their true selves. Like Ray. He was fawning all over Dale as he led him from the mess. That would have repercussions, but so would Tonya helping to recapture animals that had gotten free when cages toppled over and rattled locks loose.

*Safe Haven's in the midst of her own global warming.* Changes, big and small, were arriving. Zack neared the edge of the twenty-foot sinkhole with that thought in mind.

Kenn was taking a minute to get his thoughts together. Why did it feel like they were always under attack now and doomed to lose? Kenn raised a brow at his right-hand man. "Truce?"

Zack wanted to deny him, but at that moment, the sense of being needed for this camp's survival was impossible to ignore. "Yes."

Kenn grinned, but it didn't reach his eyes. Despite all their security and the magic they had here, he had to tell Adrian they'd lost someone. Behind Kenn, Alex and Anderson were bringing up a towel-clad body. So far, it was the only one, but the blow from this would be harsh for their leader.

"Do you want me to tell him?" A week ago, Zack wouldn't even have considered it.

"No." Kenn noted that Lexa appeared to have broken her neck, meaning it was quick. At least one mercy to tell the boss. "This is part of my job." Kenn didn't want anyone else to see Adrian's

grief.

Zack's rage lowered to normal anger. Ass or not, Kenn was loyal to Adrian and he was good at what he did. After he delivered the news and handled the blowback, Kenn would spend the rest of the wee hours setting this camp to rights. Come dawn, it would be back together.

John joined them. "Anyone need the doctor here?"

"No."

"Not here."

Kenn and Zack both answered, stepping back to let John through.

John knelt down to confirm what a first glance had already shown. Lexa, the gun store owner from the City of Angels wasn't going to join Adrian's army or any other. John looked up at Kenn. "Does he know yet?"

Zack swept and found the blond leader now comforting camp members by the mess. "In about five minutes he'll start rounds, but he'll head here first. Maybe less."

"Yep." Kenn grunted. Why couldn't it have been someone else? Adrian wouldn't take this well. "He'll pick it up from us even if we take her away." Kenn sighed. "Get a sheet. Leave her face uncovered and put an honor guard here. That'll let him know before he sees her."

Zack took care of it, giving Kenn a nod of respect as he left.

John stood up too quickly. Pain ripped through his stomach and stole his breath, knocking him to his knees.

Kenn offered him an arm. "Anne saw, not Adrian. Get up, old man, quick."

John let the Marine help him.

Kenn stayed with his body shielding the sick doctor from view of most of the camp. "Tell me what you need."

"He needs a pill and rest." Anne appeared and took John's other arm, turning them toward the trees. "He doesn't want Adrian to take him off duty yet. Help me get him out of sight and you can scold him from there."

Kenn grunted, doing as the woman ordered. He wasn't worried

about Adrian. The boss already knew John was getting worse, but he didn't want the camp any more upset than they already were. It was what Adrian would have done.

Anne didn't scold her husband; her touch was gentle, loving. She understood a man's pride all too well, but did John understand a woman's ego was just as big, just as thick? Did he realize this would drive her harder, make her more determined to be able to protect him? The shootout at the QZ wouldn't be the last. Even a dying MD was better than none at all and John was now an easy target.

They got him inside the medical tent to find people already waiting for them.

Anne took charge. "Unless you're bleeding, give me a few minutes to get him settled."

"She's bleeding."

Jennifer and Charlie were in the flap behind them, Dog at her side. The girl was pale, pulse in her neck pounding rapidly. She sank to her knees as another contraction hit, groaning.

Anne let go of John, causing him to grab a cot and roughly slide down on his own.

"Go get your mom and then Adrian," Anne ordered. "I can't handle all of this."

Behind Charlie, lurking to see the results, Lilly's face glowed with satisfaction in the light of the flickering fires. An accidental punch during the stampede had been enough.

*Really makes a difference when you catch the witches off their guard.* Lilly headed for the mess to get a mug of chocolate. *I'll remember that.*

## 2

Jennifer and John both grunted in relief as Angela's healing orbs began swarming over them.

Hidden by a small sheet, those in the tent watched the glowing lights behind the partition in uneasy wonder. The Eagle inside the medical tent wasn't here for the camp's protection. He and Adrian

had exchanged one brief moment that made it clear what Zack's job was.

*"If she uses magic, no one comes out of this tent until you handle them."*

Standing in a corner near the flap, Zack was now keeping a hand on his gun and eavesdropping on the quiet conversations to know who might be a problem.

The highest ranked Eagle in the tent was able to see what Angela was doing, but Kyle couldn't have told anyone afterward even if he wanted to. He wasn't watching. He only cared about Jennifer.

"If I don't make—"

"Sshhh." Kyle refused to let her talk that way. He wiped the sweat from her brow. "Save your strength."

Jennifer felt the cramp easing and let out a tired breath. "Didn't know it would hurt so much."

John thought of giving the girl a painkiller.

Angela shook her head, red eyes glowing. "Do not interfere."

John hastily retreated and stopped in stunned shock at the pain free movement. He felt...*good!*

John sank into a nearby chair and began to weep. "Thank you! Oh, thank you!"

Angela ignored him, straining to keep the orbs working, though they'd already repaired what damage they were capable of. She was trying to give Jennifer some of her reserve.

In the far corner of her mind, the witch watched silently.

Angela knew the witch was waiting to be called, but she didn't want to admit that there was little more she could do without crossing a line that couldn't be returned from.

*What will you do?* the witch questioned as Jennifer's breathing became a low moan on every exhale. *You have one life to save, one more time you can fully heal. Will you use it now?*

Angela hated the rules, the limits, on her magic. She received only one life credit for each birth, and she had used the first for Marc. If Charlie ever needed help, she wouldn't be able to give it.

*Is there another deal I can make?*



The witch came closer slowly, glowing crimson in front of an enormous mental construction project. They'd worked on it all of Angela's life, but recently it had begun to take shape. It was as if being around Adrian and his light had increased their mental workers and supplies. Hammering and grunting was a common sound in her thoughts these days.

*You can borrow from the mother's double luck, but the price is moral responsibility for them,* the witch finally answered, coming close enough to fight for control if she wanted.

Angela wasn't concerned. They were a team now. She confirmed what mattered most to the future. *One good, one bad. And we won't know which?*

The witch raised a hand with long, jagged claws. *Yes. Let them both die and spare Safe Haven. That's the choice he would make.*

Angela understood that to be the truth, but she wasn't Adrian; she hadn't hardened that much yet. *I'll tend to them in whatever way is required. Do it.*

A vivid bolt of crimson light shot from the witch's hand and slammed into Jennifer's contracting stomach.

Kyle jerked back, stung by the heat.

Angela held up a hand in warning. "Stay back. She still wants you."

Kyle scowled, watching Jennifer's face heat up to match the burning of her skin. "What are you...she doing?"

"Closing, cauterizing—"

"Ahhh!"

Kyle shoved through the heat to take Jennifer's hand at the scream.

In his mind, the witch groaned, *Yes. Let them feel your love!*

Kyle didn't resist the drawing.

Angela allowed the witch to meddle. With the knowledge of 50/50, it couldn't hurt. Angela was already planning to have the evil twin removed at the first clear sign and it was heartbreaking. If the witch could stop that future, it was worth whatever mark the witch was stitching into their DNA. When it came to the evil Cesar and his minions had carried, his kids needed any help they could

get.

### 3

At 4 am, Marc and Kevin were still busy.

All but one cherished camp member was accounted for, the smaller perimeter had been secured, and then the two men had been sent to gather supplies for the kids who were now set up in large tents with the camp women.

In the darkness, the sinkholes were visible because of torches and guards using flashlights. Between all that, these two tired men had helped round up the surviving larger animals, moved vehicles away from the still crumbling edges of the sinkholes, and taken Lexa's body to Hilda and Peggy for funeral preparations. Everyone wanted leadership, but at moments like this, no one envied the men who'd actually been chosen for it.

Thanks to Adrian's efficient setup between teams of Eagles, the outer edges of camp life had been quickly reestablished. Once Marc and Kevin delivered the last load of supplies to the waiting women and kids, both men would go to their higher-ups for a new check in and a fresh list of duties to be performed. Marc's hopes of a beer and Angie's kisses were long gone.

"I guess it's Neil or Jeremy you're usually working with on things like this."

"Yeah." Kevin clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice to have your brain here, but I do miss their arrogant attitudes."

"So do I." Marc opened the door. "Not being nagged by Neil while Jeremy makes faces behind his back just doesn't feel right."

Laughter died at the sight of Matt in the supply truck. The teenager was curled up in the corner, a mostly empty bottle of whiskey clutched in his grip.

Kevin frowned. "Adrian's night just got longer."

"Maybe not." Cynthia joined them and handed Marc the drawing, then she climbed into the truck. "Make sure Adrian gets that. Tell him I'll take the boy on as an apprentice for my newspaper."

Kevin stared in surprise, captured by the reporter's ass suddenly being level with his face. It was almost too much to take. Kevin found himself leaning forward for a subtle smell.

Marc turned away with a grin of recognition. It was something guys did, like tasting what they'd just had a finger inside. Women might be disgusted, but they didn't understand. It was instinct for a man to imprint the female that way, ages old and undeniable.

"I'll punish him when he steps out of line." Cynthia moved forward and delivered a solid slap to Matt's leg that made the teenager recoil groggily.

Marc and Kevin exchanged glances.

"Would Adrian trust her with something like that?"

Marc shrugged. "Let her handle it for now, I guess. If he disagrees, he'll let her know."

Kevin climbed into the truck to help, and to get another whiff of her scent. "I say we wait until morning and fill him in then. If we can get Matt sobered up, maybe Adrian will go for it."

"Okay." Marc paused. "You got this covered?"

Kevin's face reddened in the lantern light. "I don't have a clue man, but I'll wing it."

Marc chuckled as the sooty reporter continued to try rousing Matt, missing the remark. He slid the detailed drawing into his pocket. Why did people with talent have to have such glaring flaws? Why couldn't human nature just be good?

Marc sighed. As he went toward the medical area, he mentally scanned, making sure the guards were covering the camp. Marc saw the crowd outside the medical tent and the lone man trying to secure the area. With so many of the higher Eagles he depended on not around, or flat out not responding to his need, it wasn't going smoothly for Kenn.

Marc reluctantly took the place on Kenn's right. For the most part, he liked working with Adrian. Kenn would always be a piece of shit. "What's next?"

Kenn pointed toward the medical tent and then the camp that was slowly being set back up, unable to stop the elation of telling Marc what to do. "No organization, too many rookies."

“I’m on it.”

Kenn gave Marc a minute to scatter the crowd and then began directing things again. It went better this time, truck and men moving together.

Kenn’s heart eased. *This is the way it should have been all along.*

#### 4

On the other side of Safe Haven, Adrian winced each time he passed the freshly dug grave. They would hold Lexa’s funeral right before they left.

*Scchrrriipp!*

The sound of the sinkhole still growing, getting closer, was keeping him and the Eagles alert. Adrian didn’t want to move the camp in the dark. They were too jumpy to be sure of a calm bugout, but he was ready to make the call if he needed to.

Adrian swept the sheet clad body again. No matter how careful he was, people died.

Neil and Jeremy had chosen a thick grove of trees for the camp, and Samantha had approved it. Neil, along with half his team, was packing a few essentials and heading back to secure the new site—much to Neil’s pleasure.

Adrian knew Neil was having a tough time staying away from Samantha, who was now holed up in the vet area to listen for more trouble. The trooper had been by there a number of times in the last half hour, but he hadn’t gotten the nerve to speak to her yet.

Adrian moved that way in case he was needed. Neil was leaving camp; Jeremy wasn’t. *Let the games begin. Again.*

Greg put away his list. “We’re all set.”

“Good.” Neil stored his kit. “We leave in ten minutes.”

“We’ll be ready.” Greg hated not being on any of the mission teams going out, but Neil’s constant need to leave camp was helping with the restlessness of his team.

Chosen to be the man left in camp this time, Jeremy waited at

the truck door, full of thoughts and plans. He wanted to talk to Samantha, but he couldn't do it without telling Neil first.

Neil was expecting it. He shrugged in dawn's grudging light. "If you think you can get through that hard-ass shell around her heart, go on. I won't stand in the way."

Jeremy was caught off guard. "You mean that?"

"Yes, I do." Neil grunted unhappily. If he was wrong, there were a lot of miserable nights waiting. "It's not enough to have what I want. For me to live with myself, I have to know *she* has what she needs. If that's you, so be it. My wants no longer matter above hers."

Jeremy flushed. "You don't think I can put her first?"

"I know you can." Neil wasn't going to leave with any misunderstandings between them. "Now you know I can too." Neil let his XO in for the first time in months. "I want her in ways that I never expected, and her happiness is one of those. It ranks above my loneliness."

"Are you going to see her before you leave?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"No."

There was a tense pause and then Neil broke it. "Are you ready to jump back into his war?"

Jeremy thought of Frank dying beside him, of the blood on his hands. "No. Neither is our team."

Lingering at the semi door, Adrian listened to them work it out. Neil could make the offer because he knew what Samantha was hiding. She loved it that he was dangerous and while Jeremy was too, he didn't throw it around the way Neil did. Samantha liked the excitement, the attention. Neil was confident enough of it to give his blessing for Jeremy to try. It was almost wise. This way, all of them would know for sure.

*If Samantha agrees to play their game. Adrian tiredly continued to the parking area. She has her own script written this time.*

“I’d like to ask you something.”

“Damn it!” Samantha swallowed a startled shriek as Neil stepped from the foggy shadows behind the vet area. Hadn’t he just been in the parking zone?

“Please?”

Samantha’s pulse increased at the tone. “Uh...okay. What?”

Neil didn’t get upset at the defensive response, understanding she was scared of what he might say. It was in her wild eyes and twitching fingers.

“I know you want Angie’s XO slot, and to help Adrian build the dream. I think you fit right in, but what about personally? If your past didn’t stand in the way, what would make you happy?”

Unprepared for the telltale query, Samantha flushed. “What if I said I have it already?”

It was obvious that she didn’t. Neil waited.

Samantha sighed, staring at his cleanshaven jaw. “The things that haunt me would get in the way of anything I try to build.”

“*You* need time now?”

Samantha shrugged. “Surviving was all I thought about for so long that I’m not sure what I need, only that my place here has to come first.”

Neil thought of his words to Marc. “*I’m an Eagle first. My woman would have to know that.*” “I’m leaving now.”

Samantha stiffened. “It’s only for a few hours, right?”

He moved a step closer, wanting to grab her and needing to run at the same time. “I’ll still feel it.” Neil pushed his hat back, letting her see how much he meant it. “I miss you.”

Sam sucked in a sharp breath at the emotional blow. “Damn it!”

Neil smiled bitterly. “Had to know you feel it too.”

Samantha couldn’t resist the panic. She advanced with a low growl. “I hate you for this, Neil. I really do.”

Neil met her kiss with a blast of his own anxiety. They were about to be apart. He’d given Jeremy permission to try. Was he

crazy?

Sam's grip tightened. She didn't want to need him this way. She just did.

Neil deepened the kiss, taking the taste to memorize in case he didn't get to do it again.

Samantha's arms tightened around him, need thrumming through her skin.

Neil pulled back, heart suddenly ripping open without him knowing why. "After this is done, I'm going to ask you out."

Samantha clutched at his shirt, trying to control her breathing. "No promises."

Despair returned. Neil took a double hit as he remembered saying almost the same thing to Becky. And then he'd developed this attraction for someone else. Neil went cold inside with dread. "Okay."

Samantha slid back into his surprised arms with a low groan. "Kiss me once more. Hard and quick."

Neil did, then headed for the waiting team without glancing back.

Samantha didn't look away until the taillights faded into the landscape. When she finally turned, it was to find Jeremy's wounded face staring at her from the foggy dawn shadows. Waves of guilt tried to crush her.

Samantha joined him with a blank expression. "How about a kai lesson?"

"You know that means I'd have to be around you, right?" Jeremy couldn't stop the jealousy that spewed. "And touch you."

Not in the mood for it, Sam's tone cooled. "Yes, I do."

Jeremy's hands shoved into his pockets. "Why me? You've got enough admirers to fill that slot."

Instead of another barb or even the shove of frustration she wanted to give, Samantha walked away.

Jeremy quickly caught up. "Wait. When?"

Sam's feet were already leading them there.

Jeremy groaned silently but didn't protest. After an hour of beating on him, she might agree to have a cup of coffee and spend

some time together.

Samantha eyed Jeremy warily. “So, you two aren’t fighting anymore?”

“No. The Eagles come first. Even before you.”

To his shock, she grinned.

“Good. Maybe we could all start having mess together?”

Jeremy instantly fell back into competition mode.

Samantha sighed. “Guess not.”

“Why don’t you just pick one of us?” Jeremy prompted. “We’ll work it out.”

Samantha shook her head, leading them to the crowded training tent. She wasn’t the only one who didn’t want to try sleeping right now. “That might ease the two of you, but it wouldn’t make me happy.”

“What would?”

Sam sighed, nerves about shot. She couldn’t wait to start swinging. “Being able to spend time with who I want, doing what I want, without people acting like children over it.”

Jeremy felt the sting, but it was still attention. “Thanks.”

Samantha opened the flap, held it for him. “Any time.”

Jeremy wanted to be pissed, but he found himself grinning instead. *I just can’t figure her out.*

## 6

Becky snapped awake with a startled gasp, not sure where she was or what had happened. Her hand groped out to find Seth’s tense body at her side. They were in the parking area, in the back seat of his big truck.

“What is it?”

Becky sat up, sweating and shivering. “Dream.”

“Nightmare, you mean.” Seth placed a gentle arm around her trembling shoulders. “He’s dead, Becca. You saw it.”

The girl nodded and let Seth guide her down to his lap where he could wrap her up tight against him.

Becky felt the tears coming and let them.



*Gonna have that mouth next, Becky, baby!*

She shuddered, lost in her mental prison.

“Rebecca?”

The different name helped pull her from the past. She bit down on her lip in an effort to stop crying. Rick was in her head so often! Seeing him die hadn’t been enough. Ashamed, Becky buried her head against Seth’s chest to hide the tears she was unable to stop. She didn’t want to die anymore but living looked hard too.

Seth held her close, forgetting about the sinkhole, the possible witnesses and everything else but her anguish. “You were betrayed. That’s not your fault. You didn’t cause this.”

Becky shuddered again. “I should have turned him in.”

Seth didn’t lie. “Yes.”

Becky sucked in a ragged breath. “I wish I had!”

She sounded completely different from the playful flirt they’d all been accustomed to.

“He’s like Angela and Adrian. That’s why he won’t... wouldn’t die. Except he’s all darkness, where she’s light.”

Seth had wondered what information Becky might have gleaned from Rick while with him, but he hadn’t expected her to be so observant.

“I think he was supposed to be one of us. That’s why he’s so full of hate. If we’d found him first... Cesar stole that hope.” Becky trembled, forced herself to go on. “He wanted me broken and bleeding. He said...he said stealing my soul would destroy Neil and Samantha, and through them—Adrian.” Becky sobbed, shattering. “Please!”

Seth gave in, tilting her head back to slant his mouth over hers.

She responded as if she were drowning, grateful for any distraction that he would provide. His hands would put her back to sleep, and she’d be able to try living again when she woke up.

Lingering in the fog, Adrian watched Becky guide Seth’s hands, small moans echoing. Now he understood what hadn’t been revealed by his Eagles. Seth was helping the teenager fight Rick’s ghost in a powerful way—one the camp would not condone.

*Can I?*

Awash in guilt at the answer, Adrian headed for the funeral.

*Yes, I can. I'm not finished playing with her life either.*

Chapter Nine BK3

# Honor And Confusion

1

“Are you sure you should be doing this yet? John didn’t clear a full course.”

Angela increased her pace instead of wasting breath on words. *Running helps me think.* Having her body in motion often sent innovative ideas and connections through her brain. Angela knew it was the same for many of their Eagles.

Marc tried not to stare. Even with bags under her eyes and worried, Angela and those perky breasts were a sight to make a man glad to be alive.

Angela jumped over the hole in the ground, landing smoothly despite the arm sling.

Marc hung back, but he was ready to grab her. She wasn’t happy about it, but that was the only way John had agreed to clear her for even a partial workout, and that was telling, considering how grateful the doctor was for Angela’s healing. Both of her secret patients were doing well. Jennifer was in Kyle’s tent, once again hiding.

Angela jogged sharply down the flower dotted hill. Face tight, she picked up the stride and forced air into her burning lungs.

Hanging back a bit more, Marc watched her muscles flex as she jumped another wide hole and rolled down a grassy incline. It had to be hurting her, and he knew for a fact that she hadn’t taken a pill. *Where was this fire when Kenn was beating on her?*

He didn’t understand that surviving it without snapping had taken incredible strength, but Angela didn’t correct him. It wasn’t worth the argument. Let him think Kenn had been able to control her because she was weak. It didn’t matter, did it?

*It shows another way he doesn’t understand you,* the witch

said.

Angela stored it, but without worry. They didn't have to be alike in everything or see all situations the same way.

Angela's foot slipped as she hit the next embankment. She allowed herself to fall into a roll that took her to the bottom with only a grunt of discomfort. It was much better than hitting her shoulder directly.

Marc tried not to be offended when she refused his hand, pushing herself up with one arm and a frown. He stared at her for a second of complete bewilderment before jogging to catch up. *Will I ever understand what makes her so determined that pain means nothing?*

Angela's heart thumped. He wanted to know her in those ways that she was still holding back, but she wasn't sure he was ready to hear the truth, let alone to accept it. *In mere months, Adrian has changed me. I'll never go back to what I was before.*

They both called greetings as Charlie moved toward them.

"Hey, boy."

"Good morning."

Charlie didn't glance at the men filling in graves or the crowded mess, taking Marc's side. He also didn't say anything.

That told Angela he wanted to talk to his father.

"I," she stated, with dramatic eagerness, "have a class and a run. Excuse me."

Angela went back the way they'd come.

Both males tried not to frown or remark on it. Neither of them wanted her out of camp at all, but she was stir-crazy. If she could prove she was in shape, Adrian would let her go to Wichita.

The males waited until she was out of earshot, then Marc looked at his son. "Girls, again?"

Instead of laughing, Charlie leaned closer. "I can't stop thinking about them! When does this shit stop?"

Marc sighed, gaze going to Angela's lightly swinging hips. "When we die, maybe. Not a second before."

Cynthia nodded to Angela as she went by and got the same in return. She and Matt were working on speech lessons right now. The reporter insisting on doing it in public for many reasons. The biggest was her refusal to be accused of having a thing for someone younger. Too many of this camp's men had shown that side and the females were getting tired of it.

“Do it again.”

The din of the mess had Matt flustered, cheeks red. He repeated the rhyme, easier this time, and stared at her in adoration. “That was better, huh?”

“Yes.” Cynthia's attention was drawn away as Li Sing came out to personally reload the buffet dishes. Maria had always sent one of her helpers, preferring to remain in the truck where she could take bites of everything unseen. Li Sing liked to circle the tables and make sure people were happy. It wasn't hard to guess that he had owned a restaurant before the war.

The eager-to-please man had been put in charge of the mess and providing Safe Haven with a new menu, a quick choice by Adrian after a snack he was served. The rice patties and bamboo shoots had been covered in canned beef and gravy. Adrian had been sold. It was good, considering that all their food was now nonperishable or being raised. Hilda had run out of meal ideas for the items they had in abundance, but Li Sing had added a new item to his menu every week before the war. He'd promised their stocks of beans and rice would yield more than plates of the same. All of them hoped it was true. After six months, supplies had dwindled into small stashes that would hold them for days at a time instead of weeks. Many of their old staple items were now only occasional treats.

Cynthia saw Angela's shadow a few seconds later—Zack—and approved. Anyone who wanted to cause Angela trouble here would now have a challenge finding an accomplice. The camp knew she was protecting them, even if they didn't know exactly how. Even nature wasn't getting the chance to attack them from the bottom again. They were only camping on solid foundations.

More than a few of the camp were limping due to sore feet. Concrete sucked.

Cynthia swept the crowded mess around them, spotting Doug lurching with Maria's boys. She quickly dropped her eyes at the surprising number of males who tried to catch her attention. *It feels so odd to be wanted!* She wouldn't trade it for anything.

### 3

Angela slid into the pharmacy tent with a grimace at the strong alcohol odor. "Hey, Tonya, got a minute? I'd like to—"

Angela stopped at the sight of Kenn, shirt off and lying on a bedroll behind the makeshift wooden counter.

Stiffening, she cleared her throat. "Tonya around?"

Kenn was just as surprised to see her. "She has babysitting duty."

"Oh. Right." Angela stared. Even without the layers of fat and cruelty, Kenn's hard body was enough to make the past come flying back in thick waves.

"There's only one thing she wants from you, if you came for more than wipes or Chapstick." Kenn was trying to break the awkward silence.

Angela turned around, needing to go. The tent even smelled like the past. "What's that?"

"A chance."

Angela understood Kenn wanted to speak on behalf of the redhead and locked down on her emotions, making herself wait.

"Please." Kenn hoped his faith in Tonya wasn't misplaced. "She deserves it."

Hearing him care for someone was a good moment. It broke some of the hold the ghosts were gaining. Angela really did need all the hard-assed women she could gather, and Tonya fit that role without a doubt. "I don't know how it would work, but if I didn't tell Anne no, I won't tell Tonya that either." Angela yawned, fear leaving weariness in its place.

Kenn grunted in satisfaction.

Angela got pissed. “You’d better be sure, Marine! He will banish you for tanking *this* part of the dream.”

“I think you’ll be surprised.”

Kenn’s answer was oddly confident and held none of the resentment she’d expected. Angela sighed, glancing around. Unlike the mess she’d come to expect from the redhead, Tonya’s tent was orderly, jars and bottles all neatly shelved. “I’m going to hold an official tryout. Have her show up five minutes late. Even if she blows it, the surprise might rattle the two women tied for top and help me pick.”

“Thought you would have already.” Kenn was surprised. “Not smart.”

Angela swiveled, bracing for the sight of his naked chest, only to find he’d pulled a shirt on.

*Wow.* Angela was stunned. She’d never gotten that kind of respect from him. “If it were your choice to make?”

Kenn both loved it and hated it that she’d asked. He loved the sense of power but hated the urge to help that usually only Adrian drew from him. “It depends on what you need from a right hand.” Kenn looked away. “Adrian chose me because he knows there isn’t anything he can ask that I won’t give him. If he needed a stronger moral line, he would have picked Neil.”

“What if I need both of those, at separate times, with organization and communication?” Angela was surprised to be taking his opinions seriously. “Who fits that?”

Kenn snorted. “You won’t like my answer.”

“I hardly ever did, but tell me anyway.” Angela’s tenor was only slightly bitter.

“As I’m sure you know, I have a lot of time to observe things now, since most of the Eagles aren’t talking to me.”

Angela nodded. That would eventually ease.

“Well, I’ve never seen a more manipulative chick in my life.” Kenn pursed his lips. “And that includes you.”

Angela was instantly intrigued. “Which one?”

The lowly spoken name was a shock. Angela immediately left the tent. *Is he kidding? Is he...right?*

*Maybe. Damn.*

*Will Adrian be as surprised as I am or did he see this one coming too?*

4

“Will you give your approval?”

Adrian had been expecting it. “You’ve thought it through? You’re sure?”

“Yes.” Kyle was. “She needs someone.”

“To help or to have?” Adrian had to know. That would make all the difference to the camp. “Our old world would vote to lock you up.”

“In the old world, I would have never considered it.”

“And yet, here you are, claiming an underage, pregnant stranger.” Adrian’s tone sharpened. “Can you explain that?”

“She pulls at me like no one I’ve ever met.” Kyle tried not to get defensive. “She’s brave and strong, and she doesn’t deserve the treatment she’s getting. I promised her she’d be safe here.”

“And?”

“And...I *need* her.”

Kyle’s soft mutter made Adrian nod “The truth, at last.” Adrian sank into the chair he’d first picked out in Vegas, the edges tattered and torn. *Like my heart*. They’d just come from the funeral for Lexa; they were still in Eagle gear. The service had been the same for the camp as it had been for the Eagles, only the crowd wasn’t as big. Many people in the camp were still sleeping off the sinkhole interruption.

Lexa would have been an Eagle. He’d told her that once as she’d writhed beneath him in orgasm. Her quiet strength had drawn Adrian repeatedly to her comfort. Of all his afterwar women, she was the one he’d thought might make him a father again. He hadn’t loved her exactly, not like he could Angela if things were different, but he’d honestly liked being with her. That was more than Adrian could say about many of those relief moments. Lexa might even have been carrying his child. John



wouldn't have put it in the report. The doctor had known about their relationship. John had sacrificed the medical tent to him once so the crippling need could be eased. Lexa had been a safety net that Adrian had taken for granted. *Did nature single her out because of me?* The odds were high.

"It's a good match." Adrian let Kyle off the hook, too consumed by grief to continue being a hard ass. "She'll have your name and the protection that comes with it. And there won't be any contact until she's sixteen."

Kyle remembered to breathe, glad he'd controlled himself and remained silent while the boss considered things. Pushing would have been a mistake. Adrian wasn't in a comfort giving mood. In fact, he appeared to need some. The mobster understood why. Losing two females you were sleeping with was a hard blow for any man to take, let alone one who cared about life the way Adrian did. That was part of why Kyle had chosen to talk to him now—to provide a distraction.

Connie's body had been found farther down in the sinkhole; her red top was visible once the sun rose. She'd been a distant member of the camp, one who hadn't really wanted to be a part of it at all with her antisocial views. Kyle had only seen them together once, right after Angela joined. He wondered now if it had been because of Connie's long black hair and pale skin.

Kyle forced his mind back to the issue at hand. "What do I say, when they ask me why?"

"The truth. You want to be the father of her children—these and future." Adrian held out his hand. "Congratulations."

Kyle shook it and also his head. "She hasn't said yes."

"When do you plan to talk to her?"

Kyle thought of her in his tent, secure with Dog at the flap. He had a quick rookie session to do and then he would spend the rest of his day with her. "Tonight, or tomorrow."

"And you'll explain? Expectations should be clear up front."

"I expect to marry her."

"And do you plan to sleep with her? 'Cause if so, you need to make that clear during your talk. If not, she'll assume you've made

this offer to protect her from all men, including yourself.”

Kyle frowned, starting to understand.

“She’s been horribly abused,” Adrian continued. “Right now, she probably thinks she’ll never want another man to touch her. Best tell her up front, give her time to get used to the idea. Otherwise, you’ll be able to say it’s your right as a husband, but she’ll hate you for being tricked again.”

Kyle got it clearly this time. Adrian was right. He would be honest and tell Jennifer what he expected of their future. There would be a lot of time before, but unless she said no, it would happen and the real start of it would come tonight. He was following Charlie’s unknowing advice. The same age, Charlie had given Kyle a glimpse into Jennifer’s thoughts that he hadn’t considered, and a way to be sure she never forgot him. Charlie had said she and Dog got along so well it was almost as if he was her pup. Then he’d mentioned the new puppies.

*That’s my way in. I’m taking it.*

Adrian saw the glaze of obsession and knew he’d have to make sure the mobster wasn’t a threat. The feeling was ugly. It was a side of Kyle he had never suspected. The other small disturbances in his camp would slowly sort themselves out, but this one was just as dangerous as the Seth and Becky bomb waiting to hit. In fact, they were identical slugs from the same double barrel. Hopefully not to be fired yet, though. His herd was too twitchy.

Kyle left but Adrian barely noticed. He would have to do something about the jumpiness, something to soothe his people. He had the Eagles now including ground sweeping patterns during their rounds, but Adrian knew that wasn’t enough. He also needed to squash a few of the rumors of magic in camp. These weren’t coming from Angela healing both Jennifer and John. The few who had been in that tent weren’t a problem. Adrian had no idea which of his wild cards was stepping out of line, only that it wasn’t the elder ones.

*Tap-Tap-Tap.*

Adrian forced his mind to the coming kai lesson. He would worry about all of that after he spent a few minutes feeling male,

feeling human. Causing so much death was slowly eroding his soul “Come in.”

Angela ducked into the tent.

Adrian felt his mental confusion clear into one single thought. *She’s the key. She’s Safe Haven’s future.*

## 5

“These things that I’ve gone through, they’ve changed me in ways that are scary.”

Adrian studied her thoughtfully. The main lesson was over, but not finished. “You mean for the worse.”

“Yes. I can be so cold now.” Angela sighed. “Is it supposed to be that way?”

“It has to be that way.” Adrian watched her twist her necklace restlessly. “How else would you be able to make those hard calls that sometimes hurt everyone to help them?”

Angela was quiet, considering. She’d come up with that much on her own, but there was more to it.

Adrian knew. “No, it’s not morally correct. Nothing about being a leader is. You’ll lie to one to satisfy the other and buy time to make ends meet.”

She was horrified. “How the hell does that work?”

Adrian shrugged, sweeping the quiet camp through the open flap. “It helps to have fate on your side.”

“Do we?”

Adrian met her gaze. “*You* answer that.”

Angela laughed. “Not me, Bubba. Better ask the witch.”

He chuckled, not telling her that he already had. The answer was terrifying.

They sat at his folding table, sharing a joint as the cool breeze rushed over hot skin. Angela understood her session wasn’t over when he nodded toward the bubble.

“Seal us up.”

She did it awkwardly, bringing the shield over Safe Haven into a solid form. She quickly let go of it, hoping the ever-growing

camp hadn't noticed.

Angela felt Adrian's mood improve; his stress level lowered. "Why is that?"

"Sometimes I wake up right before dawn and it's the week after the war. Except there's never any light. Day doesn't come and I'm alone, trying to keep them all alive. The things you do drives those ghosts back."

"Because it proves you're not crazy, that all of this is really happening?"

Adrian flinched from her astute observation.

Angela smiled coldly. "Don't ever let them know you have those kinds of doubts. You'll lose them."

Adrian knew her warning to be a valid one, but instead of answering, he leaned back and closed his lids. "What am I thinking?"

"The ocean is dangerous." That was too easy. "Again."

He looked at her curiously.

Angela shrugged, almost blushing. "I pick things up."

"You had to be searching me to know that."

"Listening."

"To me?"

"Like everyone else here," she admitted. "I just have an advantage."

"Okay."

Angela stared in surprise. "You're not mad? It's an invasion of privacy."

"You're not Tonya." Adrian smiled. "Trusting you is easy." *Unlike myself.* His mind these days was either on her or Arkansas. Both produced excited longing...and dread.

Angela was picking up many of his thoughts, aware that he would only allow her to be his comfort, his guidance, in matters that were personal. None of the others played this coveted role for him anymore.

"We could leave sooner instead of staying for a break." Angela didn't like his unhappiness. "We could get there faster."

Adrian was sorry she was getting the negative from his

thoughts. “I need a reason for the camp.”

Angela closed her eyes, concentrating on her lessons. *What did Doug say about getting a large group of people to agree on something?* Oh, yeah. Tell the truth, and if that doesn’t work—lie. “Tell them you saw carcasses with sores.”

He recognized her tone. “Where?”

She pointed to a small thicket of brambles they could barely see through the flap. “Rabbit.”

Adrian stood up. “Come on. You can help with the rearranging on your way to handle Matt. We’ll head out after the level tests are finished, instead of staying the two other days.”

Angela sensed he wanted her close and got her notebook out as she fell in on his right. “What’s first?”

“You tell me.”

She concentrated. “We have to get them to *want* to go.”

“Yes. Write it down word for word, Eagle. These people are tired of being on the road. Extra travel has to be their idea. Unless it’s a crisis, don’t order them to do anything.” Adrian kept talking, walking her through how to accomplish it.

Angela copied it tirelessly, obeying the instinct that said want it or not, she would have need of this information later.

## 6

“My mom wants to see you.”

Matt paled. Charlie had told him it would happen. The adults wanted details now that they’d cooled off enough to hear them.

“When?”

“Now.”

Matt froze. This was where he found out his future in Safe Haven, if he even had one.

Charlie hated the tension. “Try not to worry so much. She understands you have a drinking problem.”

“I don’t have a...”

When Matt stopped, Charlie didn’t push.

“What’s gonna happen?” Matt asked instead of continuing to

deny what he'd known for a while.

"I hope you'll be punished and cleared, but I don't know. Your dad's in trouble, too."

"Yeah. I'm sleeping in the l-l-livestock truck again."

"Let's not talk about it, okay?" Charlie didn't want to go through this anymore. "Just tell her everything, and this will be over before you know it."

Matt planned to do exactly that. There wasn't anything else he could do "What's it like, to have a mom and d-dad again?"

Charlie swiped at hovering insects. "Different. I've never had both."

"But, Kenn--"

"Was never my dad."

Matt shrugged. He would take either of the men in Charlie's life in place of his own. "What's it like to have both?"

Charlie realized that was another thing Matt envied about him and tried not to get upset. He didn't want to fight now that they were talking again, but he had also been on the other end enough to understand it was hard not to feel that way when you had so little hope for your own future. Adrian and the Eagles would change that for Matt, but he had to prove himself worthy first, otherwise they would never give him the chance to atone. "It's cool. My dad trains me on the things she can't do, and she covers my...gun classes."

"Sucks about her getting hurt."

"Yeah..."

Matt frowned. "I thought you were pissed."

"I was. I still am a little, but a lot of things are better now."

Matt wished he could say the same. "What type of training are you getting?"

"Self-defense from my dad. Common sense stuff from my mom."

"Like what?"

"Where's the hidden object, figure out the right path. Stuff where I have to add up the clues for an answer."

"Is she easy on you?"

Charlie snorted, holding the flap open. “My dad’s nicer than she is when it comes to lessons. She’s a lot like Doug.”

Just coming out of the tent that they were headed into, Doug smirked at the teenagers. “Got a rep, do I? Good. You’ll know what to expect when it’s your turn.” He went out.

The two boys stared after him with uneasy glances that made guards hide smiles.

Matt was a ball of nerves as he followed Charlie inside. He would know his fate in a few minutes. He didn’t have much hope.

## 7

Samantha slammed Cynthia to the mat, grunting at the effort. The reporter was scrappy. “Stay down!”

Cynthia growled as she got right back up, triggering Samantha’s rage. The storm tracker swung a nasty hit that knocked the woman on her ass again.

“Match!”

Sam pulled in the anger and wiped a wrist across her bloody nose as Cynthia struggled to her feet.

Angry at losing, Cynthia used the sleeve of her shirt to clear her vision, then flung the blood toward Sam’s boots. “Again!”

Sam advanced, eager.

The observing males braced, expecting it to be ugly. The two women had already passed their evaluations in this area and others. It helped to have female vs. female, but the battle for Angela’s right was growing nasty. It wouldn’t be long before that slot was officially filled. So far, no one knew who was in the lead, only that Adrian had given Angela the choice, as he had with his other team leaders and their crew.

“No. That’s enough.” Adrian’s pleased words stopped the women. He liked it that they were showing their willingness to bleed and fight for the slot they wanted. It was enlightening for the males to watch these determined women go through the same emotions and discoveries that they had.

Adrian sensed that bond might become incredibly strong once

Angela was back full time. Right now, there was a lot of fighting between the new and the old as the sexes merged, but once her XO was assigned, things would settle down.

Cynthia and Samantha could both do the job, but the two Eagles standing near the flap knew which one it should be. After less than a month, Samantha was brutal. She was only two levels behind Angela in kai. Cynthia, on the other hand, was just starting her workout sessions. Samantha spent hours a day in the ring with Doug and Billy, and sometimes Adrian. Cynthia had only recently passed the first defense lesson. Neil and Jeremy didn't like the idea of Samantha in danger any more than Marc had Angela, but there was no denying the truth. She deserved the position.

For Jeremy, it was another attraction, another sign that she was the woman of his dreams.

For Neil, it was pride and pain. Pride that his chosen mate, even if she hadn't chosen him, was doing so well, but also pain to be around her and not try to convince her that he deserved another chance. Her reply to him asking her out "*No promises.*" had stopped him from doing it.

"Can I play?"

Angela's forlorn tenor at the flap drew grins and instant welcome from all of the men. It also caused straightened shoulders and fresh glares between Samantha and Cynthia as the sense of competition rose.

Using the moment, Adrian motioned toward the ring. "Were you watching?"

"Nope." Angela's cool gaze went over both bloody females waiting for her approval. "Have 'em do it again."

Adrian smiled amid the eager male chuckles and female dismay. "Welcome home."

With that, she was cleared for workouts.

"Thank you." Angela came inside with a long-suffering sigh. "Can't tell you how much I've missed this ugly green tent."

More laughter came, but those who had spent time off duty understood. It was as if nothing else was satisfying. The air was just air, and food was just food, but when you were an Eagle, the



wind was crisp and inviting, and mess was a sweet trip into happiness. To be away, was to be incomplete.

Angela moved toward the two women who were straightening clothes and tending minor injuries. Rookie nerves before a level test were always rough, but with everything Safe Haven had been through in the last few months, these men and women were now quick to fight first and talk later. As a result, the number of people working off offenses with the vet had increased. Sour faced and surly, Chris now had more hands than he knew what to do with. Often there with Jennifer, Kyle helped keep them all busy.

Angela swept the women with a hard gaze.

An expectant silence fell in the tent.

“I’ve had short conversations with you, where I refused to talk about what role you might have on my team. You both said you were content so long as you held a place, *any* place. Is that still true?”

“Sure,” Samantha grunted, clearly not meaning it.

Neil smirked. They were so much alike, it was scary.

Jeremy worried she was about to blow it.

Cynthia already expected to lose the slot and didn’t respond at all. After this session, she understood she had a lot more work to do.

Angela motioned toward the flap, where a new female had quietly appeared. “She says the same thing.”

All eyes went to Anne, running over the glasses and other signs of age. There were surprised mutters and even snorts.

“No less than five of you are now competing for my right hand, with others quickly rising through my list of requirements.”

That stopped the laughter. The Eagles instantly began trying to name the others and all came up short by two. Even Adrian was minus one.

“If someone shows me something the others can’t, that’ll seal the deal for me.” Angela turned toward Adrian. “What’s the deadline?”

“By Little Rock.”

“I’ll make my choice before then. In the meantime, all of them

need XO training.”

Adrian motioned to Doug. “Take over.”

As the big man took the two sweaty females into the corner and began explaining the next part of the test, Anne joined them. The camp would know within hours.

*Are you sure?*

*It’s only for a little while,* Adrian answered Angela’s mental question.

*Long enough to give her the skills we all need and the strength to carry on after he dies,* Angela clarified.

*Yes, but also to finish bringing in those who are watching you form this team.*

*Because it boosts their confidence enough to try,* Angela repeated the reason she’d given to Anne. A lot of this wasn’t set in stone in her mind yet. She was using Adrian’s techniques, but confirmation helped relieve some of the worry over her choices.

*Yes.* As they ducked out of the tent, Adrian holding the flap, he couldn’t stop himself from asking. *Who’s the fifth?*

## 8

“You’re late,” Chris quipped.

Kyle gently dislodged Jennifer’s hand from his tingling arm and glowered at the vet. “You’ll get over it.”

Jennifer kept her eyes on the ground as she waited, curious and a little uneasy. It was only the vet and the guards here, but that was still enough males to make her wish for the privacy of her tent. *Kyle’s* tent. The sight of the dome light in his camper had brought her to tears every time she saw it. Kyle had insisted on switching after getting her a thick air mattress from the supply truck. Most nights she fell asleep while he was still with her and woke to a flower or a piece of candy on her pillow. He was sweet, considerate, and so closed off that it was hard for her to imagine him as a father.

Jennifer ran a loving hand over her twins as they jostled for position. “In a bit, babies. In a bit.”

As if hearing and responding, her stomach settled into the occasional twist, and she went back to her observations. Life here was so good that Jennifer sometimes found herself studying Safe Haven for hours without moving or talking. The setup was vastly different from the old world, but the leadership made it a beacon of hope. Even the name said she and her children could be happy here.

“Damn dog!” Kyle growled from inside the semi.

The vet backed up as Kyle came from the truck with a box. Inside, something sniffed and scratched curiously.

“Why don’t you keep her chained up?!”

Chris scowled. “You didn’t hurt her, did you?”

Kyle snorted contemptuously. “No.”

Chris shrugged, eying the newest tear in Kyle’s pants. “It’s her pups. You hurt?”

“No. I’ve learned to jump when she lunges. Only got cloth this time.”

Chris snickered in satisfaction, but still headed into the truck to assure himself of Star’s safety. “Give her time. She’ll figure that one out too.”

Kyle was still scowling as he set the box at Jennifer’s feet. “Know you’re okay with wolves. What about mutt puppies?”

Jennifer frowned darkly. “Guess that’s what I’m having.”

She eased to her knees beside the box before he could say anything.

Kyle stopped breathing when she giggled.

“They’re so cute!” She sighed happily. “Hope mine are.”

“Oh doll, your kids’ll be beautiful,” Kyle answered before he could think, steering the conversation into a direction he’d intended to avoid. “Fathers don’t matter when they come from your gene pool.”

Jennifer stared at the puppies. “Cesar was ugly. Won’t it make mine that way?”

Kyle knew a thin line when he heard it. The problem was, he couldn’t *see* it. “If they are, you’ll love them anyway.”

Jennifer was too young to hide her concerns. “What about

you?”

“Kids are kids to me, Jen. I’ve always liked them.”

“The people here won’t feel the same.” She revealed her true concern now. “They’ll be outcasts, even here, because of who their father might be.”

Kyle had already considered that. When it came to getting what he now wanted more than even air, there was little he hadn’t contemplated. “We’ll stay until it’s causing trouble. By then, Safe Haven will be settled somewhere.” He fought the urge to stroke her head in comfort. “We don’t have to live in Safe Haven, Jenny, to be a part of the light.”

Jennifer hadn’t considered that, still working up to what else was on her mind.

Kyle understood that asking for her wants so soon after being a slave was hard. “There isn’t anything you can’t tell me or ask for.”

“If I said yes, I would need two things, and they’re hard,” Jennifer quickly answered before the terror could shut her down. Her fear was thick, making her breathing rough.

Kyle felt his protective nature grow, but also the dangerous need. Her chest heaved a bit at his silence, capturing his eye. Kyle braced for a fresh wave of lust and was surprised to find sympathy leading this time. “Yes, to both. Now tell me, knowing I’ve already agreed, and I won’t take it back.”

Jennifer swallowed. “If you’re wrong and you can’t love them, you have to let me take them and leave.”

Kyle knew it wouldn’t ever matter to him. He’d always wanted to be a dad. He just hadn’t wanted to be a husband. That had changed. “Next?”

Jennifer drew in a breath.

Kyle prepared to take a blow.

“You can’t...have me, until they’re six months old and we *know* if you can love them.”

Kyle leaned down to brush a curl back. *So soft!* “Let’s make it until you’re legal, so the den mothers don’t castrate me. I’m rather fond of that part, Jen. I doubt I’d be the same without it.”

Jennifer giggled, sending good vibes across the camp. “Okay.”

Above her, the shield rippled into view for a bare instant that was noticed by three people. Two of them were in different parts of the camp and assumed the other had done it.

The third stiffened with a hundred connections filling in the blanks of Jennifer’s profile. Kyle backed up. She wasn’t just special. She was meant to lead. Only those with that duty could influence the shield. It was the first thing he and Neil had noticed about the mysterious bubble.

Jennifer felt Kyle’s withdrawal and knew he’d discovered one of her secrets. “Are you sure you really want me, Kyle?” She quickly distracted him, vowing to control her emotions better. “It’ll be hard.”

Kyle was jolted from his deep thoughts. “So much that I’ll make any deal you want, even if it costs me everything I’ve built.”

Jennifer’s heart leapt. *He’s mine now if I want him.* The manipulative girl gave him a smoldering glance that was hidden from the others by her hair. *I do.*

Kyle’s openly returned leer said he’d known all along, but his reaction spoke louder. He backed up another step. He meant to stand by his word and not touch her until she was legal.

Jennifer didn’t celebrate her victory, thinking a life at Kyle’s side now looked better than any of her other options. She had come to care for him, without meaning to.

Kyle absorbed the warmth in her eyes as if it were the icy drinks that she’d confessed that he smelled like to her. And then he stepped even farther away. A man could only take so much.

Totally distracted from what he’d noticed with the shield, Kyle leaned against the truck, staring at her without the usual protective cloak over his expressions. Making her happy was something he planned to do repeatedly.

Kyle’s team were the Eagles on the area. They were about to be relieved so they could take their places overseeing the level tests. All those men wanted to continue being upset with Kyle, but they couldn’t. Hearing his promises, being sure he would stick to them due to his reputation in Safe Haven, went a long way. If Kyle

said she'd be of age, then she would be. Daryl's support and carefully chosen words had helped to convince them.

The vet ignored everyone as he came out of the semi, only caring for the wildlife in his charge.

Mitch stared at him through the com truck window. Maybe later he would swing by and find out what the disgruntled man had seen...and maybe Safe Haven would be short another useless member. Rick hadn't been the only evil Adrian let into Safe Haven. He and his Eagles had to play by the rules, but Chris hadn't before the war and the vet didn't plan to now. Some things had to be done. Some people had to die. It was that simple.

Kyle got the vet's attention. "What do you want in exchange for the pup? I'm her collateral."

Chris had been expecting it. Anyone could see the mobster was smitten, and what better way into a young girl's heart than a puppy? "She joins the training lessons and shows up. One sign of abuse, and I come for it."

"I'm not trying to buy her." Kyle made sure his words carried. "I thought she'd like it. No strings attached."

That had been her first thought. Jennifer was glad she'd been wrong. "I'll show up for every lesson, my word. And I'll come help if you have something I can do." She thought Chris had probably once been a very handsome man, but nice hair and straight teeth couldn't make up for a nasty attitude. None of the females here ever looked his way.

Kyle opened his mouth, but Chris beat him to it. "Paperwork and play with the small animals. They get restless, being caged so much."

Jennifer's happiness radiated again, making her glow. She could tell she was glowing by the way the males stared. The closer she got to delivery, the harder it was to control the things that made her different from the other survivors.

"Cool beans!" Jennifer used a simple smoke-and-mirror technique to defuse the tension. She sounded her age.

Both men blinked in response, shaking off the haze.

"You can't start working until John clears it but come and play

with them whenever we're camped."

The vet's tone had become the one Kyle had only heard him use on the animals. "Which one do you want?" Unable to control his jealousy, Kyle directed her attention back to his gift. "The solid black one is the runt."

Instead of picking, Jennifer stood up and moved into Kyle's personal space, pushing herself and him to show how much she appreciated the gift. She knew pets weren't allowed here.

Big stomach resting against his hip, Jennifer cautiously curled her arms around his thick neck. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Kyle clenched his fists to keep from reacting, nose on fire as her sweet scent flooded him. "*Anything* to make you happy."

She leaned closer to hug.

Kyle groaned, hands coming up to hold her shoulders. He eased away before his fingers could cross a line. "Go pick your puppy and we'll hit the mess for a snack before you crash."

Happier than she'd been since the war, Jennifer did. She still held a fear of the dangerous man who had chosen to be her protector, but it wasn't something she had to worry over right now. She'd also heard enough of the adult females talking to hope there was another side to sex, one where humiliation and submission weren't involved. Jennifer thought that was probably BS, another line fed to female children to keep them following blindly...but if anyone could show her that side, it would be Kyle.

Jennifer's breast hardened into the deep ache that said delivery wasn't so far away now. She shifted around so the men might not notice her adjust her bra. She couldn't wait to hold her babies but carrying them sucked. Not that she would complain. Angela had saved her children, given her another chance. Jennifer wouldn't be caught alone again, nor would she hold back the witch from how often she wanted to draw energy from Kyle. She would do whatever she needed to.

Kyle strolled into the shadows to take up a place by his XO. They didn't speak right away, watching Jennifer sort through the five pups. The load these two lethal Eagles were carrying was toted without objection. The moments like this—sweet and simple—

were hard to come by. When one happened, senior men knew to soak it up as a buffer against the next horror.

*Or the last*, Kyle thought, flashing to holding Angela down so Adrian could burn her skin closed. He could still feel the blood pulsing from her body to soak his clothes.

Jennifer picked the runt, then helped the vet take the remaining pups to the semi, chatting cheerfully with the surly man the entire way. To Chris, Jennifer was another expectant animal to be cared for. The fact that she was human didn't matter to him. All he saw was her need and the abuse she'd suffered. Despite his bad attitude, it was winning the vet a special place in Safe Haven among those who understood what made him tick. The man abhorred violence of any kind, but most especially to animals and mothers.

"That was nice of you." Daryl was eager for this shift to be over. His skills were wasted on this area.

Kyle nodded. "She needs it."

"Someone to be nice to her?"

"To feel special." Kyle swept the shadows for trouble, not meeting the hard eyes of his team.

Daryl raised a brow. "And to know someone cares for her?"

Kyle watched Jennifer's awkwardly perfect waddle. "She already knows that."

"Then why?"

"Tell the camp I don't want her to be lonely while I'm on runs."

"And the real reason?"

Kyle's heart spread over his face. "Every time she loves it, she'll be reminded of the man who gave it to her...and maybe love him a little too."

Daryl sighed, being swayed to the idea against his will every time he saw them interact. "The others are coming around. Just be careful. Stop letting those sparks show. It's too clear."

Kyle settled into the blank expression that was so dangerous. He wasn't sure if he might lose it all, but he had no illusions; getting the camp to accept it wouldn't be easy. In this life,



achieving happiness wasn't meant to be. In fact, happiness for most people after an apocalypse was impossible. Kyle was glad to know that he and Jennifer might be an exception to the rule. Once she understood he would never hurt her, that he would always love her above himself, they would be perfect mates who never had to hide anything from each other.

*It only took the end of the world for me to find it.*

## Part Two BK3

### **Challenge:**

*A task or situation that tests someone's abilities.*

Chapter Ten BK3  
**Tiger By The Tail**

1

**A**s the gritty sky settled into full black, Kenn was finishing a shift on guard duty over Tonya's pharmacy and Candy's hairdressing canvas. Both females were getting customers, and as Kenn had predicted, most of the pharmacy orders were for Tonya's stashes of Advil and Chapstick. In exchange, people were donating time to teach her the things she'd been avoiding. It was earning her small gestures of friendship and giving Kenn an awareness of emotions for her that he hadn't known existed until his snap. Leaving her behind had been hard. Recognizing that had made Kenn keep their relationship within legal bounds for the last two weeks. They were both walking the line.

Life for Kenn was now a confusing mix of new emotions, of being accepted by the camp again, but still being loathed by the Eagles. For those brave men, it was justice. For the camp, life was better, and it was mostly because now that Marc and Kenn were no longer fighting, they were working together and making their own magic.

Kenn still didn't know if Marc and Angela had been together while she was with him, or how they had split up, but there was another suspicion that had become more pressing. Whatever Charlie had said had triggered the shootout with the traders. Had he been hiding his gifts? Was he like Angela?

Kenn wasn't sure it mattered. He also wasn't sure that it didn't. He was making progress, finally growing as a person, but to be fooled for ten years by a child? How was he supposed to react to a crippling blow like that?

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Kenn spun, hand dropping to his 9mm before he realized it

was the construction crew adding another layer to the shield around camp. They were out of wooden planks and down to using the moldy trees for stakes to attach the ledges. Once they chopped the trees down and cleared the mold there was still usable wood, but in another year, that probably wouldn't be the case.

*Thud! Thud!*

Zack's boys were cleaning the mold off the trees. It was their punishment for stealing supplies from the trucks while Zack's team was on duty. The trucker hadn't known about it; he had let Adrian handle the boys with a week of hard labor. That had been the lightest punishment given. Mitch had been assigned a buddy in the com truck so he was never alone on duty again. The first time his *buddy* reported him drinking and working, he would be finished as Safe Haven's radioman.

All around Kenn's post, people were working, digging latrine holes and garbage pits, washing clothes, playing cards and handheld video games, chatting lightly while waiting in lines. It was calm, but Kenn wondered how many of those conversations were about Angela and the things she could do. Those who had been in the medical tent were refusing to talk, but John's renewed health said something huge had happened. He was moving without discomfort again and he appeared to be sober, implying she had helped him enough that he didn't need the painkillers.

With his vigor returned, John was implementing new procedures for the camp, like monthly disinfecting of tents and equipment, and restarting vaccinations for those who wanted them. He had also upped the iodine consumption for the entire camp after his weekly absolute lymphocyte count came back more elevated than usual. The doctor tested random batches of blood from people who came in during the week, then compared those numbers to previous amounts to tell Adrian how much needed to be added to the drinking water. Today, John had run a full shift of appointments, and then examined Billy's broken leg, sending him out of the medical tent on crutches instead of in a wheelchair. That Eagle was ecstatic. And clumsy.

Kenn watched Billy fall twice, wincing each time. If he kept

up like that, John would be setting the other leg next, with no sinkhole to blame it on.

“Instructors and testing Eagles to the training tent!” The radios crackled roughly. Some still weren’t functioning at all despite Kenn and Marc both working on them.

Angela walked by with a gun on each hip, fast clip implying her recovery was speeding along. John had also cleared her for private lessons with the senior men. Marc wouldn’t like Adrian’s plans, but to Kenn, there was an intense feeling of time running out. Whatever Adrian had been preparing Angela for was closer now.

Kenn stepped over to where Doug was standing. The big man was in charge of making sure the cans were lit, the dogs were put out, the supply trucks were locked up, and the keys were delivered to the next person on point. “Is everything set?”

Doug didn’t answer.

Bracing against the lingering ache from his healing ribs, Kenn raised his voice. “Are we 5-by?”

Doug swung around in surprise. “Huh?”

Kenn ignored the twinge in his side to view what had distracted the big man so thoroughly. Doug wasn’t normally one to miss much. If not for his limp, Kenn would have considered him a serious rival when he’d first joined.

“We’re all set,” Doug answered stiffly.

Kenn narrowed in on the mess. Hilda and Peggy were unpacking the truck and it wasn’t hard to guess which female the giant man was eyeing. The stories were flying through camp. “You should go talk to her.”

“What?” Doug stared as if Kenn had three heads.

“You’re allowed a personal life.”

*You don’t understand. You don’t look like me.* Doug was addicted to the dream of rebuilding as much as the rest of Adrian’s refugees, but the idea of finding a woman among Safe Haven’s hens was terrifying. *No one wants a hulk like me.*

“Doug?”

“I don’t need a woman.”

Kenn flashed to one of his last moments with Tonya, to the way she'd had him shuddering and groaning. "If you say so."

Doug pushed Kenn's words out in favor of the silent worship from afar that he'd been doing for months. She wouldn't have anything to do with someone like him, not a strong woman like Peggy, but he liked to look at her. The stern bun she always wore was loose from a day of labor and the sight of all that strawberry silk gone wild had drawn his eye from across the camp. It glistened in the light of their fires like diamonds.

Doug's daydreaming was interrupted by a familiar, hated ache. The big man limped toward the bathrooms. Eventually he would talk to John. After hiding his own illness, surely the doctor would understand and keep quiet. The debt Doug felt he owed Adrian for pulling him free of that collapsed bridge along the Nevada state line hadn't been paid yet.

There was a lot of that going around in Safe Haven.

## 2

"How about I teach you to hear differently?"

"Sure. How?"

Becky heard Seth come up behind her. When his big hands settled onto her shoulders, she didn't flinch. They were just outside her tent, with a small campfire going. With so many of the camp and Eagles at the level tests, it was almost isolated. "The world is full of sounds. Even this dead one."

He rustled her hair against her jaw. "The wind, the animals, us. Even if it were all gone, there would still be sound. After light, it was the next thing created." *Or so I understand from my dreams.*

Becky heard his thought clearly and tried not to flinch at the newest evidence of her gifts.

"Light and sound," Seth highlighted. "Without your eyes, there is no light, but without ears that can hear danger, sound no longer matters. For true survival, the ears must work as well as the other senses."

Seth rubbed his fingers together, making a light scratching

noise. “We hear ranges of sound, from high pitches to low, deep to shallow. Our ears process it for us automatically. So much so that most people don’t realize they can consciously sort those sounds. With the right mindset, a person can make a sound louder or softer to hear what’s around them.”

He made a few low noises, demonstrating so Becky understood what he meant. “Controlling it is like anything else—practice and willpower. In time, sounds from multiple sources can be not only identified, but also tracked to a close location and evaluated for the threat.”

The sound of him sliding his knife from his sheath made her tense.

Seth put it away. “Very good. You’ll use your ears and react accordingly.” Seth grabbed her arm, forgetting to warn her.

“Don’t!”

Her panicked shout stopped him in his tracks and drew the attention of those on duty—his team. None of them envied the undercover cop this chore, but each of them respected him for living up to it.

“I won’t touch you.”

“I’m okay.” Becky was shaking. “You just moved too fast and I...” She dropped her head, starting to cry.

Seth slowly put his arm around her shoulders. She rested against him tensely.

“It’ll get better with time.”

Coming to herself for a brief, rare moment, Becky raised her eyes and a hand that went to Seth’s cheek. “It’s good that you’re not like *him*.”

Seth placed a gentle kiss in her palm. “Thank you for not giving up. There’s always hope.”

Becky’s demeanor snapped into cold desolation, hand dropping. “Don’t be confused, Seth. I’m destroyed. There’s only a gaping hole surrounded with endless rage. Killing him may have let me survive, but I’ll never trust another man as long as I live.”

Her face hardened more as she revealed another level of the adulthood she’d been forced into. “And that includes you, even

after all that you've done. He robbed me of something that I can't ever get back. Even I know that." Becky stumbled toward the tent. "I need a few. Go take a test or something."

Seth headed for the level tents, waving his team closer to her. She did trust him though, even if she didn't recognize it. He had to show her that she was wrong. He'd hoped the new friendship with Charlie and Jennifer might help, but he hadn't seen any signs of it yet.

Studying them from across the camp, Neil couldn't miss the connection, their spark. Seth was extremely protective. *Maybe that's what Becky needs now.*

Neil grimaced, tilting his hat forward to block the glare of the roaring center fire as he headed to the tests. *I certainly didn't put her safety first.*

Seth wasn't among the largest of Adrian's army, but those thin hips held up a man that was wiry and determined to succeed. Everyone had expected Seth to be a hot head when Adrian had brought him into the Eagles. That bright red hair and those glinting green eyes said he was just as wild as a first contact implied, but he'd settled in and found a place with his team. All of those men adored Seth now. If they had to accept Becky as his woman, Neil was sure they would agree.

*Unlike my team.* Neil tried not to be bitter. He understood they didn't have as close a bond because he wasn't an enterprising person like Seth or Kyle, or even Kenn. Neil liked his place where it was and didn't see the need to fix what wasn't broken.

After weeks of watching Seth guide Becky into her tent and hold her until she cried herself to sleep, Neil still hadn't made a final choice. The shadows had confirmed that Seth was mostly only offering comfort, but it implied they'd had at least one intimate moment to bond them. And no matter what date he came up with, Neil was pissed. He would keep watching until he was sure Seth's motives weren't like Rick's...or Kyle's.



“Welcome to the Cage. Let’s get started.”

The Eagles and camp members who were crowded around the testing area cheered in response to Adrian’s words.

Those about to fight grinned as if they couldn’t wait. For the first time, the camp was being allowed to view a level test. Over a hundred people watched, waiting for them to get everything set up. Of all those fighting tonight, Marc’s was the team everyone wanted to see—especially the Eagles. Marc had been working privately with his men for almost two months now, not letting them show what he was teaching. Even Angela was curious.

“Draw a name from the hat.” Adrian pitched his dog tags into the rear of the cage. “Trainer with the number three goes first.”

Seth held up his number three for them to see.

Some of Marc and Kevin’s team groaned. After Neil and Jeff, Seth was the most ruthless at kai.

Kevin was nearest to the hat. He swallowed a complaint when he pulled Seth’s name from it. He would go first.

“Come on, rookie.”

Kevin snorted, unbuckling his gun belt. “Suck my rookie.”

Loud laughter rang through the crowd as the men faced off.

Marc reached for the hat.

Everyone craned to see who he would face.

Marc flashed Greg’s name.

When the groaning and betting began, Marc gave Neil’s third in command a grin. “Ready?”

Greg sent a worried look around. “Oh shit. Who has my back?”

More laughs came as Adrian started the match. “Go!”

Marc watched the first minute or so and then found his interest lagging. His team was set to give Adrian what he wanted, but more than that, it was what all his men wanted. They loathed being so far down the Eagle chain.

Marc noticed there were more females in the front rows than there had been for any of the events he’d attended. It included Samantha, Tracy, Cynthia, and half a dozen camp women.

Those last six were a clique that called themselves the Sisters. More than a few Eagles eyed these females as they watched the now bloody match that they themselves would be facing in a few weeks. Most of them were pale, but a few seemed like they might be more interesting to watch than the current match. Kevin was good, but Seth was toying with him. Being levels ahead meant all the difference, and it was another sign of Adrian's genius. As long as the men continued to pass each level, the teams would be easy to manage because those on top would keep seniority over the years.

"That's a pass."

"4:41." Shawn recorded it.

"Number two, pick someone who drew your name." Adrian continued to sweep the camp, hoping they really were ready for the show he was about to give them.

Jeremy waved his paper. "Let me have Ray. If he gets by me in a fair fight, I'll support him and Dale."

A shocked silence fell over the area...then shouting echoed until Adrian began glaring at people.

Ray eagerly stepped forward. "Let's go."

Jeremy took up a defensive position in front of Adrian's dog tags. "If you lose, I'll be with the moral board when they make it illegal here. Men have to be able to defend this camp."

Ray's face tightened. "I can't wait to see you bleed. Then the rookies will know that *straight* blood looks just like ours."

Jeremy waved a hand. "Come on, then."

Adrian hit the timer. "Go!"

Everyone crowded closer to watch the surprise matchup.

Marc was the only one who didn't. Ray had come to him not long after Angie broke Zack's nose and asked for private lessons. Jeremy was set to take a dive for the dream, but it wouldn't be needed. Ray had caught on fast.

*Thud!*

Marc grinned as those watching went crazy.

"He's out!"

"Get the doctor!"

“Did you see that?”

Marc met Adrian’s eye over the mob, brow raised. *Happy with that?*

Adrian nodded back. *Yes.*

Ray handed Adrian his tags and then turned to face the surprised people watching the match. He narrowed in on the rookie Eagles. “I’ll hurt the next man who touches Dale against his will. I mean that.”

Ignoring the shouts and mutters, Ray went to Jeremy. “You okay, man?”

Jeremy was slowly sitting, blood dripping down his shirt. “No, you asshole. Help me up.”

Ray grinned, getting Jeremy to his feet.

The talking, laughing, muttering crowd quieted as Adrian approached the two men. He held out a small black patch with a gold number three on it. “That’s a pass.”

Ray slid it into his pocket, grinning wider. “Should I take him to the medical tent?”

Jeremy wanted to say no, but his nose was bleeding freely, stomach churning. “Damn it, Marc. I know you taught him that and didn’t warn me.”

“Yes.” Adrian turned toward the cage after motioning Dale to help them. “Who has number one?”

#### 4

All of Kevin’s team went first, by Adrian’s design Marc assumed, and except for Logan, they all passed. Logan went down with a fast hit from Greg and didn’t get back up until John arrived with smelling salts. He had passed all the other parts of the test, however. Kevin’s team stood in happy triumph.

Marc’s team was now gathered around him, waiting for their matches to start. “All set?”

The nervous males nodded uneasily at Marc’s question. Going through the tests in front of a few teams was hard. This? This was a circus, and *they* were the main act.

“Good.” Marc chose to wind them tighter. “Look at the front row.”

They did, and quickly saw what Marc had. The number of single females watching this test had been unusual before, but that had now doubled. A few of those groomed, perfumed, set-to-cause-doom females were here to see what they would face, but most of them were looking for a man.

Jax was the first to react the way Marc had hoped.

“Dibs on Leslie!”

Paul didn’t like that. “I already talked with her. Too late.”

“So have I,” Quinn informed them with a grin.

Marc waited, hoping she’d gotten her interview’s worth from his team. She should have since he’d arranged it.

“Uh, guys.”

They all turned to look at Shane.

“Not you too?”

Shane chuckled. Unlike the others, he was a brawler from birth and wasn’t the least bit scared. With nine brothers, he’d had to be able to fight. “Yeah. I think she’s more of a relief source than a mate.”

Jax frowned, but the other two gave low laughs.

“Is this a problem?” Marc knew Jax had a thing for Leslie; he’d set it up this way to draw out the rage he needed everyone to know his XO was hiding.

Jax shook his head, glaring. “No.”

“Maybe she’ll narrow it down to the one who does the best here.” Marc stepped by, leaving them with that thought.

Marc gave Leslie a small nod as he neared the cage and watched her deliver a generous smile to Shane. And then a second leer to Paul.

Jax nearly growled.

Marc was satisfied. He could now concentrate on his own match. He was set to face Greg, but Charlie had warned him Adrian had a surprise planned. Then the boy had refused to say more or think about anything except dog training classes

“Okay, let’s get the next sets started. Greg and unlucky victim

number one, come on down!”

Adrian loved to make his herd laugh, and he was in rare form today. Few heard the forced cheer.

On his right, Angela ignored it.

Paul had the first match. He followed orders, making eye contact with Leslie as he entered the cage. “Busy later?”

Leslie blushed furiously at the open attention, shaking her head.

Paul chuckled, getting set as Greg glowered at him. “You could be.”

Jax and the others shouted insults at that; the crowd continued to enjoy the show.

Marc had taught each of his team a special move, one that would disarm an off-guard opponent in less than a minute. They’d learned fast.

Paul used his leaping chest kick to daze Greg and then a vicious roundhouse to land the Eagle on his back. He grabbed the tags and gave them to Adrian while Greg tried to recover. Being a test overseer had some disadvantages.

“Pass. Next!”

Quinn jumped down from the stands and sauntered into the cage, not bothering to play his part in Marc’s game. Jax was already hot enough to injure whoever he faced, and Quinn had his eye on Cynthia. The reporter was incredibly sexy with a gun on her hip. If only she wasn’t so aloof. *Doesn’t she understand she’s been forgiven?*

Crone, the top fighter on Kyle’s team, growled. “Ready, boy?”

Quinn didn’t answer, busy getting set.

“Go!”

Marc watched Quinn run and heft Crone into the air for a quick slam against the bars and head butt that sent the bigger man to his knees. A fast knee to the chest, and Crone sagged, still trying to swing back.

The crowd roared for Quinn to finish him off, but when Marc shook his head, Quinn finished the test without delivering the expected final blow. He dropped the tags into Adrian’s satisfied

hand.

“Pass. Who’s next?”

Marc’s men stepped forward eagerly.

The overseeing Eagles began to eye them as if they had the plague.

Marc laughed, enjoying himself.

“I’ll go.” Daryl took up his position with a hard face.

Everyone thought Kyle’s team was unbeatable. Rumor had it they had taken a dive in every cage match that anyone had passed. Marc was determined to prove that popular belief wrong. Kyle’s team were the best overall—they’d had more experience than Marc’s men—but when it came to teaching men to fight, Marc was worlds better than Adrian or Kenn.

Shane got to the steps before Jax could and stripped his guns with a taunt. “Watch this, kid.”

Shane had ten years on the rest of Marc’s team, years that he liked to rub in when they were facing a challenge he knew how to handle. It made for an awkward group some days.

Marc gave Adrian a subtle confirmation, telling him this one needed a lesson.

Adrian caught Daryl’s eye. *Put him in his place.*

Despite liking Shane, Daryl shrugged. What the boss wanted, he got.

“Go!”

Shane lunged forward.

Daryl kicked, catching the cocky man just inside the knee. It was a brutal first blow.

The crowd gasped as Shane fell to the mat, clutching his leg and groaning.

Daryl delivered a fast heel kick to the other knee and leaned down to grab Shane’s hair as he tried to roll away.

Daryl loved to set up the hits before he gave them, but it backfired, giving Shane time to recover. He slammed one fist into Daryl’s ribs and the other into his cheek.

Daryl landed on the mat, blood running from his jaw.

When he pushed himself up, Shane had the dog tags and was

set to dart by.

Daryl spun into an extended punch and knocked Shane back into the far corner of the cage. The dog tags flew from his hand, sliding under the bars.

As Daryl moved determinedly toward the dazed man, all of those watching began to understand this wasn't about the pass or fail of a test. It was personal.

“Do you know everything?”

Shane shook his head, trying to stand. “No, I—”

“But you act like it.” Daryl delayed the physical blows for emotional ones. “Safe Haven has enough leaders. You're one of the crew. You got that?”

Understanding, and then embarrassment, fell into Shane's face. “Go to hell!”

Daryl rushed in and punched him in the mouth.

Shane clutched the wire to stay on his feet. As he gained his balance and looked up, Daryl swung again.

Shane fell, hands missing the bars. He dropped heavily to his ass.

“You get it now?”

“No!” Shane didn't try to stand up. “You can't break me!”

Greg moved forward.

*Thud!*

The crowd didn't like it, not the camp or the Eagles, but no one interfered. Shane really was an insufferable know-it-all.

“Please! Stop now.”

Daryl stepped back as Shane's hand came up in defense, glad to be able to. If he had to go much farther, it might hurt his own place. “Do you know everything, rookie?”

“I didn't know this was coming.” Shane glowered through the bruises and blood. He glared in Marc's direction and got a look in return that said he should have.

“You have a team. Act like it or lose it.” Daryl stepped out of the cage and moved to Adrian.

“Fail. Who's next?”

Adrian was clearly supporting Marc's choice to have Shane

handled this way.

Now Marc's team moved forward slower, not sure if they were in for what Shane had just gotten. All of them had flaws—they were men.

It would have surprised these nervous Eagles to know that the females in the front row were thinking the same thing. It wasn't only the men who knew and feared their shortcomings.

"I'm up," Marc called in satisfaction.

Silence fell as Greg moved into the cage.

Adrian waited until the two men were set. "I have an adjustment to this test."

Marc waited calmly. The only one in camp who might be able to give him a hard fight was Adrian himself.

"Some people in my army have backgrounds that give them the advantage here. That ends now." Adrian motioned Kenn toward the cage.

The crowd chattered eagerly. Eagles began to place bets.

When Adrian also motioned Neil that way, the crowd slowly quieted. He was kidding, right?

Standing nearby, Angela turned to glare at Adrian.

He didn't look at her. "Ready?"

Marc had gone into kill mode the second Kenn moved toward the cage. Seeing the best kai man in camp join Kenn made the lovesick wolfman vanish and the Marine appear for the camp's view for the first time. He could lose this one, but it wouldn't be a quick beating. He wouldn't stand for that. Challenged, Marc grinned. "That all you got?"

Adrian obligingly motioned a third man forward.

Marc cursed his mouth as Seth came through the surprised, uneasy crowd. *Shit!*

"What the hell are you doing?" Angela reacted angrily, like Marc had been doing over her. "Someone will get hurt."

"I'm putting his back against the wall so he'll give me what I need." Adrian gestured curtly. "Exactly what he just had me do to Shane."

Angela already knew Marc's pride wouldn't let him back



down. She clamped her lips shut to keep from protesting again. *Adrian had better be careful. Once that tiger is out of the cage, it might be awfully hard to get him back inside it.*

Adrian tossed his tags into the corner as the defenders took up shoulder-to-shoulder places. Marc would have to disable all four men to pass.

Marc turned to look at Adrian, starting to understand what the blond wanted. He didn't have time to figure out why as Adrian hit the stopwatch.

“Seven-minute limit. Go!”

Marc ran straight at them.

The four men drew back to swing, but Marc jumped at the last second, throwing himself to the right in a leaping lunge that gained him the side of the cage.

He quickly scrambled along the bars and leapt into the back corner over Seth's reacting shoulder.

Seth's swipe missed, sending the redhead sprawling.

Marc had the tags in hand in the first eight seconds, without a single blow taken. He slid them over his neck without a grin, though. He'd lost the advantage. The four men trapping him were no longer on defense.

Marc took out the most dangerous first. He lunged forward to hit Kenn in the jaw so hard that his arm clenched in a spasm from the recoil.

Kenn dropped like a ton of bricks, and then the other three were moving in and Marc had no choice but to react as the situation deserved.

A sidekick to the ribs took Greg to his knees.

A fast kidney punch sent Neil stumbling back to trip over Kenn's big body.

Seth knocked Marc against the side of the cage.

Marc ducked the next swing and caught the redhead in a bear hug, forcing him back. He dropped the man and did a half spin, sending his balled-up knee into Seth's stomach.

The man gasped for air, sliding down.

Marc felt a blow coming and threw up a hand to deflect Greg's

temple shot.

It glanced off, unbalancing them both.

Marc sprawled against the cage, an open target for Neil's hit. Blood flew again.

Fists rained down, the grunts and groans echoing across an unhappy crowd. No one liked seeing Marc treated this way either.

They didn't understand, but Adrian was confident in his plan. Marc wouldn't take much more before he got mean. Once that happened, another part of the dream would be safe. Marc was a strong hand for any leader to have, one who would be followed if his strength were known. After this, it would be.

Marc felt that dangerous side of him fighting to come out and tried to prevent it. He didn't want to hurt—

*Thud!*

Greg's blow rocked Marc's head against the cage. Blood splattered.

*Kick!*

Neil's spin sent pain flaring into Marc's arm as he blocked it. If they didn't back off, he wouldn't be able to—

*Wham!*

Seth delivered the line-crossing hit with a brutal chest shot.

Marc struggled to find air, fists clenching... But he'd been pushed too hard. Ice flooded his veins. His heart thumped in that familiar, nauseating rhythm of death.

The inner Marine stepped forward. *May I?*

Marc grunted at the next blow, no longer bothering to block. *Yes. Give him what he wants and then some.*

One of Marc's long hidden demons snapped a mental salute and took full control.

"You have to stop it now!" Angela was frantic. "He'll kill them!"

Adrian wasn't about to interfere. "He still has three minutes."

Marc didn't need them.

Adrian watched him lunge forward and deliver a nasty hit to Seth's windpipe. As the cop fell, face reddening, going dark from lack of air, Marc swung again.

*Thud!*

Neil slid to his knees at the forehead blow, not knocked out, but on the edge of it. His vision warbled sickeningly as he fought to stay alert.

Greg tripped over Kenn's body as Marc turned toward him, hoping to avoid it, but Marc was there to help him with an uppercut swung from the hip.

Greg joined the others—groaning, trying to recover, and clearly out of the match.

Three hits, three men down.

Marc stalked toward the cage door.

Except for breathing, silence echoed eerily across the crowd.

Behind Marc, Seth's gasps came in choked whispers, but at least he was getting air. He didn't care that his eyes were streaming tears or that his throat felt like it had been caught in a pepper grinder. It was just good to breathe at all.

John waited until Marc was clear of the cage before hurrying inside with Anne on his heels.

The crowd wasn't sure how to react as Marc moved toward Adrian with bloody fists and furious eyes. The Eagles were, though. Those closest rushed toward the two men.

Marc stopped with plenty of distance between them. "Are you satisfied now?"

"Yes." Adrian's tone was neutral. "Are you?"

"Not even close."

"Good." Adrian had expected it. "You'll handle the rest of the cage matches. Who's next?"

Angela didn't think it would work. That was her Marc, and his need to see Adrian bleeding was strong.

"Fine." Marc turned back toward the cage. "But you'll have to send in tomorrow's men, too. The few left on my team won't be enough to cool me down."

"Agreed. Pass. Who's next?"

Tension broken, the crowd began to cheer, and the Eagles joined them—those who weren't busy helping their fallen men or comforting suddenly terrified rookies.

Now, Marc's team absolutely dragged their feet, shooting each other worried glances. There were four of them left and no one was surprised when they all went together. Marc's reputation had just grown.

## 5

Angela waited until the tests were finished and the camp had gone. Only a few of the Eagles were left; the training tent was now back up around them. Marc was filling out paperwork, collecting old patches, setting up the next duty shifts, but all the while, his eyes flamed. He'd won the remaining matches. It made for slightly upset teammates who could now miss the next level with even one mistake during tomorrow night's shooting test, but it also made for a calm camp that was secure in their defenders. Jax had been the only one to even get a hit on Marc.

Angela frowned at the injuries. She wasn't allowed to heal him, but she wanted to.

Angela saw the last Eagle duck out of the tent and moved toward Marc, feeling his tension, his anger and triumph. Both were on his mind, but the need to kill hadn't been satisfied.

"I'm fine."

His coldness stopped her from touching him, the fear she still held of men rearing up. It would be nothing for Marc to hurt her, she knew that now. All the shots she'd ever gotten in on him were nothing compared to a single blow from his fist.

"I would never do that."

Angela relaxed her stiff body language in guilty surprise. He was so much more observant this way. Not that he'd slacked off before, but now, without even looking at her, he knew she was scared.

"It takes a little time to cool down," Marc tried to explain, still fighting the occasional shudder of rage.

Angela wanted to offer comfort but seeing him tonight had sent her into places she'd hoped not to visit again.

"Angie?"

It was odd, to be so full of courage one minute and lacking a spine the next. She found her tongue. “I’ll be in the...our tent.”

Angela forgot the golden rule, spinning for the flap.

Instinct triggered by the movement, Marc lunged.

Angela found herself in his big arms before she could suck in the air to shout with.

Marc held her tightly against him, scenting her. He’d never wanted anything more.

The fear in her face and those beautiful eyes brought him back. Marc slowly lowered her feet to the ground. He gently adjusted her sweater over her rigid shoulder. “Give me a few.”

Angela was having a battle of her own. She could fight, shoot, think, run, but when it came to men... “I’ll wait with you.”

Marc wasn’t back in control yet and shook his head. “We’ll end up doing a repeat of Nebraska, baby cakes.” Those flaming eyes dropped to her chest. “Or more.”

Angela swallowed. *Am I ready for it?*

“No. Not like this.”

Marc’s tone forbade a moment like that out of sympathy or duty, and she understood. That wouldn’t be enough for her, either, if the situation were reversed.

Marc’s hot eyes never left her face. What he wouldn’t give to be allowed to take her!

Catching the thought, Angela trembled, but not all from fear. If she knew their moment in Nebraska was all they would repeat, she wasn’t against it. The revelation was enough to make her smile.

Marc stared at the mouth he craved, dreamed about. Some night he would kiss those lips as he slid into her warm, willing body. Marc shuddered. “You. Go. Now.”

Angela chuckled at the wording, but Marc wasn’t kidding. “Angie.”

She looked up, face a mix of courage and terror. “Some fears should be conquered head-on.”

Marc hadn’t expected that but realized he should have. Hadn’t she handled every challenge that way? Marc’s eyes went over her

lips again, wanting to kiss her, to go on and give her what she was asking for. “It’s too soon.”

He watched his hand go out to touch her. She kept that long hair up now, usually in a thick ponytail, and she had no idea how sexy she looked with it that way. It exposed a nape he longed to stroke, to taste.

Desire, thick and welcome, flooded Angela as he traced her cheek and slid his warm hand along her jaw.

Angela tried to relax. “Why not tell me what you had in mind and I’ll make the choice?”

Lust—to feel her in the throes of a pleasure he’d delivered—swept through Marc. “Better to show you.”

“Clothes?” she asked nervously.

Marc tightened his control at the images that sent flipping through his mind. “On.”

Scared, Angela started to shake her head, and Marc’s heart protested. He leaned in and kissed her.

Angela was caught in flashes of the past, of their stolen moments together. Things hadn’t begun crossing the line until she was older, but this heat, this magic between them, had always been there.

Heavy with need, Marc deepened the kiss, and felt her arms go around his neck. His body responded instantly, thrusting against her.

Angela was helpless to keep from arching back.

Marc paused for an instant. He hadn’t thought she was ready for more, but that one little reaction said differently. The Marine inside wouldn’t let him stop after that realization.

Marc kissed her again, softer, but more intently this time as he searched for her pleasure triggers. Some men rushed through these moments for that quick, fleeting satisfaction, but not Marc. He enjoyed a woman—all of her—and learning what she liked always increased his own satisfaction. Women’s libbers might have called it pride, or an ego fix, but Marc was determined that what his woman got out of it would always be good enough to keep her coming back.

“Okay.” Marc’s timbre lowered into that deep rumble that stunned the camp’s women when he used it on them. “I want to do what we did the first night we snuck out to the clubhouse.”

Angela was a bit dazed by how much desire he was pulling with only a few words and a kiss. *Is it intentional?*

“Yes.” Marc stared at her in blatant want. “Lean against the wall, close your eyes.”

Liquid heat and nervous tension flooded Angela as Marc eased her back without waiting for a response.

“Let me make you feel good, baby.”

Angela couldn’t fight that desire laden request. It said these chills running along her skin would become shudders of pleasure if she let him do what he wanted.

She leaned against the tent wall, trapped between it and him. She slammed her lids shut. *He won’t hurt me.*

Marc slipped out of his coat, understanding she was on the edge of calling it off.

Angela didn’t want to be tense, but it wasn’t something she could help. At moments like this, she’d always been scared.

Marc was in his own mind and missed the reluctant surrender for the feel of rubbing against her. He knew she wasn’t relaxed, but he wasn’t sure if he could stop without at least touching her.

Marc slid a finger between her legs.

Angela stiffened as lust, fiery and strong, shot through her stomach. “Mmm!”

Marc throbbed. “Yeah, me too.” He pushed gently.

Angela forgot to be tense as desire reminded her it had been months since she’d done this for herself—long before the final slaver battle.

Starting to sweat, Marc carefully repeated the exact movement, making her hips arch.

Angela shivered as he stroked her through the jeans, breasts tingling, scalding heat flowing.

Marc rubbed against her, sliding into that hazy place where satisfaction was what mattered. He felt her breathing roughen, hips shifting restlessly. He slid his lips along her jaw, moving

closer to rock gently against her thigh. As he did, he thrust inward again with his finger, harder than before.

“Oooo...”

Need, thick and demanding, shoved into Marc’s mind. *Take her!*

Marc locked down on his lust, free hand coming up to slide along her hip. He gently lifted the edge of her shirt and stroked his thumb across that satin skin as he slowly withdrew his finger.

Angela arched, lost.

Marc let his hand settle over her breast as he thrust forward. They both groaned.

He leaned back to look at her. “I want to touch.”

Angela knew what that meant, but with him thrusting his finger against her like that, it was hard to stand, let alone think.

When she didn’t answer, Marc drew in a breath and rubbed her nipple as he tugged her zipper down.

Beautiful bare skin flashed in the lantern light, and Marc felt a bit of his control snap off. He wanted to be naked, rutting and spewing inside that body.

“Wait. We’re in the training tent. What if someone—”

Marc dropped his mouth back to hers and sent his hand to her other breast, rubbing that rocky tip in hard circles.

“Mmmm...”

Her moan against his lips was enough to make Marc have to count to ten in his mind. His hands didn’t pause, though. He would have a little of what he’d been denying himself.

Angela shivered at the cool air as the buttons on her shirt began to pop open.

Marc sensed the withdraw coming. To counter it, he sent both hands to her nipples and pinched lightly as he moved between her legs. Hard enough to hammer nails, he thrust forward as she arched, giving them both an incredible spark of lust.

In the clubhouse that night, he’d done much the same, though the inside of his jeans had been coated more than once by the time they were finished. This time, Marc put his hand inside her pants and touched that slick pussy.



Angela cried out, grip on him tightening.

Marc throbbed at the feel of her hands in his hair, lips moving against his neck in hot lust. He dipped his head and brought his finger up, tasting her.

*Sweet!* Marc shuddered. His hand went back to her body, swirling his finger over that sticky nub.

Angela stiffened, muscles clamping down. “That’s so good!” She groaned against his cheek, hands tangled in the silken hair she’d dreamed of for so long. When he used his knee to nudge her legs open farther, she trembled, no longer caring about who might see them.

Marc’s rough breathing sent chills over her as he thrust, pinched, and continued to use that amazing timbre on her. “Next time, I want to kiss you...*here.*”

He squeezed as he tugged and Angela exploded, nails ripping into his shoulder. “Oh, Marc!”

Marc ripped his jeans open and positioned them, eager to steal a few seconds for himself. He thrust against her slick heat, drawing another arch and moan when he hit that pulsing nub. She was so wet!

*One tilt and thrust, buddy boy,* the Marine inside reminded him ruthlessly. *A shift into heaven.*

*But only once,* his heart protested. *She’ll never let us get this close again.*

She wasn’t a camp whore. He couldn’t make the mistake of treating her like one. And that wasn’t nearly enough for Marc, anyway. He reluctantly stepped back. *Need time alone—now!*

Angela’s hands slowly left his shoulders, surprising him when they kept going down to his tense forearms.

“Do it while I’m here to watch.”

Marc forgot how to breathe. If he didn’t get a release right now, she was in danger or his vow of fidelity was. A man could only take so much.

The thought of Marc using a camp whore to keep from scaring her or being a little rough had Angela’s womanly instincts protesting. She would rather he threw her down and had his way

than to send him into someone else's arms, for any length of time. "Come on."

*Damn.* He'd been counting on her leaving now. Didn't she understand that he was—

Angela took his wrist and moved it to where it was needed, meaning to let go.

Marc watched his big paw wrap around himself as if he was alone, trapping her hand. Flames shot into his groin.

Angela watched in fascination as Marc began to stroke, seeing how his glowing blue eyes traveled over her lips, her hair, the skin he could see. Still pulsing, she slowly opened her shirt with her free hand.

It was what she'd done to end their first night together at the clubhouse, and Marc shattered. He yanked her against him, one big hand going to the small of her back to keep her in place, the other jerking furiously between them until he was grunting in thick satisfaction with every stroke.

Angela felt his pleasure. His lust was fierce, shooting through her in dizzying waves. She helped things along. She shifted the fingers under his.

The iron bar in their grip swelled, jumping eagerly at her attention.

"Again!" Marc begged against her mouth, breathing coming in short bursts.

Angela squeezed as he jerked.

Marc groaned hoarsely. "Yeah, baby!"

Angela repeated the movement, delighting in the power she held over his body. She wanted to play a bit, but the witch sent a quick warning. *If you stop, he won't.*

Angela pressed a slow kiss to Marc's sweaty jaw and shifted her fingers again. "Love you, Marc."

"Uh! I...grrrrr!"

His grip tightened and he shoved forward, sliding between her damp thighs. When his hand moved, going to her hip, Angela spread her legs. If this was what he needed... She braced.

Marc grabbed her thighs, forcing them closed as he exploded.

Angela held him as he shuddered, absorbing the energy. Even at the most out-of-control moment for a man, Marc had kept her safe, but more than that, she'd been braced to take whatever he needed. She hadn't frozen or even flinched. *Though there wasn't a lot of time*, she thought with a small smile. It broke another barrier around her heart. She was healing—sexually—and she had Marc to thank for it.

Breathing mostly back to normal, Angela leaned her head against the canvas. “When can we do this again?”

Winded and amazed that she wasn't filled with his seed, Marc let go of her legs and slid to his knees. “Two...minutes. Need fluids.”

Angela giggled. Being his woman was wonderful.

Outside, most of those who saw the shadows went on about their business or sought comfort where they could find it, but not all of them.

Adrian moved through the darkness toward the firing range instead of the shadows where eager relief sources waited. *Jack Daniels and jealousy are my companions tonight.*

Chapter Eleven BK3  
**Twice The Men**  
June 2<sup>nd</sup>

1

**“Remember to pivot on three and look. If you don’t look, you can’t pass. Go!”**

Aware that the routine would be a part of their first level test, Cynthia got into the rhythm, ducking and remembering to look as she held her body under rigid control.

The rookies rolled together across the training area that had been cleared for this, nine souls working together to cover the targets coming at them from a dozen angles.

Cynthia spun awkwardly and caught herself in time to recover. She was there to put a steadying hand on Samantha’s arm as she also spun wrong. They dropped into their places, attention going overhead. They drew as they rolled, dry firing at targets to their right.

Sweating, Cynthia grunted heavily as she spun again, starting the routine over, and heard Samantha echo the sound. This was the hardest thing the males had tried to teach them so far, this teamwork. She wasn’t the only one struggling with it.

“Take five.”

The group of Eagles dropped to the floor in relief at Doug’s call. It was the tenth time they’d run it in two hours, and though it was getting better, it still needed a lot of work.

Now that they’d all been evaluated by the senior men, Cynthia had been put with Kevin, who’d already been training her on most of her Eagle duties. Samantha was still with Daryl. Leslie was XO training with Jeremy, a fact that Jax and Samantha were upset over without being able to express why.

Cynthia moved toward their head trainer for the day. “Can I

ask you something?”

Kyle shrugged, clearly not in the mood to be here. “At your own risk.”

“Why didn’t you ever bust me?” Cynthia leaned against the tent wall. “I know you saw me tracking Adrian plenty of times.”

Kyle didn’t bother with the expected sneer. He didn’t hate her anymore. “We needed you busy. You chose the activity, but we made sure you saw what we wanted you to.”

Not a bit hurt, Cynthia fired her next question. “Are you going to claim Jennifer publicly?”

Kyle’s expression tightened, mind going straight to the pregnant girl he’d left in the chair with a heating pad for her back. “None of your business.”

“That’s interesting.”

Kyle smothered a growl, waiting for the next dig. Hate her still or not, there was little love between him and the reporter.

“If you wait much longer, you might lose your place.” Cynthia felt he needed to know. “Action is about to be taken.”

Kyle turned to snarl and found himself alone along the tent wall. Was it time for the next step? He’d been waiting, but inside, it was a done deal.

Coughing, Daryl slid into Cynthia’s spot. He hated the smell of the perfume Cynthia wore. *Damn flowers*. “Word says you can expect a visit from the den mothers.”

Kyle stiffened. “And a call to the moral board after that?”

Daryl shrugged. “If you don’t obey what they decide, yes. They plan to check on her tonight.”

“They what?!”

Daryl took a step back. “They always check on the new females, Kyle. You know that.”

Kyle cursed, storming from the tent in a show of Italian temper the camp rarely saw.

He climbed the steps to the new female shower camper a minute later, with no thought to the rules. He caught Hilda and Peggy mid undress.

“I need to see you!”

Peggy, not flustered by most men like the younger females were, had an idea what had brought him here and nodded. "Okay. We'll wash, you talk."

Hilda's mouth dropped open as Peggy removed her shirt, exposing her bra and a waist that was still slender.

Kyle blinked. "Put your clothes on."

"Wait until we're done."

Kyle crossed his arms over his chest. "No." He didn't keep his eyes on the molding stall doors or the foggy windows that were screwed shut to keep out the draft and curious teenage boys. He leaned against the door that was now being knocked on by Doug, the guard on the campers.

"Is everything okay?"

"Go away! We're all full here!" Kyle slapped the door as Peggy stepped into the stall and closed the half door.

"What the hell, Kyle?" Doug's bewildered voice faded.

"I want you to support me and Jennifer."

Neither woman responded with anything more than frowns.

Kyle's tenor rose. "And, stay away from her!"

"You're not exempt from the rules." Peggy was carrying a grudge against any male who wanted an underage girl. "And doing this isn't helping your cause."

"Depends on what we can work out."

Hilda's gaze flew to his in denial.

Kyle scoffed. "Tell me there isn't anything you two want, and I'll call you both liars."

Again, neither woman spoke.

"What is this?" Kyle groaned. "A guessing game? Tell me what you need!"

Now that he'd said the right word, Peggy grinned, a harsh smile befitting a sly female determined to have her way. "When the time comes, support Angela, not Marc or Kenn. Do that, and you can have *any* willing female in this camp."

"So long as there's no physical contact until legal age," Hilda added.

It took Kyle a minute. *What...who...* A bit stunned, he

uncrossed his arms. “And they say men are ruthless!”

“Yes, but we’re also survivors, Mr. Reece.” Peggy sneered bitterly. “Angela will make sure we stay that way.”

Kyle opened the door. “I’ll get back to you. Until then, leave us both alone.” He slammed the door, ignoring Doug and the other scowling guards the big man had called over.

Kyle paused on the landing, caught in a haze of longing as Jennifer tilted her chin up to catch the sun’s warm rays. She and Dog were walking by, ignoring everyone around them to enjoy the beautiful day. Kyle forgot how to breathe.

Jennifer felt the heat, the strong, protective presence that was Kyle, and started searching. She found him nearby and gave a small wave, detouring.

Kyle held up a hand, telling her to wait.

He slid back inside the shower camper and gave Peggy’s now naked chest an appreciative leer. “Nice, Ms. Kelly!”

He enjoyed their startled expressions for a moment, letting the tension build. As they both started to speak, Kyle delivered scorn and surrender. “You’re conspiring against Adrian. You’ve offered a deal for a teenage camp member, to get what you want.” Kyle dropped his eyes in respect. “And it worked. Give us your approval and so will I, *if* the time comes.”

Hilda gestured. “It’s the right choice—unlike the one you’ve made with that little girl.”

“Don’t think you can push me any farther than this, ladies.” Kyle’s demeanor became dark and dangerous. “You have no idea how big of a mistake that would be.”

Peggy studied him, this big killer with a bleeding heart showing for everyone to judge. She relented reluctantly. “Walk the line we’ve set, and you’ll have what you want.”

Kyle understood the word choice, and now flung it back at her. “*Need*, Ms. Kelly. If I only wanted her, I would have made a different deal, and it wouldn’t be with you!”

Peggy and Hilda exchanged satisfied nods as Kyle left. He would love Jennifer, and their plans would have the support of the top Eagle in camp.

The two females looked up in surprise when the camper door opened again.

Doug limped inside, hand up to cover his view. “Everyone okay in here?”

Hilda opened her mouth to answer.

Peggy stopped her with a quick motion.

Understanding what would happen, Hilda quietly grabbed her towel. She’d thought Peggy had a spark for the big Irishman but hadn’t been positive.

Doug cleared his throat, not hearing anything except running water. *What did Kyle do?* “Hello? Hilda? Ms. Peggy?”

Steadily running showers and silence.

After the way Kyle had stormed in and blocked the door, then stomped away without answering him, Doug knew he had to look. He slowly lowered his hand, braced to see anything.

Anything, but beautiful breasts being lovingly washed without a thought for his shock.

“Son of a...”

Peggy snickered, making sure he was getting her best angles. Age hadn’t been unkind to her, but it hadn’t been exactly generous either. “We’re fine, Doug. Thank you for coming to make sure.”

Hilda didn’t approve of the way Peggy was letting him know she was interested, but it was still amusing to see Doug’s jaw drop and his eyes grow dark. Hilda hid a grin.

The big man nodded, gaze glued to Peggy’s chest. In the halls below, shifting began. “Yeah, um, it’s my...” Doug trailed off, aware that he was staring, but that tone! It said if they were alone, more than looking might be allowed!

Peggy slid into the water, studying him from under lowered lashes as his eyes glowed like the bonfire. She was enjoying the rush. “Was there anything else you wanted...*needed*, maybe?”

“Aye!” It was almost a growl. Doug tried to snap out of it. “I mean, no! I’ll go now.”

He didn’t budge.

Peggy thought of her late husband, of the way he’d been so big and quiet. Was it okay that she liked the same things in Doug,



was drawn to him because of it? She hated his dreads, though. They would be the first thing to go.

Peggy swept his faded red vest and army jacket, seeing how raggedy both were becoming after so many hand washings. *Bet there's a story attached to them. Other than just a symbol of his time in another war zone.*

Hilda stayed quiet, waiting for the kind giant to be gone so she could dress. She had enough to do with the things Adrian had her working on. She didn't need to add man trouble to it. She was perfectly happy being Safe Haven's top den mother, thank you very much.

Peggy arched a sexy shoulder at Doug as she rinsed. "It would probably be best if you left now."

Doug forced his feet to leave. *What did I come in here for?*

Behind him, the hens cackled.

## 2

Adrian slowed down as he neared the small, neat tent Tonya had put up herself. Right in the center of the female canvas area, she wasn't able to get away with anything. Her convertible had been traded in for a sturdy truck, the fake accent was gone, and that shorn hair had drawn attention. The camp knew what Kenn was trying to do, and to the surprise of the Eagles, people were helping her. When Tonya went against an unspoken rule, camp women took the time to correct her. It wasn't always gentle, but it was effective—mostly because she was listening. Tonya's reform was a learning experience.

*"Do I have to?"*

*"No."*

*"What happens if I don't?"*

*"You'll lose progress and have more work to do later. Up to you."*

Kenn didn't sound like he was being hard assed, and Adrian changed directions; sure they were discussing how she was running the pharmacy. Kenn's transgressions were ones to rival

Tonya's. It was uplifting to have them both trying so hard.

Kenn was handling his outcast status well, not even voicing a protest at being forced out of the level tests as an instructor. The Eagles had done it intentionally, causing double pain. Kenn wasn't really one of them and they were making sure he knew it.

Adrian headed for the parking area, confident that Kenn would join him soon. This was the first time he had sent so many teams out of camp all at once, and he wouldn't be able to relax until they returned. Kenn would keep him busy, like he was doing for the grief over Lexa and Connie.

Adrian winced, distracted himself with the sight of Cynthia and Matt awkwardly setting up a large tent to work in. The hand cranked machine to print her paper was already waiting in a crate for her use. The reporter didn't know it, but she would help push these people into another level of cooperation and manipulation. *If it's in the paper, it must be true. Everyone knows that.*

Marc was aware of Angie watching with open longing as he and the others prepared to leave. Over half the bruised Eagles were going, but not her. She hadn't been cleared for full duty yet.

"You should take her along as your XO." Adrian came up next to him. "We both know that's all she wants."

Marc stared at Adrian for a long moment before speaking his mind. After last night, he was in control with Angie, but with other males? Not so much. "I don't need your help to make her happy."

Adrian wasn't about to argue that point. "Shall I surprise her with it, then, and be slapped by the heat of her smile while you watch?"

Trapped into accepting the gift, Marc felt that inner male wanting to lunge out and draw more blood. "Be careful. I won't stand for much interference."

"Understood." Adrian grunted, pushing away the need to respond in kind. "Now go tell her, so she'll have time to get the new vest setup."

Distracted, Marc spun that way, frowning. *Why wasn't she already given one?*

Adrian motioned to the other team leaders and got nods in return. They were set. He pushed the button on his barely working radio. Since the sinkhole, well over half of their communication devices were useless. “Hurry home.”

Headlights flashed in comforting response.

### 3

Wichita appeared completely abandoned as the four teams approached. That dark city skyline was haunting; a somber mood settled over the Eagles. No one envied the men sent to gather supplies from that menacing mausoleum. It looked like a place where death still lurked, eagerly waiting for those who would trespass.

As they reach the city, the four teams split up. They all had a destination, a much-needed goal, and a long day ahead of them. Due to the other half of the level tests being tonight, some of the returning teams would have to relieve those who were standing watch while they were gone. Even with the three new rookie teams being formed, they still only had eighty-seven Eagles.

Three missions would take place inside those dark halls and rotting buildings. The fourth, Neil’s team, was on a search and rescue for the trader hostages just outside the city limits. Zack’s team would secure a load of fuel—jet and normal—if they were lucky. From the low squat of the tires on some of the heavy planes and trucks that the recon scouts had seen lined up around undamaged terminals, the odds were good. Unless they built vehicles that ran on something else, survivors were either stuck using what was left from the war, or just plain stuck wherever their luck ran out. Adrian was determined to get his camp to the mountains. If they found enough fuel today, he could stop worrying about it.

The second mission was headed to the Reddi Industries Plant to find water. Samantha’s idea was a sound one. The chance that there had been water cleaning taking place when the war came was good. It stood to reason that if it hadn’t been looted already, the

water would still be there, waiting to be drained into Safe Haven's trucks. If there wasn't any water in the clean tank, they had instructions to try hooking up a power source and following the codes and specs they could find. Water was desperately needed. Seth and his men had charge of that mission, with Jeremy along as Samantha's personal guard.

The third team—Angela and Marc, surrounded by his crew and a team of rookies—was going to the Westlink Branch of the Wichita Public Library to bring back medical and gardening books. Among their more pressing needs, Adrian had them gathering information on projects that would take a while to put in place, like solar panels to absorb the energy from their truck tops. Driving or parked, they would be collecting power and eventually become self-sufficient.

When finished, all teams were supposed to report to the treatment plant and either help with gathering and cleaning water or supply protection for the trip back to camp. All four teams would travel together to provide less opportunity for anyone hoping to take whatever they gathered. It was a lot of risks, a lot of time for something to go horribly wrong. All of them were aware of it.

“This is creepy.”

Zack agreed with Allan's observation. They were slowly rolling through the suburb outside the airport. The sense of emptiness was everywhere.

“Do you think the whole city is this way?”

Allan meant the weather-abused, but otherwise undamaged neighborhood around them. Some of the homes still had cars parked neatly in weedy driveways and sprinklers set up. If not for the mildewing Christmas decorations and grass growing through the pavement, it could have been before the war. The effect was enough to make stomachs tighten with longing, while hearts clenched in grief. Their generation would probably never know this lifestyle again.

Lee frowned. “What were the numbers for?”

Zack peered through the window, studying the painted and carved numbers that were on most of the front doors. “Number of dead, I guess.”

“What about the letters after them?”

The trucker stared, noticing that A and S were the only letters. Some of the numbers were low, four and five the most common, but a good deal of them were over fifteen.

The Eagles’ dismay changed to horror as they rounded the next block. On these doors and windows, below the numbers and that one letter, were silent screams.

21 S

*No food*

*Please help us!*

18A

*Starving!*

39 S

*Murders! Need law!*

11S

*Will trade bullets for food.*

“Alive...” Allan moaned, horrified. “They were survivors!”

“This isn’t good.” Lee lowered the camera. They needed the fuel from the airport, but not the depression that would come after this trip’s pictures were shown to Adrian.

5S

*Need medicine!*

8S

*Missing! Ashley Simmons*

*Black hair, 5’3*

*Needs medication!*

Zack increased their speed so that reading the notes was harder. In the UPV behind them, those pushing the buttons captured another of the tragic effects of the war. This city had clearly tried to keep itself together and succeeded in avoiding the looting and arson that most places had dealt with, but it hadn't mattered. They'd gotten no help. The smell was identifiable now. It was the dead, their rotting slowed by the dampness of both nearby rivers and barricaded basements. Adrian wouldn't sleep for days after he viewed these pictures.

Behind the airport, the city of Wichita groaned and creaked in neglected decline, lower areas now marshy swamps only fit for reptiles. In them, pythons had already begun to spawn unchecked. Moving up from the south in search of food, these snakes took over each waterway as they progressed, leaving eggs.

"This is a Safe Haven mission team. We are a convoy of Red Cross survivors picking up refugees. Is anyone out there?" Allan had to try.

"No way, man. It's been six months."

"Hello? This is Safe Haven. Can anyone hear me?"

Zack didn't protest again. If it comforted Allan to try, what would it hurt? They were packing enough heat to take over a country, and this place was a ghost town—

"Help us!"

The shout was faint but clear over all the radios on their channel.

"We're out, but they're coming!"

They waited only a few seconds before Neil's ecstatic voice came over the radio.

"Help is on the way! Keep transmitting if you can."

Finding the hostages at the boarding school would make up for what they were seeing. Allan was glad the kids the traders had tried to sell to Safe Haven were here and alive. There was no mistaking the youth in those shouts, but the thought of going into a ghost town still wasn't sitting well with him. Allan didn't consider himself superstitious, but then, he hadn't considered

himself a hired killer, and yet, that's exactly what he'd become. Adrian had bought his loyalty with confidence and power. Allan was grateful he'd had the good sense to agree.

Zack spotted the grungy planes and trucks lined up across from them and steered that way. The abandoned feeling was prevalent, but the Eagle didn't let his guard down as he scanned the windows and doors of the terminal. There was no damage other than nature, no signs that anyone had been here since the war. Even to hardened men, it was eerie.

Zack felt his training kick into gear as he pulled the ugly green Bronco to a stop in front of the first fuel truck. "Let's get it done and get home."

Eagles spilled out.

Zack joined them with the mantle of leadership firmly in hand. He'd gone from a driver to a leader. The feeling was everything he had hoped it would be while laboring under Kenn. *I'll never go back.*

#### 4

In the library parking lot, the third mission team quickly secured the area, noticing signs of life, both good and bad.

Angela's hand slid to the Python that now had a place on her left side. She wasn't picking anything up. Instead of the past fear and urge to hide, she advanced eagerly when Marc motioned everyone out.

Eyeing the boot shaped bruise on Marc's forearm, Angela followed the team. He'd fared better than most of the others in the cage when it came to marks, but it bothered her to see him wince as he stepped from their vehicle. He'd accepted the Advil and refused the stronger painkiller, though she knew he was extremely sore. That was the condition of half the mission teams, but it wasn't a hindrance. The bruises and wounds were their badges of honor. She understood now because she had her own.

The library stank.

It was bad enough to make Eagles gag as they moved through the dusty bookshelves, clearing each room and level. As they headed downstairs, the stench grew worse.

Marc held them just above the bottom floor, using his hands to keep from talking and having to use his nose to breathe. *We go on three and brace. Smells like dead.*

Except, Angela thought it was more like mildew and feces. Either way, it was improbable there were survivors.

*One... Two... Go!*

The first team moved down the stairs at a run, with Angela and the rookies behind them. She ran down the stairs, lights glaring from all directions as she hit the carpeted bottom and found herself listening to the faint sound of something that they were all familiar with. Barking dogs might mean they'd been wrong to assume there were no survivors here.

Marc waved Angela's team back as he went to the only door into the single room.

Following his training, they put her in the middle of their tight circle.

Marc flashed a signal, stomach rolling as breathing through his mouth no longer kept out that sickening odor. *Ready?*

Enough positive motions between gags made him yank the door open. Marc lifted his gun as shadows darted for their legs.

"Hold your fire!" Marc choked out as the rot hit him square in the nose and twisted him into a gagging, puking machine that only let up when he made it back outside and covered his head with his jacket. *Bodies would have been easier on me. I was ready for that.*



# My Baby!

## 1

**A**ngela handed out the medical salve from her bag, motioning for Jax, who was grimacing under that split lip, to follow Marc.

The basement was alive with growling, wiggling, barking shadows the Eagles carefully waded through as they hung lanterns from the rafters. The sound of vomiting was almost as loud as the dogs. Angela was grateful for her cast-iron stomach.

The library team had found a large basement full of dogs. Thanks to bags of food and an intentionally dug watering ditch they traced to a nearby creek, a surprising number of the animals were still alive. Angela hadn't picked it up because they weren't a threat.

Angela watched the Eagles play with a few of the calmer dogs they'd culled from the stench-ridden room. The animals were shivering and shaking with joy, pissing all over the place, and drawing loud chuckles from these hard men. Angela found herself absorbing the good moment. She'd been braced for another awful city. It was wonderful to have this instead. Even the deaths of the weaker dogs couldn't dull it for her. She often forgot what it had been like to live in a calm world that delivered good things. Since the war, she always expected the worst. Wichita would last in her heart for a while as a balm. "They tried to save their pets."

Quinn nodded, ears hurting and stomach twisting violently. He gently nudged his team leader's woman toward the stairs, sure that viewing the small corpses wouldn't help her sleep much more than human ones would have. "Let's get the rest of what we came for, gentlemen. Marc says we'll take the mutts with us."

The others got to their feet.

Angela went upstairs to supervise there when Quinn motioned her to. It had been a good trip for them. She hoped the others were doing as well.

## 2

*Bang! bang!*

“I’m pinned!” Shawn ducked behind a wide tree with a trim of dead roses.

Neil fired at the truck trying to leave, hitting a windshield.

The glass fractured.

He fired again.

The window shattered this time; the driver jerked at the impact.

The prison transport truck swerved to the left and ran into a burnt security car by the gate. The impact sent the truck flipping into the brick wall, throwing debris in all directions.

Smoke and steam rolled upward as Neil ran toward the traders who fled from the transport wagon. He didn’t demand surrender. That world was gone.

No longer pinned down, Shawn joined Neil in the chase.

“There’s another one!” Greg tried to get closer through the sporadic return fire from the traders. They’d already disabled two jeeps of armed riders.

Neil and Shawn spun around to see a third jeep flying toward them, guns on the front glinting in the dim sun.

“Take cover!” Neil and Shawn dove behind the brick divider next to the gate.

*Wack! Wack! Wack! Wack!*

A fourth jeep flew up the grassy hill behind them.

*Trapped!* The traders had been prepared. Neil hit his emergency radio as he dumped his spent rounds. “We need backup! Automatic weapons, five mobile targets!”

Only the mission teams inside the city were close enough to hear through the limited radios.

“Half hour,” Zack responded first, grimacing at the fuel odor on his hands.

Marc’s team was deep into loading the dogs and books. “Fifteen.”

“On the way!” Seth’s voice was eager. “Where?”

*Wack! Wack! Wack!*

Greg fired from nearby, hoping to hit any of the four vehicles now bunched together as they came in for a sweep.

*Kablammm!*

Two trucks exploded with the grenade. The other vehicles split up, realizing their mistake.

Out of grenades, Neil keyed the radio and ducked lower as debris flew over the battlefield. “Just follow the noise.”

### 3

Jeremy grabbed Samantha’s arm and shoved her toward the tanker. “Ride back to camp with the water.”

Sam jerked away, drawn to the sound of the explosions. They weren’t far from Neil and that was where she wanted to be. “I’m going.”

Jeremy didn’t have time to argue. He shoved her toward his ride instead. “You follow orders, or I’ll tell Adrian!”

Samantha smirked, sliding into the passenger seat of his sporty white Jeepster. If he really thought that would keep her in line, he was crazy.

Jeremy felt the sense of dread he’d experienced at the rest stop and made a quick choice she would hate. He didn’t want to deny Samantha the opportunity to feel like an Eagle, but this was a gunfight and she wasn’t ready.

Samantha didn’t speak until the battle scene came into view, heart thumping at the sight of the armed jeeps and trucks circling the pinned down team at the entrance to the boarding school.

She watched as Seth arrived and drove behind a tall brick wall that lined this gated community. “What should I do?”

Jeremy stopped well behind Seth's team, killing the engine. "Stay here."

Sam scowled, shaking her head. "I'm good with a gun. I can—"

"No time to argue, baby." Jeremy grabbed her wrist with one hand and his cuffs with the other.

"Hey! No, don't!"

Jeremy snapped the metal into place and shoved it over the steering wheel before she recovered from the surprise.

*Click!*

"You son of a..."

Jeremy quickly got out of range of her fury, barely missing being kicked in the balls.

"I'll make you pay for this!" Samantha was so pissed, she was crying. *How dare he do this to me after Rick did it!*

Jeremy slammed the door in her face and went to join Seth's team. They would hit hard and quick, and he wouldn't have to worry about Samantha.

Samantha began digging in her pocket with her free hand the second the door closed. After being held this way by Rick while he hurt Becky, she'd sworn she would never be in this position again.

Sam clutched the hairpin in a tight grip and started working it around in the hole.

Gunfire echoed as she struggled—hard, flat pops of death.

#### 4

Seth waved everyone forward, gun in hand. This was the best part of his new life. Not the action or the rush, but the legal killing. "Fire!"

"Fire!" Jeff repeated Seth's order, careful aim already locked onto the circling jeep with the machine gun. The grenade launcher in his hands lurched, belching out a perfect shot.

The jeep exploded in a splintering ball of flame and smoke.

Jeff switched his aim to the closest truck.

*Kablamm!*

The other jeep of traders rolled their way.

Neil's men were able to fire at it now that they were no longer pinned down by the rapid shots of a machine gun.

Seth's men fell into that dangerous V as Neil's team did the same. Watching their line of fire, two full teams of Eagles emptied their guns into the remaining vehicles from both sides.

It was over soon after the call for assistance came. One Eagle team was dangerous. Two was lethal.

"Where are the hostages?" Seth reloaded as Jeff and Shawn moved through the bodies. He normally would have had a lot more to say, but it hurt to talk. The quarter shaped blood bruise on his windpipe was a constant reminder to everyone who saw it. Marc wasn't to be challenged without a death wish. He'd taken that slot from Doug.

"Back of the transport truck. Greg's working on the door." Neil pointed.

Seth went to help.

Neil did a quick sweep, hating the openness of this area, but also grateful for it. With a little more cover, the traders might have been successful with their ambush. When their other men hadn't come back, these few had assumed them to be dead and packed up. If Neil's team had come an hour later, they would have been gone.

Neil saw Jeremy gathering guns and ammo. "What's the count?"

Jeremy shrugged, shoving guns into a burlap sack. "About fifteen usable. No ammo other than what we might pull from the machine guns."

Neil nodded. "Water run go okay?"

Jeremy stood up, leaving the bag for when they loaded it all up. "We'll be off rations by morning."

Neil grinned. "Guess Samantha didn't like not being allowed to come along. She's with the water, right?"

Jeremy didn't answer.

The silence made Neil frown. “Right?”

Jeremy shook his head, voice casual. “No, she’s uh, handcuffed to the steering wheel of my jeep.” Jeremy pointed to the barely visible Hurst edition. It was too far away to see her shadow, but waves of anger hit them clearly.

Neil stared. “You are in deep shit, my friend.”

“Nah.” Jeremy smiled uneasily, looking at the fist shaped bruise in the center of Neil’s forehead. “She’ll yell for a minute and then realize I didn’t have a choice.”

Neil’s brow went up. “Do you think so?”

“Well, maybe.” Jeremy became defensive. “She refused to stay in the jeep!”

“Did you think she would?” Neil scoffed, motioning for Greg to load up and get rolling as soon as possible.

“No, that’s why I cuffed her.”

“So, it was premeditated. Another mark against you.” Neil led the way. He wasn’t sure there would still be a steering wheel when they got there, but he didn’t tell Jeremy that. “It’s rare, right?”

“Oh, yeah.” Jeremy nodded, grinning. “I’ve wanted one since I was ten. They only made about a hundred of them. Even found a way to modify it for my cd player.”

“Uh-huh.” Neil was still staring at the jeep, almost convinced he’d seen a glint of movement—*shiny* movement. “And she knows that, right?”

Jeremy nodded again. “Yeah, she said I might be in love with it instead of...” Jeremy got the point all at once. “She wouldn’t!”

Neil clapped his XO on the shoulder. “Did you tell her it even has the original T-handle shifter?”

Jeremy’s third nod was the slow motion of impending doom. He’d told everyone who would listen and even a few who wouldn’t. “Yes.”

Neil got them moving, trying to be sympathetic. “Vehicles aren’t as important to women. Maybe she won’t remember.”

*Crash!*

That sound made the two men run.

*Crash!*

Neil rounded the edge of the wall first and came to a screeching halt as he took in the situation.

The jeep looked as if it had been in the center of their battle. All but two of the windows were sporting large, jagged holes in the centers. Glass shards littered the ground all around the jeep; the hood glinted as if it was covered in diamonds. On the ground in front of the Jeepster, was a broken T-handle shifter.

“Uh, I think she remembered.” Neil tried not to snicker.

*Crash!*

A thick boot heel shot through the passenger wing window, leaving only the back glass intact as a fresh rainbow of shards scattered.

“Shit.” Jeremy sounded as if he’d been punched. “Maybe she can’t twist enough to—”

*Thud! Thud! Crash!*

Jeremy grunted in shock. “My jeep!”

Neil clapped him on the shoulder again. “She’s out of windows. I wouldn’t leave her cuffed much longer or you might lose that radio—”

*Grind. Rippp!*

The radio came flying through the boot hole in the windshield, catching more glass and sending debris to the ground.

“Oh. Too late.” Neil turned back toward the boarding school, where the teams were set to roll. “Let me know how it goes.”

Jeremy stared at the furious blue eyes glowering through the damage, warning him that she wasn’t satisfied yet. “Coward.”

“Yep.” Neil chuckled. “Gotta tell ya, I’d rather face that machine gun again. Good luck.”

*Riippppp!*

Jeremy watched a brand new sun visor join the radio. Why had he thought Samantha needed protecting? *We could have turned her loose on the traders and saved the grenades.*

Jeremy moved closer, carefully. “Hey, Samantha.” He

grimaced before he said it. “Are you still mad?”

*Thud! Craaccckkk!*

The steering wheel, wires flapping, landed at his feet.

“Uh. Yeah, okay. I understand that.” Jeremy held up the keys to the cuffs. “If I let you out, will you be nice?”

He winced at the next sounds that came from his cherished jeep. He had spent weeks modifying it. If he had to guess, he’d say that was the glovebox and the cup holders.

Plastic shards flew at him, unidentifiable. Jeremy took a step back. “How about if I throw you the keys and run?”

Silence.

“Sam? I’m gonna let you out now, okay?”

The dented driver’s door slowly crunched open, grinding from glass and plastic caught in the frame.

Jeremy watched Samantha slowly stand up and then get out on her own. *She isn’t cuffed! Shit!*

Sam snarled as she stepped around the door, a wild mess still aiming for a deserving target. She drew back, baring her teeth.

Jeremy turned in time to avoid the heavy metal cigarette lighter. It was the rearview mirror that smacked him in the back of the head.

Samantha grunted in satisfaction as he hit his knees, not caring that Neil and Seth’s team were stopped nearby, laughing uncontrollably. She threw the flashlight without remorse, striking his shoulder hard enough to shatter it.

Jeremy scrambled toward the safety of Neil’s truck as batteries started flying.

Samantha missed with all of them; he was zigzagging to avoid her aim.

As he ducked into the safety of Neil’s backseat, Sam held up the keys to the wounded Jeepster.

Instead of the throw they all expected, Sam dropped the keys just behind her and took up a familiar cage stance. It said come get them, coward.

Jeremy thought about it. Those keys opened any number of toolboxes and devices, and he would definitely enjoy rolling



around on the ground with Samantha. But... Jeremy wiped the blood off his ear and held it up for her to see through the window. “You play too rough.”

Samantha laughed, calming down now that she’d had a release. She scooped up the keys and gave them a shake. Then she slid them into the front of her shirt where they poked her. “When you want ‘em, you know where they are.”

She walked by the truck to take a backseat in Seth’s truck.

The Eagles burst into another round of crude laughs and taunts.

Jeremy stared at the Jeepster as the others got in. *My baby!*

“I guess you know not to do that again.”

“Yeah.” Jeremy took the napkins Neil held out and began wiping away the blood. “There were some signs.”

Neil chuckled, motioning for Greg to get them moving. “Head for the rendezvous point. We’re done here.”

The four teams met up under a green sunset that didn’t dampen their mood. They’d gotten all the list items and a few others. The kids they’d rescued were between the ages of five and twelve. Jeremy thought Adrian would put them with the slaver children, sensing the bonds that might grow between the two abused groups. The adult females they’d also hoped to help, were dead. They’d found the graves and corpses upon exploring the school grounds. The boss wouldn’t be told that part. Adrian would be pleased by their successes, and that meant a good time at the second half of the tests that would take place just after mess.

It took half an hour to get back to camp, where they unloaded, sorted, and cleaned up. It had been a long day. They were ready for the quiet drama of camp life.

## 6

On her way to watch the tests, Samantha paused at the sight of Jeremy coming from the workout tent that Marc and Charlie were entering. Jeremy looked as if he’d just– “*Grrrr...*”

Samantha flushed as her stomach growled. He looked as if he'd just come from the bed of a woman who was sore and smiling. Desire pushed into her thoughts, the kind she usually suffered at night or found a distraction for. Samantha recognized the moment. She'd felt lust before the war and sent out for a stranger like the other females in her class bracket had, but now...

Samantha tuned out everything but the man who'd spotted her. Now, she had two sweat layered, muscle bulging, gun packing Eagles at her fingertips—hard killers who would delight in easing her torment. It was going to be harder to resist taking one of them up on what their eyes were always offering.

Jeremy was caught in the heat blast, drawn to her side against his will. He'd concluded that she was likely done with him now, but the open want in that gaze said differently.

Jeremy took a quick minute to ask himself if he wanted to try again, to keep playing the role. It only took a few seconds of her looking at him as if he was hanging on a butcher's rack to find the answer. Jeremy gave her an easy grin but stayed back. "You still pissed about what I did?"

Sam blinked, but the haze didn't clear. She watched a drop of sweat roll down his neck and trace a fiery path over his shoulder. "No. You?"

"No." Noticing where she was staring, Jeremy stiffened the muscles in his chest.

Sam's hands clenched. *Think! Keep talking.* "Are you sorry for it?"

Swallowing the grin, Jeremy couldn't lie. "No." He was sorry to lose the Jeepster, though. He didn't tell her that.

Samantha shrugged. At least they had honesty. "Then, I can't be either. You didn't understand the lesson, so it wasn't harsh enough."

Jeremy didn't know what to do with a female who used logic and emotion. How was he supposed to...*logic*. Jeremy began running through the signs in his head, listing those little things that were either putting him off or making him uneasy.

Samantha sensed he was about to open a painful subject and

quickly spoke up. “If you do it again, I won’t be able to get over it.”

Jeremy already knew that. He’d gotten the lecture from a number of Eagles, but Cynthia had clued him in first by threatening to cut off his balls if he interfered with the dream again. “I don’t have another Jeep.”

Sam sighed in mock reluctance. Leave it to a man to say the wrong thing. “Guess I’d have to let Cynthia handle you the way she wanted to when she found out.”

Jeremy took a step back. “If you want to kill yourself Sam, you’ll have to do it when I’m not around.”

“Okay.”

Jeremy stared in exasperation. “You get that you’re not ready, right? That we would’ve been busy watching out for you instead of helping Neil?”

“Bet if it had been Angie you would have handled it differently.”

Jeremy spotted the ambush too late. “Yes, but she’s...”

Jeremy snapped his mouth shut as Samantha’s eyes glowed brighter. *Mistake!*

Instead of blasting him, Sam spoke softly. “I have Adrian’s approval, too. You know that. Treat me like everyone else or stay away from me.”

Jeremy shook his head, heart thumping. “I’ll never be able to do that.”

Sam caught the tremor. “Stay away or treat me the same?”

Jeremy went for the kill now that he’d evaded the trap. He took a step closer, leaned in. “Both.”

Sam stiffened.

He pushed, hand going out to brush a wild curl behind her ear.

Samantha shivered as his finger slid along her jaw before dropping. *That’s cheating!*

“You’re not the same. Stop being ashamed of it.”

Samantha wanted to scoff, but he seemed to know what effect he was having on her as he let the sweat drip instead of wiping it away with the thin towel around those big, hard shoulders.

Samantha felt heat scorch her insides and began fighting back. If he still wanted to play, she had his part picked out this time.

Jeremy braced for it, reading the intent as she reached out.

Sam grabbed the ends of the towel, gently pulling until his mouth was within inches of hers. Tension crackled. She let her lips brush his. “Will you be one of my relief sources?”

*One of my relief sources. One of. One...*

Jeremy was ice in her space an instant later. “No.”

Sam let go, shrugging. “Okay.”

When she turned around as if she’d just finished an unsuccessful interview, Jeremy’s inner asshole broke out. “Whore.”

Samantha stopped.

Jeremy got ready to run. Her aim was too good to bother with ducking.

Sam scrolled through a dozen responses before she answered, bitterness supplying the lines faster than she could reject them. She finally chose the one that would keep him awake tonight, worrying if it was true. “I’ll have a stable lined up in a week. You’ll fight alongside them, eat with them, save their lives, maybe, and Neil will be first.”

*You bitch!* Jeremy gave her his second thought instead. “Neil won’t go for this. You’re asking too much.”

“Really?” Samantha’s hand went to her hip, oblivious of their gaping witnesses. “How many guys is Leslie providing comfort for?”

Jeremy shook his head, glaring. “That’s not the same.”

“Okay, then. How many of the older women in camp is Daryl seeing to?”

“They have an arrangement!”

“I know.” Sam grunted in exasperation. “So would we, if you could just accept that I have the same rights as everyone else.”

“It’s not that you don’t have the same rights,” Jeremy protested. “It’s that I don’t...”

When he stopped, she filled it in. “Want to share.”

Jeremy nodded, expression pinched. “If I didn’t care, it

wouldn't matter.”

“It doesn't matter that you care. That's your issue to control, not mine.” Samantha twisted it around, as females are so adept at.

“And I don't think I can,” he confessed angrily. “So go ahead and line up your stable. I won't be in it.”

Samantha watched him go, understanding he was hurt, but unable to change her nature. Since the war, she needed more to stimulate her, and that was true in so many ways that she wasn't able to count them all without a scoresheet. If she had to do her old job now, she would never be able to tolerate it. Without the thrills and the close calls, what was the point of being alive?

“I haven't forgotten, you know.”

Sam stopped, but didn't turn to face Neil, not wanting the observant trooper to notice her crimson cheeks. How much had he seen and heard? “Forgotten what?”

“I'd like to spend some time with you, Sam.”

Her shoulders stiffened. Great. Another awkward conversation. “In what respect?”

“A date. I'll swing by your—”

“No.”

“What?” Neil's mouth snapped closed.

Samantha sighed, moving toward the crowd. “You guys will figure it out eventually. I believe that.”

Neil sighed. The attraction wasn't going anywhere. He'd hoped for it to fade, but the more she said no, the harder he was pulled to her. “Who set it up this way? God has to be female. No man would ever be this cruel!”

## 7

Charlie studied Marc as the bare-chested man pushed the bar up in quick, hard repetitions. The members and Eagles were gathered on the other side of camp for the second half of the level tests; the workout tent was empty around them.

Charlie drew on his courage as the silence continued. “Do you and mom...get close when you're alone?”

Marc's grip on the slick weight shifted. He caught it awkwardly. *Damn tent shadows.* He grunted as he shoved the weight off his chest and set it in the groove. "Interesting question."

Charlie shrugged, tossing him a towel. "Just heard something and it made me curious."

Marc sat up on the bench, wiping at his light beard. "Guess it depends on your definition of close."

"Sex."

Charlie's cheeks reddened, telling Marc he had an itch that needed scratching. "What's up, boy?"

Charlie was relieved at the willingness. "I have this idea about men and women, and I'm kinda watching you guys to verify it."

Marc took that in, trying not to grin. Being a teenager was confusing. The last thing he needed was his father's laughter filling his mind. "Why don't you tell me, and I'll give you my opinion?"

Charlie agreed eagerly, sitting on his bench. "It's about how to recognize a good mate."

Marc wondered who had caught his eye. "Go on."

"Well, it's a myth until you and mom are in a tent together. People notice it, so I started studying the other couples here. They don't have the same connection that you guys do."

Marc studied his son in the softly swaying light. Charlie was growing into a man already, and he hadn't seen him as a boy. The thought made Marc blurt out a question of his own. "Does that bother you? That we're getting close."

"No. Matt teases me, but I think it's great you guys like each other so much."

"And..."

"I'm watching, that's all."

"No pressure."

Charlie grinned, looking away from his dad's new injuries. It made his own desire to be an Eagle more complicated, but it hadn't dimmed. "Not like that. I mean for myself. I won't go through the crap everyone else is. I'll be sure of my choice the first time and stick with it. Like Kyle."

Now Marc frowned. “What Kyle’s doing may not be right.”

“He can’t help who he loves. Jenny won’t believe it yet, but—”

“How is that possible? He’s a grown man and she’s just a kid...” Marc let his words trail off, realizing he and Angie had started awfully close to the same way. Was Kyle’s attraction so different from his own? Hadn’t he acted on his desires and found a love beyond compare? Marc looked over to find Charlie changing his shirt and smiling. “You did that on purpose.”

“It’s a psychology thing I have to practice,” Charlie admitted. “And I know you liked being friends with Kyle.”

When Marc didn’t blow up, the teenager moved for the flap, giving his father the rest of the truth as he saw it. “Kyle deserves the same chance that Adrian made sure you were given when everyone thought you and mom were having an affair.”

Marc stared after his son, stunned. No wonder Adrian had already brought him into the Eagles. A mind like that needed to be occupied or it could bring down the dream without even trying.

Dazed by the intelligence he and Angie had created, Marc headed for the tests, eager to start shooting. Unlike last night’s surprise, this evening would be fun. He would pass, enjoy being with Angela while they watched the others for a while, and then maybe head back to their tent for an hour of pleasure before sleep. He couldn’t wait to hold her again. It had always been that way, and that would never change.

Chapter Thirteen BK3  
**Fighting For It**

1

“**W**e have a couple minutes before the test is ready. Does anyone not scheduled want to try to pass a new—”

“Lefthanded, level three.” The area went quiet as Angela came eagerly through the thick crowd. She couldn’t wait to stand on her own again.

Crone got a pleased nod from Adrian. He waved her to the line. “You’re up.”

Angela’s skill with a gun was something most of the females here had only heard about. All those thinking about the team she was putting together crowded closer.

Angela thought she was the only one who knew she had only cleared level three a single time and by a hair, but when they got to the line, Billy smirked in a good-natured challenge.

“No wind. You *might* be all good.”

Angela realized the guard had seen her attempt. “Sweet. Now clear me a line of fire. Momma needs to hear that thwap!”

The males chuckled as she checked her weapon, then drew and fired in a smooth blur.

*Thwap! Thwap!* The last two slugs went into the farthest target within an instant of each other.

Angela reloaded as they waited for the call. Unable to take her level tests, Angela had been working on the left hand so she could have this moment.

“Five of Six!” Crone had to shout over the cheers. “That’s a pass!”

Adrian came to her and held out a small patch.

“What’s this?”

“A welcome back.”



She recognized it as the new way he'd been setting the teams apart. It would go on her jacket, declaring her a level Three.

"But I didn't pass my—"

"Yes, you did. *Every* Eagle who went on the slaver run earned the next rank."

Angela waited until the congratulations were over and kept her voice low. "Why the double jump?"

Adrian knew she'd accept either answer. He gave her the one that mattered most. "I need you to be level Four by Arkansas."

Adrian turned away before she could plunder his thoughts to discover why.

Shoving that newest challenge onto a shelf labeled with that number, Angela held up a hand to the females in the front row. "Let's have a small contest, ladies, while they're waiting on the men to get here. Anyone who passed the gun class can try."

As the two main women lined up and began casting fresh glowers at each other, Angela swept the murmuring crowd. "Anyone else?"

Shadows broke out to line up with them, causing mutters and betting.

Angela needed a few minutes with these hopeful women, and it wasn't just a shooting evaluation. She was still trying to narrow down who her right hand would be. So far, she honestly wasn't impressed with any of them for that slot. Adrian had told her he'd known where Kenn belonged on first sight. He hadn't said the same was true of her upon their first earthshaking glance, but she'd heard the thought. Where was her decisive moment in that regard?

First in line, Samantha looked to her team leader. "Set."

Angela changed to a better viewing place and got comfortable. "A full mag at fifteen feet. Go."

## 2

"Can you stay for a while?"

Anne nodded, getting ready for bed. "I'm off until noon."

John's eyes went over her in desire, something he hadn't felt

much of in the last year. They hadn't made love in a long time, and the doctor found his hand reaching out to caress her hip. She felt good under the fingers that tingled with new life.

John grinned up at her when she looked down in surprise. Her long hair was loose—she'd been about to brush it. The elderly man tangled his fingers in it softly. "Miss you, baby."

Anne had only been thinking about sleep, but the feel of her husband's hands on her after so long was amazing. "Mmm..."

John felt life flow into other areas of his body. Tears rose. He shoved them back, gently wrapping his arms around Anne's waist. "I'd like to try to love you."

Anne knelt down, bringing herself within reach. He looked younger, but it was how he felt that meant the most. Anne was grateful, so much that she'd sworn to find a way to give Angela what she wanted most—to be accepted for who she really was. "We'll sleep in the camper tonight."

*"Where the beds are higher."*

They said it at the same time and spent a great moment laughing and holding each other as they had for most of their marriage.

### 3

"Shooters to the line," Adrian called.

Angela was now standing along the tent wall with thoughts that were no clearer. Samantha and Cynthia were neck-and-neck in most of the areas she'd compared so far. Samantha was better in the cage. Cynthia was better with a gun. They were neat, organized, tough. The others who'd shot tonight weren't anywhere near as good, though Leslie's two surprising bulls-eyes had given her third among the twelve who had tried. Having Peggy and Hilda line up had been something of a shock. Angela almost hoped they chickened out when the harder tests came. Getting those two to follow orders would be a nightmare for *any* team leader.

Angela thought about the current camp rumor and snickered. *Okay, maybe not for Doug.*

“Some of the Eagles in my army have backgrounds that give them an advantage.”

Lingering with his team, Marc’s head snapped up at the familiar words.

The crowd fell silent.

“Challenges can now be issued during a level test. Would anyone like to?”

Kenn’s big shoulders moved through the crowd that began to cheer and bet.

“I’ll offer a challenge to Marc for top gun in camp.” Kenn took his place with the other shooters.

Adrian looked at Marc. “Do you accept?”

Marc grinned. “You know it.”

“What happens when I win?” Kenn ignored his stinging jaw. The other three men looked worse than he did. “Does he fail?”

Adrian nodded. “Yes. From now on, you have to be able to defend your title. If you can’t, it’s gone.”

Meaning those who were getting by on lucky shots and other people’s misses, were SOL. Eagles groaned as the camp cheered.

“I also have a personal challenge.” For the moment, Kenn was accepted again as one of Adrian’s men and it felt better than he’d remembered. “Plates.”

The betting went up as Adrian agreed. “Another challenge has been issued. Do you accept?”

Marc’s inner Marine had already been given permission to come out. “Yep. Got one to offer myself. How about you join us?”

Adrian hadn’t expected that; it was clear by the look on his face.

His answer, however, came from the heart. “I’d *love* to.”

The crowd was starting to get slightly unruly now. Neil waved his bruised team into the mob, giving them instructions to keep things calm while Adrian was occupied. In the rear of the throng, Kyle’s team was already doing the same thing, under Daryl’s command.

Many of the other shooters wanted in on the action, but all of them seemed to know this was a leadership moment and didn’t

thrust themselves into it. The camp loved these three men the most right now. They wanted to have one moment in time where they got just that trio and the magic that might come with it.

Billy hobbled out of the way as Greg hefted a small crate of plates onto a nearby bale of hay. He would throw while Billy called it.

“On my mark.” Overseeing the shooters was all Billy could do with a broken leg.

Adrian took his place between Marc and Kenn, pausing to let his herd have the full effect of them standing together. Adrian and his hard defenders. *The only one missing is...*

Angela came through the crowd and took up a place along the front wall to watch.

Samantha and Cynthia, chatting lightly, came on her heels and chose nearby spots. During their off time, those two females were staying around Angela, like Kyle’s team had done with him in the beginning.

Adrian turned to make eye contact with the senior men on duty that he could see. All of them nodded alertly.

Adrian let himself shrug off the leader’s cloak in exchange for the fighter’s jacket. He couldn’t help the small part of him that wanted to beat Marc, but he didn’t stress over it. It was his job to rattle the man—personal satisfaction came second to the lessons—and he would try not to enjoy winning too much.

Angela picked up the thought and understood Adrian didn’t plan to hold back. Marc didn’t either. That tiger would probably never see the inside of a cage again.

“Anyone else want a piece of the action? Ten to one on the XO’s, with Adrian the fave!”

Angela raised her hand. “I’ll take a part of that.”

Alex wrote her name down. “What order?”

The crowd kept calling their own bets, sure of who she would place to win.

“Adrian, Kenn, Marc.”

Silence came except for heads whipping around.

Angela grinned as she stared at Marc’s shocked face. “Care to

prove me wrong?”

Marc felt that edge slam into him with a brutal chill. Her taste came to his lips, that sweet, mysterious odor he wanted to drown in. Marc hooked his hands into his belt. “Care to make a personal wager on it?”

Angie chuckled as the crowd voiced approval. “I think so. Depends on what you had in mind.”

Marc’s eyes went to her lips. He pulled back the first thought in favor of not embarrassing her. “A date.”

Angela snorted as the crowd chuckled. “We’ve passed that already.”

Marc shook his head. “Not like what I have in mind.”

Angela shrugged. “And when you lose?”

The crowd oohed and groaned at the direct challenge.

Marc’s eyes went dark, dangerous. “I’ll tell John to clear you for full duty.”

Angela grunted amid the laughs and frowns. “Damn, Marc. I’m already betting against you. I didn’t really want to see you fail, but...”

The crowd roared, and those who knew it wasn’t a joke anymore, pretended otherwise. Angela had hurt him a bit with the bet, even though it was meant to be a nerve challenge and nothing more, so he’d slapped her in return by dangling the freedom she longed for.

Adrian didn’t like it. Marc issued challenges to her regularly and she’d never struck out that way.

“Let’s start.” Adrian revealed none of his assumptions that there was already trouble in paradise.

Not involved in the drama for a change, Kenn stepped up to the line. “Set.”

Billy tossed the first plate.

Kenn’s gun crashed.

on the camp. It had been a good day for Safe Haven. They were back on full water rations, their vehicles would be fully gassed and ready to roll when they were, the garden had been watered, and they'd saved a truckload of dogs from certain death. Neil was content in his duties, but the loneliness!

Sighing, he swept the shadows around the tape, nodding to perimeter men. When he spotted Kyle coming his way, Neil waited. There hadn't been much said between them since Jennifer had come here. Whenever they were together, Neil's guilt rose up at the reminder of another young girl who'd been abused.

Kyle stared at his former friend, wanting to explain, to accuse, to ask. He did none of those. Instead, he nodded. "Look at the female tents for a minute. Tell me what you think I should do."

Frowning, Neil did as instructed.

The shadows on the tent caught his attention and held it. On the floor, one hard body was lowering itself on top of a barely rounded second form. Neil realized which canvas it was—Seth had crossed the comfort line—and waited for his usual righteous anger to spew out.

So did Kyle.

The top shadow hesitated, head shaking. The one on the bottom arched a young body that either of the men watching would have taken right then. Seth visibly shuddered but didn't make any other movement.

"She's using sex to handle her anger," Neil stated, throat only allowing curt words.

Kyle didn't tell him that Becky hadn't been repressing her anger. There were tray servers and duty men with bruises to prove that. Neil had missed all the fun while staying away. "She'll become an Eagle if we leave them alone."

"And probably a camp whore not long after." As a cop, Neil had watched that pattern repeat itself again and again.

The top shadow thrust; a short cry was cut off.

The bottom shadow wiped away tears and held on, clearly refusing to let him stop.

"She'll be strong, one of the first eight ruthless rookies Angela

accepts.” Kyle didn’t acknowledge the revulsion or the jealousy he felt from watching the tent.

Neil paused in his automatic urge to interfere. “Is it fair, Becky getting that in exchange for being hurt?”

Neil wanted his conscience wiped clean, but Kyle couldn’t do that. “No. Nothing we ever do will equal the debt owed to her. She was sacrificed.”

Neil had known before he’d asked, but hearing the words was another form of the punishment he knew he’d be dealing himself for years to come. “I’ll support whatever she *wants*. He’s dead to me.”

Kyle got a few feet away before looking back. “Just Seth?”

Neil’s face tightened. “Will it make any difference in your plans?”

Kyle let out a defeated sigh. “No.”

Neil gestured angrily. “Then what does it matter?”

Kyle was tired of keeping the pain to himself. “It matters because we used to be tight, you jackass.”

Neil scowled. “Hey, you’re the one who—”

“Who what?”

Neil stopped the fight before it could go farther. “Convince me, Kyle. Do that and we’re all good.”

Kyle reluctantly moved back to where Neil was standing. He didn’t want to let anyone in, but it was common knowledge that he wanted Jennifer, and he needed a friend now more than ever. “It’s the first time I’ve ever felt this way...”

## 5

Drowning pridefully inside the medical camper, John suddenly stiffened. “Trouble.” He gestured at Anne with wide, dismayed eyes. “Get your gun—right now!”

Also nearby, Charlie slowed, looking around. *What’s that noise?*

The Eagles in the shadows did the same. They couldn’t hear

anything but watching Charlie and Angela's reactions was natural now.

Hearing sharper, Dog nudged the teenager toward the nearby trees. *Stay low.*

Not arguing, Charlie did as he was instructed.

*Eekkk...*

The noise was lost in the sound of gunfire. And then a scream echoed.

Charlie started to stand.

Dog pushed on him, forcing the boy down. *Be still!*

Charlie struggled against Dog's weight. "Let me up. I have to help!"

*They've come for young blood!* Dog shoved hard and knocked Charlie down so he could curl onto the teenager's chest and keep him there.

Marc nailed the plates as they were thrown, now on round three with all the shooters tied.

*Crash! Crash!*

"That's a draw again, folks!"

Billy's voice was nearly swallowed by the crowd groaning and laughing, paying on bets and making new ones. It was clear the three Marines were evenly matched, but Angela thought maybe Adrian had said something to Marc that had calmed him down. That hard glaze was gone, with a thoughtful concern now in its place when their eyes met.

Angela wasn't sure what had caused the flip, but she was a bit disappointed. She liked Marc's inner man. He knew how to handle her fears—he didn't coddle her.

Marc holstered the Colt after reloading and moved toward Adrian. "A new challenge?"

As if fate had taken the words personally, radios crackled.

"Boss, we need you at the com truck. No rush."

"Copy." Adrian looked toward Angela, who began searching, and then to Kenn, who headed through the crowd.

"We're calling this one a draw, folks. Which means Marc



defended his title. That's a pass." Adrian moved through the celebrating, grumbling, slightly tense herd with Eagles on his heels.

With the mob now quieter, the odd noise came again and was heard by nearly everyone.

*Eeekkkkk...*

The sound was one of nails on a chalkboard, sending ice into veins.

*Danger to the herd!*

Crimson unease traveled the camp.

Samantha wiped both sweaty palms down her pants and brought them back up with a gun in each. That having two was better, more fulfilling somehow, was something Samantha had come to accept.

She moved quickly to Angela's flank and saw Cynthia do the same with Adrian.

*Eeeekkk!*

Zack took Adrian's right. "What is it, Boss?"

"Uninvited guests." Adrian struggled for a plan.

*Eeekkkkk...*

In the eerie stillness of the apocalyptic Kansas sky, another sound echoed—one that Safe Haven's people knew all too well. Wings.

The Eagles pulled their air horns and began blindly blasting them toward the sky as the colony got closer, but it was already too late. The bats swarmed over Safe Haven as if it was a river, washing through the camp in a panicked flurry of sharp wings and hungry fangs. Their food source had also changed.

"*Get to the mess!*" Angela sent, causing radios to spark across the camp, but it was hard to hear over the blare of the air horns and screams.

Adrian reached Angela as she braced and began firing using both hands. He put his back to her, Marc coming to form the pyramid. They blasted through the bats they could safely hit without striking anyone in the crossfire.

It wasn't nearly enough.

"Where's the caller?!" Marc shot in a pattern that he hoped would detour the rest of the colony getting set to swarm. The screams were telling the other bats there was food down here.

"Our tent!" Angela answered, firing.

They went that way, aware of air horns dying, people falling under the winged rodents, and the angry crimson bubble rippling over the entire camp.

"Why isn't it protecting us?" Marc steered them into the main camp. He stopped in shock at the sight of the front of the colony zeroing in on them.

The trio hit the ground as the bats swarmed. Side by side, they rolled onto their backs and continued to fire, reload and do it again, but it was like dipping water from a flooded ship with a spoon.

"Bring the shield up!" Adrian ordered.

"No!" Marc still wouldn't sacrifice her for the rest.

Angela began to gather energy, terrified of being exposed.

The colony began to retreat without warning, sweeping into the air in a long black tunnel of wings and screeching cries.

"Where are they going?"

"Is it over?"

Angela rolled to her feet, running for their tent. Marc stayed on her heels, scanning the injured for their son.

Adrian grabbed two Eagles running by. "Get the spotlights on! Get people blowing horns in the vehicles! Get help!"

Lee and Kevin rushed off, jerking other men with them.

Adrian saw another running form, but he didn't try to get the mobster's attention. Kyle was trying to make it to the livestock area, where Jennifer was helping the vet. The bat sounds from that area were loud, but the barking of the dogs was louder.

Above them, the shield flashed deeper crimson, lined in black wings as the colony circled to come in for another blast.

*Eekkk!*

Kyle hit the livestock area just as the colony zoomed down, spotting Jennifer huddled under a metal table as the vet stood in front of it, waving a torch.

Kyle dropped to the ground, crawling. Bats slammed into his shoulders, his side, clawing and shrieking as he fought to get to her. Ahead of him, the bats swarmed Chris, wings ripping into his exposed skin.

Kyle jerked the air horn from his belt and activated it as he reached the vet who was now covered and on his knees.

The bats flinched away at the noise.

Kyle shoved Chris toward the semi and crawled to the crying girl, sliding his big body around her exposed skin.

Jennifer shook uncontrollably, face buried against Kyle's arm and side as he protected her. Cramped up, she felt the first contraction coming and groaned against Kyle's arm. *Not again!*

Jennifer shifted, taking the pressure off that side. The cramp receded.

*"Stay calm and don't trigger your labor."*

John's words came to her; Jennifer concentrated on the sound of Kyle's fast heartbeat as she relaxed her body. Kyle would keep the danger away, and she would keep herself from giving birth.

## 7

*Whhooooo!*

Angela spun the Caller harder, already knowing it wasn't going to be enough. There was too much noise to detour the colony.

*Whhhooooooo!*

The blast knocked apart a substantial portion of the incoming line, sending corpses and stunned threats sliding into tents and corners, but the rest kept coming.

Angela threw herself to the ground as the colony flew over them, dropping the Caller in favor of her gun.

Next to her, Marc sensed the ambush coming and ripped free of his coat in time to wrap it over both of them and roll.

Marc took the brunt of the hit in the shoulder as the second half of the colony flew in low and hard. Bats bounced off him, flying into the ground, shrieking.

They stayed down until the sound of the wings began to draw upward, then Marc hefted them both to their feet.

Angela brought up the shield.

A small group of trapped bats slammed into the barrier and fell back to the earth with crushed skulls and shattered wings.

Above the camp, the main colony circled, preparing for another strike. The lead scouts sent radar and came back with a barrier, but it was too late to stop the incoming rush of blood crazed predators. They slammed into the barrier like a bomb blast.

More than half of the colony hit the shield around Safe Haven, shaking the ground it rested on. Those closest to the edges were thrown to the dirt as the dome shifted sideways from the force of the impact, but it held.

Angela swayed as the sound of dropping corpses and splattering guts echoed.

Denied their newly discovered food source, the screeching colony regrouped to circle the camp and send down sonar. At the first sign of weakness, they would swarm again.

Adrian's mind insisted it was really happening. The shield was a solid, crimson wall of protection that wouldn't even let the sight of the sky through. On the other side, the bats were still there, waiting restlessly to be fed. As soon as the camp began to realize what it was, Angela would be in danger. They would all assume it was her doing.

Marc grabbed Adrian's arm, leaning close. "We built it—the Eagles. Get that spreading now!"

Before Adrian could respond, another shout ripped into their minds.

*Mom!*

Angela turned that way.

Marc put a hand on her arm. "I'll go! If he was hurt, Dog would be calling."

Angela agreed, knowing Adrian needed her help. Injured

camp members were all around them. “It’s like nature’s feeding on us when she gets hungry.” Angela couldn’t find any other explanation.

“No. She’s making rounds of the dwindling herd of humanity, taking out as many as she can during each blow. We aren’t the only ones suffering her wrath.”

Adrian’s answer was chilling. Angela shared a helpless look with the leader. Then they cleared their expressions, figured out their priorities and began helping people. It was challenging work, done while listening to the remaining bats circling above, screeching in hungry dissatisfaction.

## 8

Kenn appeared at Adrian’s side, Tonya in tow. “They’re not going away.”

Adrian waved Seth off to work on the list he’d just given him.

Kenn got his notebook out, ready to take down the solution he was sure Adrian had in mind. It had been half an hour.

Adrian was struggling. *All those bodies!*

“Ready, Boss.”

The bats were flying down for another round of sonar; the clicks and high-pitched cries sent shudders through the camp members.

“Boss?” Kenn blocked the view of the dead, standing in Adrian’s line of sight. It was one thing their leader would always react badly to.

Adrian slammed his eyes shut, willing the pain back enough to think. The bats weren’t going away, and the camp was discovering the shield—they were already starting to avoid Angela as she helped those who were down. The rumors while under attack from the slavers had reached enough ears to be a problem now. What had to come first?

*Protecting her.*

Adrian waved Zack over and pointed toward Angela. “Stay by her, as close as you can until this is over.”

Kenn heard the protective order and started writing as Adrian began giving instructions, frowning. *Why do Adrian's first thoughts always cover her?*

Angela spun around at that thought, glaring. "Why not? Yours never did!"

Adrian grinned at the open anger, hitting his radio. "That shield we made won't hold for long. Camp members go to the mess; Eagles come to the bonfire."

As he went by on his way to the com truck, Billy couldn't stop from taking quick peeks at the shield, though they were supposed to be pretending as if they'd helped to build it.

The Eagle didn't realize that in a way, they had. It wasn't just the leaders who created magic. The people they brought together and the things that came from those connections, made it possible.

"What happens when we open it and they swarm down?" Kenn was waiting for orders.

"We catch them. In these." Adrian pointed to one of the crates. "And then we roast them."

## 9

Kyle helped Jennifer up, not liking the ashen color of her skin. He slid a bloody hand around her waist, directing them toward the medical tent.

Jennifer stopped, tugging on his arm. "Hang on."

"I can't. I have to go help Adrian and you need the doctor."

Jennifer was still concentrating on her breathing. "I'm not in labor. No pain now, just a little queasy from lying down under the table."

Kyle was torn. "Are you sure?"

"I'm fine." Jennifer hid her clenched hands. "Go do your job."

Kyle leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Go to John." He took off toward the center of the devastated camp.

As soon as he was out of sight, Jennifer moved toward the semi the vet was still hiding in. "Come out. I need you to tell me something that no one else will."

The semi door slowly rolled up. Chris's surly face appeared. "What?"

Jennifer tried to sound as if she wouldn't accept a lie. "How will Kyle honor his end of our deal?"

Chris instantly hated her distress and the man who was causing it. "He'll use one of the whores who know it doesn't mean anything. That's what all of them do."

## 10

"All right, watch Kenn and Marc for the setup and brace for a kick. The air pressurized cans have some recoil."

The ten Eagles lined up on the far side of the fire exchanged nervous, excited glances. This was one of the moments they'd signed up for—to discover if they had the steel to meet this new world and come out on the other side.

Shadows flickered eerily as they waited for Adrian's call; the bats screeching, and the roaring of the now triple-sized bonfire, was the only noise.

"You ready?"

Samantha nodded, aware that Jeremy still wanted to protest. They had the camp members under canvas, the injured dragged inside, and now, they would take out the threat. Because of her time logged on hunting runs, Samantha had been given the honor of helping to light the nets once the bats were trapped. "Yes."

Adrian made eye contact with each of the team before holding up his hand, calming them and steeling nerves. When it dropped, the attack would resume.

## 11

*It is my job.*

Both unaware of the new battle about to begin, Dog followed Charlie's angry march through the livestock perimeter, still stinging from his father's laughter at finding the wolf sitting on him. All Marc had said was for him to get to the medical tent and

help. He hadn't even told the wolf to get up!

*You're going the wrong way. The master said go to the medical man.*

“Bug off, Dog!”

*Pups!* The wolf chuffed. Didn't Charlie understand the gates were opening? Nature was furious with man's constant destruction. If she had her way, nightmares would be reality all the time.

Charlie marched faster, face a red glare that ignored gestures and shouts being thrown at him from crowded tent flaps. *I spent the entire attack on the ground! Dog had no right to—*

“Eeeekkkk!”

Charlie looked up in time to see the crimson shield flutter, then vanish.

*Run!* Dog's order was followed by a hard nudge that got Charlie's feet moving. The battle wasn't over.

The bats swarmed down in a violent rush of hunger.

The teenager found himself once again being smothered by the wolf's weight.

“Damn it!” Angela turned into the shadows.

Marc dropped his net and took off after her as she dodged the wings and ran for Charlie's frantic shouts. *What the hell is he still doing out in the open?*

Eagles hit the ground as the colony came in low and hard, and then jumped to their feet, hoisting guns loaded with nets.

Adrian held his button in. “Wait for it... Hold... Hold...”

The bats hit the empty camp and screeched in fury as they searched for food. Tents collapsed; thuds and bangs echoed as they flew into trucks and trees in the chaos. The colony remerged on the updraft and circled back for the downward spiral that would drive the Eagles away from the huge bonfire, making the people easier targets.

“Hold...”

Lined up behind the fire, ten men tightened their fingers on triggers.



The bats swarmed toward the center of camp, drawn by the sounds and movements of the waiting team.

“Hold...”

They neared fifty feet... “Fire!”

Nets and alcohol flew out, widening to catch the brunt of the colony in the first shots. The nets brought the flying line to a halt and actually drove the first bunch into those behind them. More nets flew in from the sides, creating a trap.

Heavy bundles of rope fell into the roaring fire that Adrian had made them extend. The smell of roasting wings and fur permeated the air as the alcohol doused nets caught fire. The screeching was endless.

“Fire!”

Kenn and Kyle hit the secondary net guns.

Another large cluster of bats was brought down; they hit the edge of the flames and bounced away in squalling protest.

“Get the ends!”

Daryl and Shawn dragged the screeching net into the flames, gloves protecting their skin.

Adrian fired the last shell, wishing for a dozen more. After this, they were down to brooms and tennis rackets.

Angela brought the shield back up. It became solid, crimson edges already tinted in that green and gold. Bats slammed into it with splatters and satisfying cracks.

Most of the colony had been caught in the first 15' x 15' net to fly at them, and nearly all the rest were in other nets or burning. Less than a hundred were flying around the camp in search of an escape.

Adrian hit his radio. “Take ‘em out!”

Eagles came from the tents with tennis rackets, bats, brooms, and torches, determined to eliminate their share.

## 12

As things wound down, Adrian evaluated his camp and found it devastated.

Unlike during the sinkhole, when only two small areas had been affected, the entire camp, from one end to the other, was now in shambles. Tents were down, some smoldering and splattered in bat blood and dung. Animals were running loose, a few down. Sadly, they'd also had more deaths.

The mechanic and his wife had been found a few minutes ago outside their charred tent. They had been crushed in the first stampede when the bats attacked. They would join three men who'd given their lives to protect kids from the swarm, and five members of the camp who'd been caught in the crossfire of this newest war. Three had been struck by other camp members who no longer had a weapon or a haven here. Two had been overwhelmed by the bats on a volunteer patrol to collect their loose animals. They hadn't gotten the message to take cover on the last strike.

Samantha stayed in front of Adrian as the Eagles gave a sitrep, not wanting him to stare at the sheet covered bodies behind her. Ten more lives lost. He was failing them. That was the clearest thought in his head. Samantha moved closer, determined to use whatever she thought might work to distract him.

Samantha didn't realize she'd read his thoughts and mood like Angela was always doing.

Neither did he.

"Didn't know they were doing something that big!"

"Good thing."

"Yeah, but doesn't that mean we're locked in?"

Camp members were staring at the shield in amazement. The questions and comments would have to be addressed, but the coming of dawn's light wasn't far off. Adrian wanted it left up until then.

"What happens when they realize they can't touch it?" Samantha was whispering. "That they just can walk through it? They'll know it wasn't built by Eagles."

Adrian gestured to where that was being explored by Zack's three boys. The trio was placing their palms against it and being stopped.

Samantha grunted. “Okay, so we could keep them here, but I don’t understand how it knows not to let the boys through, but it will let *us*.”

Kenn appeared on Adrian’s right for a sitrep. “Because Angela controls it. She makes it solid or transparent. She also feeds from it.”

The others gaped at Kenn’s words, but Adrian’s mind was racing. He would have a lot of shit to shovel to cover this one, but it would work. No one was muttering about Angela anymore or avoiding contact as she and Marc escorted Charlie to the main tents. Both parents were splattered in blood and dirt.

*Looks like they had a close call.* Samantha caught sight of Dog limping behind them in pride. The four of them made a striking group moving through camp.

Samantha felt Adrian’s breath catch. He looked older in the dim light. All the stress wasn’t being kind to their hard-assed leader. The misery coming from him begged for a solution. Samantha delivered the best advice she could think of. “Stay busy. I know how this sucks.”

Adrian was humbled as she went to help Cynthia. These people had been beaten, broken when they arrived here, but that wasn’t the case anymore. He’d done right by them and they were growing into their destiny. *If only I can have the same luck with Conner when we’re reunited!* That time was weeks away now. Adrian was terrified of the hate that had to be waiting for him.

Since they’d taken out the slavers, everything was chaos. People were looking forward to life settling down. The problem was that they had also begun to doubt it was possible. If a few more secrets were released, the camp would be too off balance to allow Adrian’s leadership to be effective. He needed a way to bring them together...or to abdicate and let someone else do it. That was an unspoken thought among all his army these days, but it wasn’t Kenn that their eyes went to.

The camp had the same opinion, though a different choice. Despite Kenn staying by Adrian’s side, the camp was showing a liking for Marc. It had grown tonight because he’d chosen to go

help his family during the crisis. It was fine to have loyalty, but those who were not part of the army wanted men in charge who would put their loved ones first. It was a fact that Adrian took to heart. When they found out he'd left Conner waiting, to care for this camp instead, it would be the final straw.

The blond leader wiped a hand across his brow. *Maybe being out of command will be a good thing. All I seemed to be able to do is get people killed.* Adrian had little doubt that eliminating so many men, so openly, had caused it. He no longer felt like one of the good guys.

### 13

Jeremy dropped his clothes into the fire. They were covered in blood, human and other. As he walked through the devastated camp, Jeremy's mind was on the conversations he'd overheard while protecting Samantha. He'd been trying hard to leave her alone and found himself paying more attention to the camp than he usually did.

*"Bet this stuff wouldn't happen in the mountains. Not the sinkholes, not the animal attacks."*

*"And we can defend that!"*

*"What about the cave-ins?"*

*"Smaller risks there than what we're having now."*

*"We're a target."*

*"A lot of people think so."*

Jeremy had already assumed these people would pick the mountains, but it had become real tonight, listening to Adrian lay it out to those who he let draw him into brief conversations. Anything to keep from facing the latest deaths.

They'd lost twice as many as they'd originally thought, half from a senior tent that had been unprotected. A part of the deflected colony had flown in there and been discovered long after the rest had been burned.

Jeremy forced his mind from the awful memory that he was sure he would dream about tonight. He had other nightmares to worry over. He was about to be cooped up inside a mountain, with ghosts for company.

His mind flashed to that other moment again, the one that had ruined his life and sent him to the seedier side of things. That had been the day he'd lost Mira.

The ski lift had malfunctioned, sending them both from the seat. They'd lain on the side of the slope for hours before anyone came, hours where he'd watched her die and developed a loathing for the location. Afterwards, even when the Inspector said his fooling around and rocking the seat hadn't mattered, Jeremy hadn't been able to go to the cabin for his things. Every time he heard the groan and shift of the stone, he heard that awful snap again—one of rusted metal finally giving way.

He'd ended up with two shattered legs and spent years learning to make them work again between surgeries. Mira had been buried during the first of five operations he'd undergone. None of them had been as awful as his fiancé's death.

Jeremy had turned to his skills for relief from the guilt, hacking and blackmailing his way out of a MIT scholarship and into the criminal underworld. When the war came, he'd been a rich computer geek, living on hacking thrills and bourbon. Surviving the war hadn't been his idea. Passing out in that subway tunnel the night before had been. He'd hoped to be run over before he sobered up.

Now, he would go inside a mountain to live for months where he would get to hear that heart-wrenching snap not just occasionally, but hundreds or maybe even thousands of times.

“Why don't we hook up a computer and try the internet again? There's got to be a better place.”

“It was locked down. Have to have the code.”

“Surely someone has hacked it by now?”

“That's crazy! It would tell any government left where we...”

Mind a blur of despair, Jeremy moved away from the growing argument, ignoring the part of him that wanted to explain to the crowd how many times he himself had tried to break the code.

For the two weeks they'd had power after the bombs, he had worked on it from his laptop. Jeremy still had the notebooks where he recorded the failed attempts, but he wasn't sure why. That world was gone. It was time everyone accepted the hard, cold truth. *We're on our own.*

## 14

“This is the death list.”

Adrian controlled himself, taking the sheet.

The Eagles were silent as Adrian read, holding their breath as they waited to see how he would take it. They were prepared to offer distractions.

Adrian let the paper fall to the table and turned away. He stood there, shoulders hunched, anguish in his heart. Twenty lives.

Dog came to Adrian's heel and stared intently. Adrian had a wall up, trying to keep himself together. Dog had to call to him with a low growl, unable to break through mentally.

Adrian finally realized Dog wanted to tell him something. Instead of the information or ideas that he'd come to expect from the no-nonsense wolf...

*Will you tell the beast keeper to let me alone? I don't like the way Star wiggles.*

Adrian stared. “What?”

*She whimpers too.* The timber wolf growled in low annoyance. *I scare her.*

Adrian felt a snicker coming and fought it. He wasn't allowed to be happy in any way when more of his people were dead. *I thought you weren't interested in mutts.*

Dog stamped his paw roughly. *Your human wants it, not us! Tell him she's not my...type.*

Adrian snorted in mild surprise. *Where did you hear that?*

Dog leered, tongue lolling. *The pup I protect and his friend.*

*They have an intense interest in females.*

Adrian's smirk almost made it onto his lips this time. *Got you thinking?*

The wolf's fur bristled. *I only sniffed her once!*

"Just once?" Adrian was now caught up in the personal moment with the wolf.

Dog's head lowered in embarrassment. *Okay, twice, but she rubbed against me! What was I supposed to do? In a pack, that means take me!*

Adrian's chuckle spilled out in a burst of calming energy that spread over the nervous men like a soothing balm. He was okay. They could go about their duties and let him carry the weight.

*Mind the flank!*

Dog's growl went through those closest as a mental shout as he padded toward the dogs circling the perimeter in a small group. The ants had been absent during the sinkhole and the bat attack, but they were following again. More than one of the mutated insects was missing a limb from the practices. Adrian and the Eagles were still dropping bait balls into the four-foot anthills, but the dogs laying down scents around the perimeter and patrolling in packs was helping to keep them back.

Adrian had instructed the Eagles to put thick nets over the camp at night from now on, and to finish the ledge around it. They would also start adding portable walls that could fold. The use of crimson paint would further convince the camp that the Eagles had built the shield. The men were refusing to say how it worked so that there was no chance of anyone sneaking in and dismantling it while they slept. The camp had accepted that answer, but the effects of the attack had given them all a new level of jumpiness.

Sighing, Adrian turned to Kevin. "Walk with me on rounds."

The level three Eagle fell in. "You know it."

It was well after dawn before Safe Haven finally settled down, but it wasn't the calm peacefulness they'd come to expect. It was dropping from exhaustion when their eyes refused to stay open any longer.

Chapter Fourteen BK3  
**Give Me Your Line**  
Near Cleveland, Oklahoma  
**June 10<sup>th</sup>**

1

**I**t was time for the mandatory camp meeting. All around the mess, tables and chairs were set up, speakers were in place. People exchanged curious, nervous glances when Adrian's top people arrived.

These feelings of unease were hidden behind welcoming smiles as Adrian came through the crowd, a large plastic tube in one hand and a mug in the other.

Marc picked out the bloodshot eyes and suspected the cup held something stronger than coffee.

Adrian made his way to the front without responding to any of the greetings or questions. He dropped down on a front table.

The silence was awkward as everyone found a seat. Those in the quarantine zone were listening on a radio that Kenn had rigged up. Their votes would count too.

As they sat, Adrian looked at his people. Despite all he had tried to teach them, they were still sheep who would always need a strong shepherd to keep them together. It was disappointing. *Will it help to keep trying? To try harder?* "We're here to pick our choice for the winter. If we wait any longer, we won't have time to get it ready."

Adrian's deviation from the usual start of the monthly camp meeting drew instant attention and more unease.

"We've been checking places as we travel. None of them are acceptable."

"What places?" an annoyed voice called.

Adrian rolled his eyes. "The ones you were too busy grazing



to see. Kenn, read it.”

Kenn exchanged a worried look with the others in command before he opened his notebook. “This is a list of all the places we’ve searched for authority, help, or permanent shelter. These searches were conducted by various combinations of Eagles and camp members.” Kenn took a breath. “Nellis Air Force Base, Hawthorne Army Depot, Nellis Bombing Range, the city of Las Vegas, Santa Clara, the Dugway Proving Ground, Salt Lake City, NORAD, Grand Junction, Boulder, Ft. Collins, Denver, Lander, Casper, Ft. Supply, Ft. Bridger, Rapid City, Cheyenne.”

Kenn ignored the mutters and groans, turning the page. “The Essex Compound, Rawlins, Cincinnati, Glendale, Tablerock, Roanoke, the Virginia Military Institute, White Sulphur Springs, Ft. Seybert, the city of Oakland, Basset, Ft. Bliss, White Sands, F. E. Warren AFB...”

The list went on for a while.

Adrian waved at Neil to pass around the albums of pictures they’d taken, verifying these places were gone or destroyed.

Tears and pale faces greeted Adrian when Kenn finally reached the end.

“We found nothing in any of these places but bodies.”

“Why was all this done in secret?” Roger demanded.

A dangerous tension filled the crowd.

“Because the weight of those disappointments was mine to carry.” Adrian looked at his soft people. “You don’t tell an injured person there’s no doctor to help. You do the best you can and handle the weight until they’ve regained their strength.” His eyes flashed over their nods and headshakes. “We took the pictures for this moment, for your doubt.”

Kenn handed out another album, this one containing shots from the places they’d searched. The images were of death, fires, and in all of them that feeling of being over lingered.

Adrian pulled the cap off the tube and took out the map he’d been working on since right after the war. Kyle stepped up to hold an end as Adrian remained seated, pointing.

“The red is our back trail. Known blast sites are in black;

debris and radiation areas in green. Purple is where we've searched."

It was easy to see he'd put a lot of time into it. There were dates, notes, even the number of people in Safe Haven at each location.

The camp leaned forward.

Billy subtly drew attention from a few Eagles and motioned toward the map. On it, Adrian's Montana base was clearly marked...and sat in the middle of a ground zero.

Those who understood the implications kept quiet, telling themselves he had found out later; he hadn't taken them all that way based on a terrible lie.

"We might have tried to find one of those underground bunkers in the desert, but I doubted they'd let us in even if we could find one. I also didn't think any of us wanted to be back under the control of our government."

There were more nods at that, along with a few shouts of agreement.

Adrian's highest people began to relax, seeing he was still driving his herd.

"NORAD might have worked if not for the slavers ruining the water supply there. We haven't ruled out caves in Kentucky yet, but the reports of mutations in the water in Ohio and Indiana are too close. If the snakes are using the creeks and rivers, being underground with them is the last place we want to try to survive and raise our kids."

Women were swaying quickly to Adrian's view, many of them hugging their charges closer.

"A safe place to rebuild is the most important choice we'll make. I'll tell you what I've come up with, and we'll go from there." Adrian took a drink, stifling a grimace at the taste of the whiskey-laced coffee. *I don't get drunk for the taste.* "We can hole up in the mountains and try to get it ready for winter. I suspect that is coming sooner than we're used to. Or we can head south, where winter won't be an issue. I hear Mexico is nice this time of year."

The crowd became almost panicked at his sarcastic words.

“South?”

“Are you crazy?”

“What else have you got?”

Angela held her breath, thinking of their dreams. *He’s telling them now!*

Adrian scanned them through blurry vision. “This land is going sour. We can hide in the mountains for a while, but at some point, we’re going to have to consider leaving. At least until the chemicals clear out. The mutations, we’ll be dealing with no matter where we go, I think.”

“Isn’t there any place untouched?” someone called.

Adrian shrugged. “Not that I’ve thought of. Except for extreme places, like the poles or an island somewhere, the entire planet has been or will be, affected by the war.”

“What about an island?”

“We could rebuild somewhere else.”

“I’m not leaving my country!”

Adrian stood up, letting go of the map.

Kyle caught it, frowning. He rolled it up and slid it into the tube.

Adrian lit a smoke, letting them vent.

“We’re not leaving!”

“I would, if there were no place else.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Look at all the pictures!”

“We haven’t tried the mountains yet, and he’s already said we could reinforce a set of caves and survive there.”

“I’m not going.”

Adrian held up a hand before it could go further. “Small groups of ten and twenty are hiding all over this broken country, surviving in their basements, subway tunnels, in bomb shelters. They’re using hardware stores, lumberyards, taking over malls and schools.” Adrian paused for effect as the crowd quieted, listening. “How many of those people will survive a winter that lasts six or ten months? Do you think they’ve even considered it?”

Adrian shrugged at the worried mutters. “It could be longer

than that. The skygrit from the war held in the heat for a while, but we've all noticed the chill at night, the sleet in the fog—and it's only June." Adrian firmed his jaw. "The thought of living under the ground or inside a mountain is horrifying to me. I want to see the sun, feel the grass, taste the rain. None of that will be possible here for decades, and I can't wait that long. I'm voting that we check the mountains for more survivors, then head to the coast to look for a ship that survived the war."

Adrian held up a hand again to calm the noisy crowd and went on without responding to any of the words that had been thrown at him. "Many southern islands have an average temperature of 74° and are out of the main Jetstream, meaning they rarely get hit by hurricanes and tropical storms." Adrian was already sure it was a waste of effort. For the first time, the vote would go against him. They would choose to set up a winter camp in the mountains and he wouldn't be leading them then. *My successor will have that heavy chore.* He nodded at Kenn to pass out the ballots. "We're leaving tomorrow at noon."

"Wait." Roger Sawyer, who had served as head of the moral board for Leon's trial, stood up with a hard expression. "There's something else we need you to handle."

Adrian sighed inwardly and gave a glare of his own. "Freedom, Mr. Sawyer, includes love, race, and any number of other things. We will not start that old shit up again."

"But these ...relationships are wrong!"

"The freedom to make your own future is never wrong." Adrian motioned to Kenn to go ahead and pass out the ballots. "It's what Safe Haven stands for. A smart guy like you should have figured that out already." Adrian moved on before the ex-detective could respond. "We've gone through a lot of changes together since the war. More are coming, starting with our kids. Official adoption procedures are being drafted. I'm also gathering a camp council to help me keep things together and allow my time to be spent leading."

Now, he had their full attention.

His top people exchanged glances of respect, and still, there

was a slight wariness. Right now, Adrian wasn't hitting on all eight, as Kyle might have said, and his closest men and women knew it.

"You're going to hear more training and see it too, as we advance through the levels. You know what the Eagles do—they make sure you wake up every day—and they're just as needed now as they were before the slavers. When you see and hear these sessions, stay back, or get hurt. We play hard."

"So it's okay to come and watch?"

Adrian nodded at Matt's eager question, using smaller ammunition to supply a much-needed distraction. "Yes. In addition, non-Eagles may now take the advanced self-defense and gun classes, providing they work up from the beginning like everyone else." Adrian turned a page and took a quick swallow, too aware of Angela's approval over the way he handled his herd. She didn't know that he'd been doing it all his life, but it wouldn't have mattered to her anyway. She followed him for the here-and-now, not for the back-then. "Safe Haven has so many couples and families starting that we're adding a third section to the sleeping area. Couples will now have their own place, effective tomorrow night."

The crowd murmured their approval and waited to see how far Adrian planned to go tonight on that topic.

"Repopulation has to happen."

Instant silence came as the Eagles and camp realized he meant to go all the way.

"But it will always be willing, or the offender will be banished. Those are Safe Haven codes of conduct. Nowhere does it say close friendships between willing partners is forbidden because of age. As long as the female is protected, we *need* her to help us repopulate."

Before any of them could shout, Adrian's expression darkened. "On the other side of that, there has to be a limit, an age or a line that we use to determine what's needed for survival and what's taking advantage of our youth. So, where's the line?"

The camp had quick answers.

“Sixteen, like it always has been!”

“Fifteen.”

“Why not just do away with an age line and judge them by each situation?” Tucker flushed at frowns from the other rookies. Even they knew Eagles were supposed to be seen and not heard during moments like this.

“Size,” Adrian shot back promptly, as though he’d been expecting it. “Right now, when there are two hundred and eighty-four of us, we can do that. What about years from now when there are thousands of us again? Or hundreds of thousands?”

Tucker scoffed uneasily. “Worry about it then, I guess.”

“And that’s why you’re not leading this camp,” Adrian scolded. “Sit down.”

Tucker did, with a red face.

“If we use the same attitude our predecessors did, we’ll get the same results. I will not leave it for someone else to fix. It’s part of our duty.” Adrian waved a hand. “So, what’s your line?”

Now there was an uneasy silence from the camp, most of them afraid to volunteer a number. They didn’t understand it had been Adrian delivering a punishment to Tucker for forgetting his place.

“Anyone?”

Lee stood up. “Another part of that camp standard is justice for the victim. They pick what will help them heal. If we trust them to know what they need at a time like that, then shouldn’t we consider their wants when they’re happy?”

“Absolutely. But what if a ten-year-old likes it?”

Adrian’s bluntness made people cringe and mutter, but Angela admired the guts it took to handle this in such an open manner.

“Okay, we’ve decided that ten is too young. How about twelve?”

Another large round of protests echoed. Adrian kept leading them. “Okay, then, fourteen. Who objects to fourteen?”

There were still a larger number of complaints, especially since Jennifer was that age.

“So we’re saying sixteen is where we draw the line, even though we need babies.” Adrian gestured at a back table, where

he'd had Hilda gather all the girls. "Look at them. *Count* them. In six months, that's all. Twenty-five females to give us the next generation." Adrian motioned again. "Now look at those who are already pregnant."

That was a single table; it caused concern as people began to understand.

Adrian pointed at a last part of the mess, pleased with the quiet way Peggy and Hilda had arranged it all. "Now count how many women we have from eighteen to fifty."

Shock rippled through the mess. When they were seated wherever they wanted, it was harder to spot, but now, it was hard to miss. All of them fit at three tables.

Adrian continued. "The number of men here is four times that of the women. Watch what happens when you take the age line to sixteen."

Hilda pointed, sending those of age to the adult female table. It only added three.

"Thirty-eight females total, with six more once the births come. That means only one in four men will even get the *chance* to reproduce."

"Lower, actually." John spoke up like he'd been asked to do. "Ten of those women can't have kids, thanks to various injuries from the war."

The mess exploded with panic; the tide shifted.

"Make the age eleven!"

"We need a law that says they have to have kids!"

"No way!"

"We'll do a lottery draw!"

Adrian again let them go for a minute. Eagles on duty moved closer to the females. Kyle was one of those, hovering between the rear tables so he could protect Jennifer if it was needed.

When he thought they'd vented enough fear, Adrian took control back. "What happened to that moral line?"

"To hell with morals!" Mitch lifted his beer. "It's about survival!"

"Not this camp, not ever!" Adrian quieted them with his anger.

“We’re for freedom. In nature, puberty makes the choice. That has to be a part of the line, as well as willingness. We just need that starting age. We have to ask ourselves what’s the lowest number we can live with. Everyone needs to do it, from the age of twelve and up. Write it on your ballot and I’ll post the final choice. We have couples in Safe Haven that enjoy our freedom and protection. That has to continue. Give me your line.”

The camp muttered and grumbled a bit, but clearly, they understood the elaborate point.

Adrian didn’t hang around for the vote results, already certain that fifteen and the mountains would be chosen. Both were a mistake, but he could only push so fast. If he had pointed out that not even one in four people had survived the war, they might have chosen a lower age, but Adrian didn’t want them fighting over little girls any more than he wanted their species to die out. In time, the age would be fourteen and puberty, with a mental evaluation of both parties. If that didn’t help them within twenty years, it would have to go lower. Adrian hated it, but without repopulation, humanity was doomed. On the other side, a bit of the animosity toward Ray and Dale might let up. With two hundred men competing for the chance at forty women, having two less contenders mattered.

Angela came to Adrian’s side as the camp began to drop votes into the locked box. “You know what this will cause?”

Adrian’s answer was silent. *It will make females the most cherished cargo we haul.*

Angela could see it in his mind, how he dreamed it would be, and instantly approved. In Adrian’s world, girls as young as seven were being escorted by their male, who handled all her needs and happiness. These strictly-screened men would dote on these girls for almost a decade before any contact occurred, but in that time, they would become attached and create love matches that would lead to not just the occasional birth, but to one after the other, out of natural contentment.

Adrian flashed another image, one of girls being taught how



to pick a man for themselves. Instead of advanced algebra, they were given relationship skills. “Their protectors are Eagles. They can only come from my army, and in return for the honor, my men will train them, protect them, and understand the gift they’ve been given.”

Angela was humbled by his vision. In it, men were taught the same things, only they were drilled on it until it became a way of life.

“A new type of Eagle.”

“No.” Adrian reluctantly pushed her out of his thoughts. “A new kind of man. One not full of violence that bleeds all over the world.”

Angela’s sharp mind put it together with a snap. “You were ready for this, for them becoming attracted to younger girls.”

“Yes. They see what your generation of rookies will be like. They know the next are worth waiting for too.”

Angela missed the wording. “How long do you foresee it taking to actually have them with the girls?”

Adrian gave her a clever smile that she knew the camp had never seen.

“It’s already happening, Angie. You’ll handle the first mental evaluation when you talk to Kyle.”

Meaning Adrian was sure Kyle would cross the line. Angela frowned. “Is Jennifer in danger?”

“Would I leave them alone if she were?”

Angela hated the answer. “If it does something for the greater good? Yes.”

Adrian didn’t lie or apologize as he moved into the deeper shadows. This was what the job required.

Frowning over the revelations, Angela moved into the empty training tent and shrugged out of her jacket. She chose the new workout equipment and began doing sets, mind not on one subject, just browsing as she worked out. Adrian needed her to jump another level in the next two weeks. That would take effort.

Angela grunted, pushing the sweaty bar up. The men used heavier weights and did harder tests, especially with the limits

John and Marc had insisted on, but she was alone right now. *I'll do what I want.* John had said two more weeks before she could have full duty, but Angela was determined to earn it quicker.

Adrian studied her from just inside the flap, where the shadows were the darkest. His gaze narrowed in on her sweaty skin as she finished the set and started a different one. Pushups were hard on her. Those shoulder muscles were still healing, but she didn't give up until she'd finished the full set. Her actions spoke of someone determined to do important things. Her workdays included time training and learning, but even her off days found her doing something for the camp. She spent time with her son, did her shifts, volunteered; when those things were put with everything else that she'd given him, it was enough to make Adrian take notice. He liked her routine, her attitude, her ability to calm him. Then there was the way her hair beckoned, the way she smelled. *I can't get her out of my mind!*

Lee saw Adrian take a place in the shadows, but he didn't join the leader as their radios crackled.

“Hello, Safe Haven. This is the first transmission of American Waves. Good evening, good wishes, and good will to you all.”

Having already read the first script before giving a copy to Adrian, Lee tuned it out, but around camp, people stopped to stare as Kevin's smooth timbre began lulling them into slumber. It was a brilliant way to quell the jumpiness.

“We're going to start with a request format and go from there, but first, we'll have a few minutes of something I have personally longed for. Happy long belated Memorial Day, Safe Haven, and to everyone else out there listening—we salute your determination to survive; we honor your losses.”

The sound of Taps filled their minds with ghosts and awful flashes, but Adrian had told his men things would always get worse before they got better. Starting the new radio station in respect, allowing the camp a night to grieve, would generate a layer of scab over the bleeding wounds. With enough moments like it, there might even be true healing.

Staying in the shadows, Lee wished Adrian could find some

of what he was always giving his people. If the blond man lost faith, they were doomed.

## 2

When Angela emerged from the tent, the shadows were deep. The first thing she saw was the glow of a cherry in the darkest of them. The smell of pot smoke came to her, along with another, sharper scent she instantly identified.

She waited, noticing the closest Eagle could barely hear them. Angela frowned when Lee gave her a pointed look and turned his back.

“You okay?”

“Yes.” She could hear that he wasn’t. So much death and loneliness had Adrian at a personal limit. “And you?”

Adrian wanted to tell her everything was 5-by but lying was more than he could manage. “I will be.”

“Soon?” She heard him sigh.

“Probably not. What I need isn’t...available.”

Angela didn’t like the misery in his answer. “Is there anything I can do?” She frowned. She hadn’t meant to make *that* offer.

Adrian’s mouth opened, eyes already begging. “Tell me to go away and do it right now!”

Need blazed between them, raw and sharp.

Angela didn’t hesitate, despite the lust thumping through her body. “I belong to Marc. Go choose a whore.”

He was gone a second later.

Angela let her feet take her to where she had wanted to be all day. She ignored the witch whispering of the pleasure she was missing. Marc was moving them through the levels of sex at a pace she was comfortable with. Adrian’s relief source wouldn’t get that consideration, or any other, until he’d satisfied that burning need.

*Not all men become monsters. You must know that.*

Angela didn’t answer the witch. *Let one of the others tend Adrian. He was right. I’m not available.*

“When did you know mom was the one?”

“As soon as I saw her. That was the day I went against Mother Brady for the first time in my life.”

Charlie and Marc were hanging around the mess, watching to make sure the crowd didn't get unruly. There were stares and murmurs as people went by. Now that the threats were gone, last night's brutal match was the talk of the camp. For Marc, it was the start of another stress, one where he had to be careful not to let the inner man come forward too often. He was still denying that part of himself, not ready to face it.

“Was it hard to pick between her and our family?”

“No. I knew she was perfect for me in ways that they could never be.” Marc was jerked into the past. “She was my kind, long before I knew what that was.”

Charlie pushed in gently, sure his dad wouldn't be bothered. He observed the moment with an intense curiosity that was usually lacking when it came to the details of their beginnings. He still hadn't gotten over how young his mom had been, but each moment he witnessed reinforced the bond, the irresistible need for each other. That was what Charlie was hoping for, why he was storing information. He was delighted when Marc began rolling through it as if he was there.

*Welcome home.*

*Her voice was in my head, confirming her gift and my sanity. I grinned. “It's great to be back.”*

*Worlds spun in her gaze, tempting, pulling. I reluctantly tore my eyes away from her sweet face.*

*Angie was wearing a short white skirt and a blue top that was too adult for her in my opinion. Her eyes darkened to the exact shade to match it as she picked up my thoughts. I watched her little hands close her coat and felt bad for my observation.*

*“It's okay. Georgie picked it out.”*

*Why did that bother me so much?*

Angie moved closer and the air parted, teasing my nose with vanilla. She smelled good. She was within a foot of me, ebony ringlets swaying against her pale skin, and I understood what she wanted with a slight shiver of anticipation and a shudder of fear.

*She stopped, unsure because of my reaction.*

*I slowly opened my arms to her.*

*I expected the usual quick hug of family and was shocked into stillness when she slid those tiny arms around my neck and placed her soft hair against my chin. Then the sensation hit, and I couldn't move. After only a second, I melted and hugged her back. My eyes closed as peace settled over me. I'm sure she knew how rarely I was shown physical affection, but I wasn't sure how to tell her that I would need this again now that I'd had it. It was as if the entire world had vanished, leaving only calm and an edge of everything being almost perfect.*

*We stood there for a long time, just holding onto someone who understood how important the contact was. When she slowly moved away, (I couldn't. I didn't have the will power), it was as if a cloud had come over the sun and I realized it was her reaction, not mine. She had a deep need for me, though I had no idea why, and that craving sealed the deal. I'd never been this wanted before. I wouldn't give it up.*

*"How long this time?"*

*"A month or two. Then the training."*

*"Early."*

*"Yes. She senses something, I think."*

*"And then back to the farm again come fall?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Then we'll have this moment, at least."*

*I was lost. It was exactly how I felt.*

*I know, she sent silently. That's how I found you.*

*It was a relief to know I hadn't imagined any of it. She had the family curse, and I was the only one she'd trusted enough to tell.*

*That made me smirk. I could almost sense her worries ease. Standing there beside her, my own problems weren't gone, but they weren't as big anymore.*

*We settled into the cold patio chairs, blocked from sight by tall bushes and trees. Our eyes remained on each other in fascination. With no prying adults observing our every expression, I stared at her pale skin and those violet eyes that I could swear were blue a minute before. She was a perfect china doll I could never admit to wanting to play with. My gaze swept over her. I felt my heart tighten. She was amazing, beautiful. I sensed that when she was older, I might beg to kiss her.*

*“I’d let you.” She flushed, sparkling at me.*

*I blinked in surprise. “Okay.”*

*I’d asked Uncle Larry some careful questions about girls while he taught me to work on the farm. I’d left him with the impression I meant my new girlfriend, Jeanie, and he’d left me with an image that filled my thoughts every night after that when I tried to sleep. He told me to be careful about age.*

*“Men get old, Marcie. We age and grow bitter. Get a younger woman and be sure you really like her. You’ll be together a long time in this family.”*

*Now, staring at the forbidden fruit, I thought I understood. Angie had a face I would never get tired of. My heart thudded in real pain. It was one I would miss over the coming years. There was no way my mother would let this happen, and there was only so much sneaking I could do before she found out.*

*“I might be able to make it go away,” Angie offered sadly.*

*“No!”*

*My quick answer drained the misery from her face and replaced it with a slight grin that I wanted to make bigger. I wanted to hear her laugh again, though it was a risk. My mother could be anywhere by now.*

*“She’s helping your sister with her dress.”*

*I was relieved to hear it and I didn’t think to doubt the information. As we stared, there were so many things that I suddenly wanted to say, to ask.*

*She knew them all without me having to say a word if I couldn't figure out how to put it. It was great.*

*"Yes, it's true. You won't tell?"*

*"No. How can you do it?"*

*"I just always could."*

*"Born with it?"*

*"I think so."*

*Which meant she had unanswered questions, yet she'd never been exposed. That meant she was smart. My mother would have her shipped off the same day she found out.*

*I saw Angie wince. "Sorry."*

*She shrugged. "Not your fault."*

*"Not yours either."*

*Her eyes darkened again, and I shook my head firmly. "You didn't choose to have it."*

*The eight-year-old was silent, but I caught her thought.*

*Then why are they so mean to me?*

*I didn't have an answer for that. All the punishments that should have gone to my uncle were being dealt out to his wife and stepdaughter. "She's trying to run you guys off."*

*"Yeah."*

*My gaze went over Angie again, this time lingering where it wanted. I felt my pulse increase. Angie was a baby right now compared to me—at least on the outside. On the inside, she was where I was—a lonely preteen who couldn't wait to grow up.*

*"She's looking for you now."*

*I nodded, not unconcerned, but I'd chosen this place with my mother in mind. I used to be allergic to the plants out here and still avoided the area. It was among the last places she would search. First though, she would go see if I'd discovered the dirt bike in the garage and taken it out for a spin. Which I would, tomorrow, when it would be warm enough to stay out on it all day.*

*I looked at Angie, wondering if she'd ever been on a dirt bike. She shook her head.*

*"Tomorrow, down by the old tire swing."*

*"When?"*

*I thought fast and tried to account for my mother's extra chores. "Noon."*

*We would be alone for hours, away from everyone.*

*Angie grinned at me, showing those dimples, and again, her happiness jerked me into a world where only the two of us existed. It wasn't weird, like when I flipped through the magazines in my closet, but I knew they were connected. When she leaned closer, I held my breath to keep from touching her hair.*

*"I made this for you."*

*It was a grass ring, the kind you handed to a friend and then yanked the top off, except this one had been repeatedly woven around itself until it was a solid object, able to be worn.*

*I watched my hand go out as if it was someone else's. I took it slowly. Our fingers touched, silk meeting sandpaper... I winced at a sharp flash of lightning. Where did that come from?*

*"Me. Sorry. It gets out of hand when I'm...sometimes."*

*I wanted to know what she'd been going to say, but I could sense her unease with the subject. She was afraid someone might overhear.*

*"Did you miss being home?"*

*That was a hard question to answer. I shrugged. "Parts of it."*

*"You don't belong with them either."*

*There it was. Honesty. And I would be expected to use it with her, I could tell. "It's more like they don't belong with me."*

*She wanted to ask if she did, but I wasn't sure what to say. If I got a vote, she would be. My mother wasn't going to give me one.*

*I could steal it, though. It wouldn't be much, but it would be better than nothing. The idea of not being around this little girl hurt me. Already, she'd found a way into my heart. I was looking forward to tomorrow in a way I knew to be wrong but couldn't help.*

*"I'll fit you in somewhere," I whispered, giving her my promise. "I'll make you a place that no one can ever remove you from."*

*"And you did."*



Both males jumped.

Angela threw on a stern facade. “Let’s go have some hot chocolate while you tell me what that was all about.”

Marc chuckled as Charlie sputtered. “Nothing, got sidetracked.”

Angela let her worries go in favor of the amusement. “I guess I’ll have to torture it out of you, then. Come on, get to the center table. Worst joke tells all.”

“I have to help the vet put the dogs out.” Charlie grinned a bit. “Why don’t you guys go ahead?”

Both parents chuckled at the obviousness as the teenager left.

The couple spread peace as they walked through camp, but it didn’t help the tortured man watching them. Adrian was struggling in his fight with temptation. He waited until Angela was out of sight, then took what was available to him.

*Who wants me?*

The mental call floated through the settling camp, drawing females his way in confused eagerness.

Adrian studied them harder than he usually had to and managed to draw a tiny reaction with his choice of Tracy. She was a distant member right now, quiet, and mostly unnoticed, but she had the required black hair that would melt against his hands and maybe help him achieve a release. With that, his control would be back in place for a while...he hoped.

Adrian locked eyes with her, pulling.

Tracy gave a short, breathless agreement. Her one thought stole his reluctance.

*I can smell like her too if you want.*

Adrian dropped his head in shame. *Yes.*

It wasn’t against their will, but he’d never claim them. They had to feel like the whores they’d be called if exposed, but Adrian never viewed them that way. They gifted him with these moments.

*When?* Tracy was certain of the answer. The vanilla would wait for next time.

Adrian eyed her freshly washed skin with naked lust. *Training tent—now.*

Tracy's secret smile was only noticed by a few, but to those who were aware of the escalating problem, it was good news.

#### 4

Acutely aware of Marc walking behind her, Angela got chills from the heat in his thoughts. Marc wasn't holding back anymore, and the past, their past, was alive again in her heart. In the brief time they'd had together, they'd loved as deeply as two people could. He was eager to have that side of their relationship returned.

As she turned around, their eyes met over the crowd. The low roar of so many voices faded into only them.

*My Marc.*

*Oh yeah, baby!*

Reality snapped in a second later with a crackle that sent static through every radio under the tent.

*"Scchhhhh..."*

"What the hell was that?"

"Some kind of pulse?"

"Yeah, a pulse," Angela agreed quickly.

When the conversation was flowing normally again, she found Marc in the far corner, talking with Daryl. His gaze was everywhere—the camp, their surroundings, the tables. It was a fascinating pattern, appearing to narrow in on something different with each sweep. *What is he watching now?* Angela eased in gently.

Marc's vision was shadowed, faded out to stretch into a battlefield grid with thin green wires outlining the perimeter. Red dots were scattered over this lined area. Marc's military mind narrowed in on those farthest away, estimating their alertness by the way they moved.

It was his gift, his ability to track any member of his team, and it was thrilling to discover. Had he always known he could do it? Angela stopped a snort. He probably thought it was normal, that all leaders were naturally so efficient.

Angela saw two shadows slip into the dark training tent, one

instantly recognizable, and forced another cheery smile onto her face. She joined Marc, who was now chatting lightly with Daryl about the lack of rain.

Adrian had taken her advice and picked one right out; he was kissing that slut, loving her. Angela shoved the images away and headed for the cooler instead. *I need a beer.*

Adrian ducked out the back of the tent, leaving a concerned, untouched relief source behind. He stayed in the shadows and made his way to the empty medical camper.

He dropped onto the cot, exhausted mentally. No one had died today, but what about tomorrow? Nature wanted him dead and she wasn't going to give up. When he'd chosen to exterminate the slavers, he'd marked himself, and through that terrible bond, his people.

Adrian was almost ready to face the choice, set to put his plans in motion early to keep any more of them from dying. He drifted into a restless sleep with a grimace of pain on his face.

## 5

Morning mess found a calm camp eating or packing for their departure time of noon. Most of the conversation was about the meeting and peaceful—fifteen and the mountains was now a verified result. They were going to set up house inside the stone of Georgia.

As he walked, Marc searched for effects of the bat attack that hadn't been repaired yet. There was only the occasional bat corpse or decaying body part as boxes and crates were repacked. Some of the wounded rodents had crawled into dark crevices to die. Dog had told him the bats were looking for young blood, otherwise they would have done more damage. Knowing it could have been worse helped Marc let go of the fear. He'd told Adrian and increased security on their youngest members.

He would also watch out for his own. Charlie now had an extra shadow, one that many of the Eagles had been surprised by. Marc

hadn't spent a lot of time on it. Charlie and Kenn needed to come to terms over plenty of things, Marc was sure, but more than that, Kenn was trying to earn his place back. He wouldn't slack off. Marc had paired Kenn with Zack for Charlie's security. That one wouldn't slack off either, and he would now die for Angela or her son.

After a week of things being quiet, more people were still signing up for the defense class every day, which was good, but the requests to keep the shield up at night had come directly from the camp women. When Adrian refused, the restlessness of the hens was rampant. It hadn't been this bad when they were being stalked by the slavers, but the Oklahoma towns they were passing didn't help the mood. Kicked-in doors under brackish blue skies were bad mood setters. It often ended in Angela bringing the shield up just to give Adrian a break.

During the daytime, it was the Safe Haven they all knew, though. The herd had settled back into twitchy grazing. It was Adrian who hadn't relaxed at all. Losing twenty members of his camp in one night had hurt their leader. His guilt was obvious. The camp was reassuring him often—his bloodshot eyes would have had them doing it even if the Eagles hadn't mentioned that he was feeling awful over the attack, but it wasn't enough. He clearly needed something else.

Marc was sure his top men had a plan. None of the Eagles liked seeing Adrian upset, but for Kyle and Neil, it actually hurt. Marc ducked into the training tent, wondering which relief source they would send to him and if it would work. *Sex isn't a cure-all.*

Expecting to hear hens clucking, Marc noticed the silence despite there being eleven females waiting in here for him. He hardened his satisfied tone into the one he'd used for the government. "Who's ready to get dirty?"

Before anyone could answer, Samantha came through the flap behind him. "To hell with getting dirty. Tell us what she wants in an XO."

Marc realized they were all waiting for him to answer that one. "Ask her."

“We have.” Cynthia leaned against the tent wall, already wrinkled and sweaty. She’d been here an hour early for a workout.

“She says a good XO already knows why they’re needed.” Tracy arched subtly, making sure he noticed her long, black braid and exposed nape. She’d spotted him staring at Angela’s neck.

“There ya go.” Marc was unfazed. He noticed it, but Tracy had two huge strikes against her. She was screwing Adrian and she wasn’t his Angie.

“But none of us understand.” Anne frowned at Marc. “At this rate, she won’t have an XO.”

Marc doubted Adrian would let that happen. “Sorry ladies, I can’t help you. I suggest you examine the duties of the job and be sure you can handle it.” Marc pointed as Charlie came to the open flap. “We’re using the same lesson you got yesterday. Pick a partner and start showing her.”

Charlie viewed the females warily. He hesitantly went to Anne, the only one he knew.

The nurse welcomed him, unknowingly becoming a contender by the teenager’s choice. After all, he was Angela’s son. Wouldn’t she lean the same way?

Anne was aware of the attention on them, but it was second to having Charlie in her mind, telling her what to do, how to get through this. She was in better shape than she’d been in a long time, but it was coming with a price. Soreness and bruises were constant companions.

Anne kicked out, stumbling.

Charlie concentrated. Shoving into her mind, he helped her control her body in an acceptable parody.

Marc gave his approval. “Good. Now do it again, and everyone else pay attention. Next time around, we all do it.”

Anne fell this time, pulling attention her way. She flushed darkly. “What!?! Ain’t you ever seen an old woman on her butt before?”

Samantha snorted. “Sure. We just usually help them up when it happens.”

Anne gave a grunt, getting set to do it again. She was glad it

was only going to be a couple more weeks of this. Even with Charlie's help and Adrian's lies, it was too much.

John had told Adrian that last night after she'd hit the pain pills and heating pad again as soon as she came through the flap. And Adrian had agreed, finally letting her and John know what the plan had been all along. She was never supposed to remain an Eagle, only make the rookie level so that it would bring in more of the women who were leery of getting hurt.

After that was settled, the men had quickly fallen into a grim conversation about test results and the increasing levels of chemicals John was finding. The herd of bison in South Dakota had indeed died of radiation exposure, as had other specimens in the rear of Adrian's semi. The fallout was spreading, growing in some places by debris and containments in areas that used to be heavily populated. Bomb parts now littered this land and all of them were toxic.

Anne slipped, about to fall again, and found a strong arm subtly shoving her into place.

Samantha didn't say anything, but she stayed close, respecting the older woman's attitude. Samantha understood they might end up on a team together. Anne needed to know these things, and Angela would be grateful to those who made it happen.

Samantha tried not to think that way and failed. She knew she needed to make peace with Cynthia—they would all be on these teams working together if Jeremy's words were true. But Samantha wanted it. She was growing into this life, adjusting to everything from guilt to embarrassment as she trained. The only mistake she couldn't find absolution for was Rick. Every time she had it contained, something else happened.

Samantha stayed close to Anne and put her thoughts back on the lesson. She didn't notice the Eagle guard who'd stopped in the flap on a round.

dripping sweat from wild, damp hair as she followed Marc's lead was enough to send him into a sensual daze. She was a tiger, with pale skin and golden mane in vivid contrast to the others here. He wanted her, enough to do almost anything for even a chance. *Why can't she feel the same?*

"That question has been asked more times than any other in history."

Jeremy was startled back into the moment.

Behind him, Angela forced a chuckle through the agony he was sending. "Saw it on the internet."

Heartbroken, the XO let his defenses down enough for the answer he had to have. "What can I do?"

Angela hated his despair. Jeremy was like Marc. He was one of the boy scouts this new world needed so desperately, but the truth wouldn't help him right now. He had to find Samantha's needs on his own.

"Come when she calls and eventually snap, blow up on her or Neil, lose your place. Then, take off into the west and never return."

Jeremy stared, open mouthed, in shock.

Angela raised a brow. "Not happy with that one? Okay. Let me try again. Come when she calls, eventually accept the situation, and find someone else to fill the down time. Mate, have a child, spend a few decades yearning for Samantha over your wife's shoulder."

"Oh, shit!" Jeremy exclaimed in revulsion. "Try again, will ya? I'd take the first one over that."

Angela was bringing him around, making him view the options, and Jeremy intended to take advantage of her advice—if he understood it. *Why can't women just say what they mean?*

"Another good question. Perhaps you should ask the Creator since we don't have a clue either."

Jeremy chuckled. "Fair enough."

Angela saw that Samantha had noticed them talking. The storm tracker didn't like it, despite knowing she only had eyes for Marc. *Interesting.*

Angela slipped her arm through Jeremy's, comfortable with their friendship. "You could try the opposite—make her jealous or ignore her, honestly try to let go. You have a lot of doors to pick from."

Jeremy started to protest, but Angela insisted. "You don't have to settle for a woman you don't love, and you will not have to leave camp. There are other solutions. We'll find one that works for you."

Jeremy's male heart overflowed at her kindness. He pushed a quick kiss to her soft cheek, not even noticing her scent. His nose, his body, only came to life for Samantha now. "Thank you. For being what we need."

Behind them, Samantha tripped and fell.

Anne was there to offer her a hand up.

Angela grunted, waving Jeremy on to get coffee. She'd realized now what it was that she was supposed to be doing. Helping, fixing, growing. Righting wrongs was on that list too, and she threw herself into these goals, rising early and staying up late to accomplish enough to be satisfied. Besides all the normal responsibilities and duties, her mind also required progress with herself. On the days she didn't think she'd made any, sleep was hard to come by.

Right now, fuel and water were the issues she was trying to solve. The garden was producing enough to add an extra meal or two per week to the supplies, but it was running through their water reserves. They were all right for the next ten days, thanks to what they'd gathered in Wichita. That should get them to the springs in Arkansas, where they hoped to collect and clean as much as they could carry.

However, that meant traveling every day, and they were about to be into the reserves of jet fuel they'd been taking from airports and refineries. Most of the normal gas they'd gotten in Wichita had been used to refill their basic services. Watered down, the jet fuel would run their vehicles for only a little while before causing serious problems. Adrian was already estimating multiple stops to pick up new cars and trucks as these broke down. They were



counting on finding more gas and water in Arkansas. If they didn't...

Angela refused to finish the thought, noting the guards on the parking area were getting them ready to roll. It was a late travel day, something a lot of them had come to enjoy. An easy wake up where they could do what they wanted until around noon and then not having to wait in mess lines when they made camp, was great. Each vehicle was being loaded with a basket, and now, thanks to Li Sing's generosity, people even received their favorites when the supplies were available. It also saved on water, something no one had realized yet. Adrian was so smart it was scary.

Angela swept the camp one last time, hesitating. The breeze was strong this morning and had a hint of burnt rot that made her stomach twist. The layers of grit never really went away, but there were days it was so thin that most of them forgot it was there. In brief, wonderful moments, they were getting their country back.

On one side of camp, rookie jackets flashed proudly through the games and tents in service, a third of them female. Most of the camp was packed; people were starting to load into their assigned vehicles. The only classes still going on were with Marc and Doug. That gentle giant was working with Matt. The boy was learning how to load a pistol. His father was viewing in drunken pride from the edge of the area. Mitch was allowed to drink during his off-duty times; he made sure not to miss even one of those moments.

Thanks to Angela's punishment, Matt was now getting what Mitch had wanted all along. Thanks to Cynthia, so was Matt. It was clear that he was developing a crush on the reporter.

Angela hoped it was harmless. When Cynthia realized what was happening, she would shut him down, and that would be the end of it. Until then, he was working extra hard for her attention, and no one was interfering. They all wanted Matt to make peace with the things eating him up inside, but that didn't mean Adrian wasn't already deciding where he would be useful. Now, it was drawing sketches for Cynthia's paper. Later, it might be more detailed images, like blueprints.

*Or Presidential symbols,* Angela thought, picking out the

official tryout notice for her team on the board. Without the alcohol and with a hard, daily schedule that included showers and healthy food, Matt's face was clearing up. He wasn't using the wash they'd given him yet, but once he did, Angela was positive his skin would clear the rest of the way and allow Matt to feel more normal. It would also help lessen the bullying kids inevitably did to each other. That was another of the problems with society that Adrian would try to conquer in time.

Matt dryfired clumsily. Angela saw Mitch's pride ease and the love he felt for his son. It was his only redeeming quality, other than his skill on the radio. The black jacket Mitch was wearing was a bad copy of Eagle gear, as was the tool belt he'd recently added. The drunk didn't have the heart to dry out and go through the levels like the rest of them, but he sure liked it when the new arrivals mistook him for a guard. The Eagles loathed it, but no one had interfered there yet either. Everyone knew Adrian was about to hit Mitch and make it hurt. Most of the levels, and quite a few of the camp, were looking forward to it.

## 7

"You look as if you're not having a good day."

Charlie shrugged but didn't answer.

Adrian took up a place next to the teenager along the rail they were using for part of their perimeter. "I've got a minute if you'd like to talk."

Charlie had been lingering, hoping he might get this type of opening. Adrian seemed to sense when someone needed a private moment.

"Something going on I should know about?"

"Nothing bad. I just heard something and now it's stuck in my mind."

Instantly worried, Adrian took a quick look around to verify only their personal shadows would be able to hear. "What was it?"

Charlie's timbre became a low, intimate draw that was shocking.

*“I offer no future, no claims, only the right here and now.”*

Adrian gaped at hearing his own passionately spoken words.

Charlie went on, stuck in the repetition of his mind.

*“Tomorrow, it never happened, but tonight, no one else exists. You’ll feel me forever.”*

The teenager stared at his stunned idol, exposing boyhood curiosity. “How?”

Adrian hesitated.

Charlie pushed on. “I know about sex, but it’s a chore for them, right?”

Adrian snorted through his misery. “Where’d you hear that?”

Charlie flushed, looking down. “Around the showers.”

“Listening to the hens cluck?”

Charlie was torn between guilt and that edge of youthful discovery. “I don’t want them to talk about me that way!”

Realizing the teenager was having his first moment of male anxiety, Adrian leaned back and handed out a valuable piece of advice. “You have to be good to them. That means all the little things you’re already picking up, but also, romance.”

Charlie was clearly confused, and Adrian concurred. “I know, but it’s the way they work. I use words because most men don’t. It gives me an advantage.”

“Why don’t you ...”

“Ask them outright to satisfy my needs?”

Charlie leered as much as he thought was acceptable. “Sorta like a perk of leadership!”

“Not unless I want to claim them.” Adrian scoffed. “I have to be careful where I take relief. So will you.”

Charlie was pleasantly surprised to be having such an adult conversation. It gave him the courage to seek the information he wanted most. “What makes it so they’ll never forget?”

Adrian pushed away from the rail, refusing to let his mind go where it wanted as he spotted Angela striding confidently across the camp. “Physical pleasure, combined with consideration and respect.”

“Physical pleasure?”

Adrian turned toward his dusty camp. “That’s all you get from me, boy. These questions can be answered by the careful observations that you’re already making...and by talking to your dad. He certainly knows what he’s doing.”

Twenty minutes later, Adrian rolled his convoy out. As he did so, the feeling of not doing it for much longer stung him like drops of acid.

*We’re two weeks from Arkansas. Fourteen days left to lead.*

Chapter Fifteen BK3  
**Chosen, Not Used**  
Outside Bixby, Oklahoma  
**June 15<sup>th</sup>**

1

“**T**hanks for agreeing to help me out with this. The list has really grown.”

Jeff, who had no clue how he was going to deliver, glanced around uneasily. “Show them the basics, and then stand there and take a beating, right?”

“For now, yes.”

“And it’s just five minutes, right?”

“Five each, yes.”

Jeff swallowed. To show them the basic positions, he would have to touch the females on Neil’s list. Jeff had picked up kai as quickly as Seth. He was being trained to take some of the load as the camp’s second instructor. Now that females had been in the Eagles for a bit, the camp had adjusted to seeing them training as hard as the men.

“There they are.”

Jeff turned to see eight females in full Eagle gear running toward the tent. Wrapped in tight black, titties bounced, asses shook, thighs rippled, and male heartbeats tripled in the space of a second.

“Oh, holy shit!”

Neil would have echoed Jeff’s expletive if he’d had the breath. Samantha running toward him was erotic enough to make his nuts suddenly drop in anticipation.

“Neil, man, damn. I’m, uh, it’s been a while, buddy. I’m not sure I can do this and remain...professional.”

Neil grimaced as his growing flesh brushed the sharp edge of

his pants. “Almost a year for me.”

Jeff’s voice was oddly soft. “A bit longer on my end. I’m a widower. Three years before the war.”

Neil glanced down and spotted the shiny ring on Jeff’s hand. He’d never noticed before that it was a wedding band. The distraction had blood returning to the head he needed it in. “I didn’t know that.”

Jeff shrugged, expression darkening. “Everyone in Safe Haven has a story.”

Neil heard the females hit their target and begin wrestling for whatever it was that Doug had declared their totem. “After this, we’ll both be ready for a beer and male conversation. My tent once Adrian’s done snickering over the report I’ll be too screwed up to write?”

Jeff welcomed the gesture of friendship. “I’ll be there.”

Samantha noticed Neil and Jeff joking and had the same reaction as the rest of the females around her. She stared. They were both attractive men with high places here, and there was enough need in this group of women to light up a city block.

Samantha smirked as the males started noticing the vibes, sentences stopping mid speech, expressions growing dazed. Being single had its perks. She was free to let these two men be driven crazy—by her, as well—without all of the drama that came with a relationship.

As she lounged in the shade, cooling off and waiting to be called into the small tent, Samantha admitted the truth. She could handle it with Neil because she knew he’d do anything she wanted for even a moment of her time. It wasn’t something she planned to exploit, but he had to understand the terms. She didn’t want to be a couple. She was an Eagle who would pick a relief source.

*Or two.* Samantha spotted Jeremy as he and a few of the rookies went into the gardening area to help pull weeds. Moving at a brisk pace, Jeremy’s thick arms called sweetly.

Need took her by surprise. Samantha couldn’t help the heated stare. He had a beautiful body, and those tank tops he’d changed to definitely suited him.

As he climbed into the semi, the laptop-toting genius turned and caught her staring. Jeremy stumbled at the warmth he read there.

He caught himself before he could smile in welcome, remembering the problem. She wanted him *and* Neil. *Will she get her way?*

Jeremy vanished into the coolness of the first garden truck without acknowledging her silent call. *Too soon to tell.*

As soon as he was out of sight, Jeremy's shoulders slumped. *But not if I can help it.* He didn't want to be a friend with benefits. Neither did Neil, but this time, it wasn't going to matter. In the future, they might both have what they wanted so desperately, and have nothing at all at the same time. It was heartbreaking.

## 2

Jeff felt his heart thump heavily in his chest as one of the waiting rookie females gave him a bright smile. *Damn. She's a curvy brunette. I like those.*

Crista saw that she'd finally caught Jeff's attention. He was the reason she'd signed up for the Eagles, though not why she'd chosen to stay. Crista had joined Safe Haven in Nebraska. She'd been eyeing Jeff since their first argument outside the supply trucks. She hadn't known the rules yet and had forgotten to sign for what she'd taken. When he insisted, she'd told him to sign it himself, that her hands were full. He had, muttering about rude Barbie dolls with more legs than manners.

Being classified that way, especially considering the stiff competition in this camp, had gotten Crista's attention.

*Does he still see me like that?* She moved closer, being sure to flip her hair and arch her chest. Jeff's head swiveled her way as if drawn by a leash, and she grinned. *Sweet!*

Jeff tried not to look down her gaping shirt as the rookie stopped in front of him.

"Sorry I told you off."

Jeff, who had forgotten about the brief encounter, frowned

absently. “I probably deserved it.”

Crista flipped her head, sending beautiful shards of heat into his eyes as he narrowed in on her hair.

Not above using her assets, Crista quickly ripped the ponytail holder off and shook. Her action drew several male heads her way—Jeff wasn’t the only one who had a thing for brunettes.

Crista took her time stroking her fingers through. When she finally stopped, Jeff was standing inches away with an intense look on his face.

“If you do that again, I’ll be banished for taking what you’re offering!” He stepped back, hard enough to ache. “Be careful playing games with grown men.”

Far from intimidated, Crista followed him, sliding into his personal space as if they were a couple. “Promises, promises...”

Understanding fell in a lot of ways, but Jeff wasn’t as blindsided as she wanted him to be. He leaned closer and disappointed everyone watching by giving her a harmless hug.

Except that it wasn’t harmless. He throbbed against her hip.

Her soft laughter filled his mind. *She’s sexy!*

“It’s about time you noticed me.” Crista placed a lingering kiss to his cheek and felt him fight not to turn his head. “You should ask me out sometime.”

She slowly moved out of his tense embrace, flipping her hair again. “I’ll wait a week or so, let you think.”

Jeff remembered how to breathe. “And then?”

Crista waved a hand at the other males who were eyeing her wild hair as if it was water. “One of them will, and I’ll say yes.”

She sauntered back toward the other cackling rookies as she replaced her hair holder.

Jeff looked toward Neil in desperation. “What the hell do I do now?”

Neil allowed himself to chuckle. “Hold on for the ride, I’d guess. She’s a wild one.”

Jeff thought about it, and grinned. “She does have the three things I need—brown hair, courage, and great legs.”

Neil’s laughter echoed. Life was improving for so many of



them that the trooper couldn't help but feel a little hopeful. The mistakes he'd made wouldn't ever be forgotten, but in time, he wouldn't hate himself as much. Not that it mattered. What did was how Becky felt. Until she was okay, forgiveness was too far away to consider.

### 3

“All right, folks. Five minutes!” Radios crackled with Kevin's calm voice. “We leave in five.”

*Danger!*

Unease rippled through Angela, strong enough to make the shield flash into solid red around the packing camp.

“What is it?” Kyle was her personal shadow today. He instantly feared the concern coming from her frozen form.

Angela didn't answer, concentrating. *What has nature thrown at us this time?*

The shield going up so fast in broad daylight drew attention. Adrian followed his instinct. “Everyone get to your vehicles. Mitch! Get the check off started. Now.”

Pleased that their new radioman didn't know how to do it yet, Mitch hurried that way, dragging Matt along when he would have stayed with Doug. “You ain't no Eagle yet, boy. Till you are, you're with me!”

Matt didn't struggle, but inside, he burned. He'd much rather be riding with Cynthia. *She's wonderful.*

Angela shuddered as the images from the witch came into clarity.

*Fire is roaring through the dry valley in a merciless path of death and devastation, zeroing in on human targets. It is finding them in basements and cellars, in malls and sewers—flushing out battered refugees as fast as it can spread on the stiff wind.*

Marc and Adrian came to her side, but Angela was trapped in a mental horror. *It's everywhere!*

Adrian knew it had to be bad for her to be on the edge of panic already. He made a motion the Eagles had hoped never to see

again once they'd finished that week of classes and drills. *Under attack, training lesson F.*

All their hearts picked up. The men began spreading the word and preparing themselves. Lesson F was where the camp fled for their lives. Half of the Eagles would keep the herd together, while the rest would try to eliminate an unknown threat.

Adrian heard the radio count off start and went to his semi, sure Marc would bring Angela. She was still searching through doors and growing steadily paler. When she let the shield come down, there was going to be panic. What to do first?

*Prepare them for it.*

Adrian waited for Mitch to pause for air and hit the button on his mike. "We have a problem folks, but we're not sure what it is or what direction it's coming from. Once the count off finishes, we'll lower the shield. I expect we'll be running a bit from there, so listen to those radios!"

Now, camp members were fleeing toward their assigned vehicles instead of the usual straggling they did on late travel days. Adrian struggled with himself as he waited for everyone to get in and be accounted for.

While they did the count off, the dogs began to growl restlessly in their cages; the rabbits huddled together into a corner of their hutch. Their few birds cawed and pecked at their pens in frustration.

Seeing people taking the time to gather tents, Adrian interrupted the count again. "Leave everything! Get in your vehicles now!"

Understanding Adrian wasn't going to wait, those few hurried toward the convoy, leaving their belongings.

Outside the shield were other noises that didn't match their enclosed camp—pops and cracks that reminded them all the fight for survival wasn't over yet.

As the call came, "All here, A-Man." Angela let him know what it was they were about to face. *Fire!*

Angela was at a level of terror Adrian had never felt from her. He recognized it as a personal ghost, storing the information as he

climbed into his seat, starting the engine. *If we survive, I'll help her with that.* “Bring it down.”

Trembling in the seat next to Marc, Angela forced the panic to ease, to release their shield. It dropped like a stone and sent raw panic through the herd.

They immediately stampeded.

The fire was everywhere—on the ground, devouring the grass, licking up trees that hadn't seen rain in weeks. The dead trees wilted under the onslaught, crashing to the ground in showers of bright coals that started new streams of winding flames.

As if spotting the fleeing convoy, the front wall of the fire shifted, racing toward Safe Haven. It already had them surrounded on three sides. The Eagles were horrified to find it less than five hundred feet away in some places. Would the shield have held?

The fire roared as it swept up the trees. The sound of exploding branches and debris rattled through the smoky air.

The inferno raging in their rearview mirrors was merciless, overtaking the area they'd just evacuated and consuming everything left behind. The fire came from the sides as well as the rear, squeezing them together as they fled along the rollers and debris.

The Eagles on the outer perimeter had the worst of it, trying to avoid the flames while keeping the fleeing vehicles together. Seeing familiar faces waving people in the right direction helped, but it didn't keep those men from inhaling a lot of the smoke as they sped along the outside line of cars and trucks.

“Drive into the creek!” Adrian blasted out the order in that irrefutable timbre of command. It was the only place to go.

Eagles began escorting vehicles into the lightly running creek, trying to keep a count. Through the smoke and screams, the flames continued to advance.

Adrian's next shout over the radio drew more attention from the stampeding herd. “Get in the creek! Stay together!”

Cars and trucks circled back toward the water.

Adrian coughed as he watched. He and his shadows would be

the last ones in.

Vehicles streamed by, some panicked and flying along the grassy ruts, but many had fallen into a sloppy version of their travel line, doing what he'd tried to teach them.

Adrian hit the button again. "The water's gonna be cold, expect it. Tell the kids and get the animals up off floorboards. I don't want one drowned dog!" He was satisfied to see even the panicking cars start slowing and falling into line.

"If you're in a truck, get out of it. The flames might spread to the top from the wind. Keep your vehicle at least fifteen feet from any trucks as our fire crew comes through."

"I'm letting the animals out." The vet wasn't leaving them to burn.

Adrian nodded. "Yes, but wait until we're all in the water or we'll run them over."

"Copy."

It sounded as if bacon was frying in a giant skillet now. The pressure from the explosions made Adrian's head pound in time with the pops and flashes of heat that surrounded him. *This wasn't natural. Someone just tried to kill us.*

Unlike the total chaos of the bat attack, Safe Haven had gotten enough thinking time before the fire reached them to be able to handle this crisis with more care. Less than ten minutes after the shield went up, every vehicle was sitting in the creek, windows up, fans off, with the edges of their coats and shirts over their mouths to avoid the smoke.

The wall of flames reached the creek minutes after the camp. Smoke began to pour over the convoy. Sitting in water, the vehicles were nearly inaccessible to the smoke from the bottom. The liquid prevented the fumes from getting through entry sources that were flooded, but the sound of people coughing still became almost as loud as the crackling hunger of the wildfire. The sense was one of being trapped by both fire and water.

Adrian kept his calming tenor flowing over the radio. "Someone kill those smoke detectors. Let the animals go by. Don't try to touch them. They're as upset as you are, and they'll bite.

The Eagles are coming to stand guard around the vehicles. Keep an eye on them and be ready to give them a break from the smoke. Don't be afraid to take a ten-minute shift in their place. We won't leave until everyone has been accounted for."

It was all ear candy, and most of them knew it, but the desired effect was calm through the fear. Knowing the fire or water could take them at any time was terrifying but having Adrian and his army surrounding the convoy with protection kept them together. The fire, roaring along the dry grass, had them trapped on both sides as it leapt from low hanging branches to dusty debris near the narrow end of the channel. If not for the water and the warning, Safe Haven would have fried.

#### 4

An hour later, the wide creek was full of wild animals and uneasy people. The camp was surrounded by guards and barking dogs that had the Eagles keeping tight grips on leashes. Their dogs wanted to charge the unexpected furry guests.

Adrian eyed the fire line—the charred edge that came all the way to the very bank of the creek. Nature, or a traitor, had tried to kill them all with one brutal blow, and even the animals they were sharing this wet haven with seemed to know it. They were lingering despite the humans moving restlessly around the stopped convoy.

"We didn't lose anyone, Boss. All accounted for."

Adrian's relieved expression soothed the ache in Kyle's heart at being away from Jennifer. "We'll have camp set up in an hour."

"Keep us set to roll," Adrian refused. "Ash is hard on the lungs. We have to get ahead of the line."

"What if the fire's still burning? We can't spare the water once we leave the creek."

Nearby, Ray was leading his team against the remaining flames on the opposite bank, long hoses suctioning up reeking, rushing water. The stocky football coach had the volunteer crew working together and he was making progress.

“We’ll only camp near water from now on. Until the rain comes back, we’ll have to be on guard. This could happen again, while we’re sleeping.”

Kyle scowled at the thought. “When does this shit go away and leave us in peace?”

“It doesn’t.” Adrian swung toward the kids’ campers that were also being wetted with creek water. “We have to survive it.”

Nearby, Zack had an arm around his youngest son’s shaking shoulders, offering what comfort he could. His mother had died in a fire right after the war, and the boy wasn’t handling the memories well. All over the creek-bound convoy, the same thing was happening. People were reaching out to each other.

It gave Adrian hope. Nature would try to kill them, but she couldn’t succeed. He moved to where Angela was standing, with Marc not far away. “Should she be doing that?”

Angela turned to see Jennifer helping the vet guide animals through the water, her pant legs rolled up to reveal grossly swollen ankles.

Angela shrugged. “Maybe not so much of the bending, but the freezing water will be great for those legs.”

Adrian noted Kyle close by, making sure the girl didn’t get hurt. Even the wolf stopped to sniff her on a round. When Chris had started letting the animals out, the wolf had been there to collect his dogs and put them to work. With little else to do other than stare at the ruthless fire, the camp had started noticing Dog. A few of them were realizing the animal was like some of the others here—special, and on their side.

Jennifer was also making progress, though Adrian doubted she could see it yet. Having Charlie and the wolf around was showing the camp that they’d been wrong to believe the former slaves without hearing Jennifer’s side. She’d spent last night in the female tents with Hilda and Peggy. Adrian hoped more had come from that than just their warnings about the evils of men.

Adrian saw Kenn and Tonya offer to give Ray and Dale a break. The tired men willingly let the second-in-command and his woman fight the battle.

Adrian didn't frown at the thought, as he would have not that long ago. Kenn was making substantial progress with the whore-turned-pharmacist, but because Adrian had publicly punished her, Tonya was now considered forgiven. The camp, in all its snobbery, had others to shun.

"You're losing hope."

Adrian noted smoky vehicles being checked to determine if they were still drivable. "I'll survive. It's these people I'm not sure about."

Angela's alarm bells sounded. She spun for the danger.

Before she could find it, Adrian did. "Damn. She picked a bad time."

Angela turned to see Jennifer approaching Kyle. The camp's women had talked to Jenny last night. If she was ending things with him right here, there was definitely trouble coming.

## 5

"I need to talk to you, about our arrangement."

Kyle tensed, sweeping to figure out who was close enough to overhear.

Only Daryl. The XO gave his team leader a look that said he was staying close in case this was the moment she asked him to back off.

Kyle was expecting that. He'd had a long night to get ready for this. He just hadn't planned on such a public scene.

"Kyle."

"Now?"

Jennifer was enjoying the wonderfully cool water. "Yes."

Hating the way his toes were frozen even as he sweated, Kyle leaned against the front of Adrian's semi. "Okay."

Jennifer wasn't sure how to start the conversation, but she was determined to get what she now needed from this too. "I'd like to make an official deal."

Kyle had been expecting much worse. The relief rush made him forget to be careful with his wording. "What kind? My options

are a bit limited at this point.”

“Meaning the trade that you made for me with the den mothers.”

Kyle flushed darkly, full of shame and need. “Yes.”

She scowled at him. “Would you have ever told me about it?”

“Unlikely.”

She took that in, still considering and comparing, but in her heart, Jennifer knew what she wanted. “I’m not old enough for you.”

Kyle’s face twisted into pain.

She sighed at his grimace. “Sometimes I wish I was. You deserve to be rewarded for what you’ve done for me, for all that you do here.”

Before Kyle could protest, she held up a hand. “I know you’re a killer.” Jennifer didn’t stop at his shame. “I also know how deeply you carry that, how you worry that you’re evil.”

To hear it put so bluntly was hard for the proud man. He forced himself to be brutally honest. “I killed my first man at fourteen. The mark was my uncle who had talked to the FBI. My father ordered it, but he wasn’t totally evil. He did teach me to be loyal and have honor.” Kyle omitted the talkative prostitute contract. He was obsessed, not insane. “I do have blood on my hands, Jenny, but little of it is innocent. Not that it matters to this new life. In fact, it made me perfect as Adrian’s assassin. I won’t change that. Not sure I could anyway.”

She’d begun to frown. “But where can a man like that fit into my world?”

“Anywhere you want,” Kyle answered as the dim moonlight glinted off her freshly washed hair. The need to touch her was one he conquered.

“I don’t want you to use a camp whore.”

Kyle reeled. “Excuse me?” He stared at her red cheeks and shiny curls, heart thumping. “Where did you hear that?”

“Do you have one yet?”

Kyle was sure he shouldn’t lie. Her age meant nothing when it came to that. “Chosen, not used.”



Jennifer scowled, hand going to her hip. “If you want me, you won’t. Suck it up and wait!”

“What are you saying?”

“That I...I won’t share you! Not even now.”

Kyle’s cold, hard heart lurched. “Why do you care?”

“It’s not because I owe you.”

Kyle realized that light being on so late last night in the common tent had meant a lengthy conversation where she hadn’t let Peggy or Hilda’s words influence her in the least. “You *don’t* owe me.”

Jennifer shrugged. She had her own views about that, but she wasn’t ready to share them, any more than she was him. “Can you wait?”

Kyle’s expression lightened. “Yes.”

“Are you sure? ‘Cause if I find out you went to someone, I’ll...”

Kyle raised a brow, letting his tone of control be heard. “You’ll what, Jennifer?”

She dropped her head. “I’ll be crushed. And I can’t ever forgive that.”

Kyle’s reaction was one he couldn’t have censored even if he’d wanted to. He leaned forward, reaching out to her. “Then I won’t.”

Jennifer slid carefully into his big arms, still surprised to feel safe in them instead of captive. “You promise, Kyle?”

He gave it to her, lost at the sound of his name on her lips. “My word as an Eagle, Jen. I’ll never touch another woman.”

Jennifer felt it then for the first time, the desire under the fear. It was strong enough to make her lips part in surprise. She wasn’t a stranger to sexual pleasure. Cesar had thought it the height of fun to bring her to the edge and make her beg for release, but she’d never thought she would *want* to be with a man that way.

Kyle heard her breathing grow rough; her body tensed against his. He had enough experience to know it wasn’t fear. He was getting through to her, showing her how beautiful a relationship could be when the man cared enough to make it that way. “I need

you. In time, you'll feel the same."

"What if I don't, Kyle? I don't want you to be caring for me forever without getting something from it."

Kyle almost groaned. She was so good, and he was so bad. "I'll prove it to you, here and now. I *know* we're a match."

Jennifer sensed it would cross the line, but she was tired of playing by Safe Haven's rules. If she were truly free, then free to have a relationship had to be a part of it too. She liked Kyle, and clearly as more than a friend or she wouldn't care if he had a whore. She wanted a chance at the future she saw in his eyes when he stared at her while she played with the puppy, while he helped her pick out baby clothes or assembled furniture. His face was streaked in soot, adding to the menace of his profile. Except, she knew better, didn't she? Despite him being the big, strong man, she would have the lead in everything they did. "Yes. Show me how you know I'll want your touch."

Kyle's mind screamed, but his heart was in control. This was the moment it might all come down, but he would still have her. "Close your eyes, Jenny."

She did, nervously, as he slid a slow hand behind her neck. She sighed at the sensation of her skin against his.

Kyle leaned in.

Her pulse increased as she realized what he meant to do.

He moved slowly, giving her time to pull away, and was rewarded when she didn't.

Eagles and camp members were scowling at them; Adrian and Angela motioned men their way, but it was too late.

Kyle kissed her.

Jennifer was braced for it, determined not to get him in more trouble than he already would be, but the feel of his lips against hers had an unexpected effect. He didn't move or shove his tongue into her mouth—he just kept them connected and let her have the sensations. His breath was warm against her cheek, and ragged enough to blow her hair back in short bursts. *I make him feel this way.*

The thought would have been terrifying with anyone else, but

Jennifer knew he wouldn't do more. With that in her mind, the teenager let herself have a first kiss, given in respectful desire.

Her chest hardened against his; a shudder ran down Kyle's length. He was almost at his limit already. No other female had ever hit him this way. He gently pushed his lips against hers, sending electricity through them both...and for one instant, she pushed back!

Kyle slowly broke the kiss, triumphant as her hand came up to touch her lips. For that one second, she'd *wanted* him.

Facing it was as hard as it had been to handle the fact that she had liked some of the things Cesar had done to her. Jennifer understood Cesar had been taking advantage, but Kyle hadn't, and he'd caused that reaction with only a bare brush of his lips. *What would his hand do?*

Kyle had been hoping for all of the things he saw flashing across her face. He took another step away as Eagles flooded his peripheral vision. "They may keep us apart now, but I'll be there when you're ready, no matter how long it takes."

"And then?" she asked, a bit fearfully.

"I'll love you, as much as Marc does Angela. You and our family will be my life, even if I lose my place with the Eagles. You'll never regret giving me a chance to love you."

Kyle took a third step back as his body prepared to shove through the guards to get to Adrian if it came to that. "I'll agree to anything you want or need from me."

Jennifer's heart took control. She followed his retreat, waving back the glowering Eagles getting set to grab him. "Yes."

Kyle forgot to breathe.

So did everyone else watching when she slid a gentle hand along his jaw.

Jennifer smiled, one of those amazing expressions of happiness that sent a ripple through the shield and drew more attention. "Yes, I'll be yours."

Kyle had enough time to press another soft kiss to her sweet lips and then he was dragged away. He didn't resist.

Doug spun him toward the livestock trucks that were now

being reloaded. “Get out of sight for a while or they’ll find something the fire hasn’t burned to hang you with. Half the damn camp just saw that!”

Kyle didn’t care. *She said yes!*

## 6

Evening fell thickly over the dazed camp as they waited. The fire danger was over, but Adrian was watching for the animals to leave the creek before he took his people away from it. That provided a lot of time to kill and right now, with nerves already on edge, the camp wanted someone punished.

“Halt there!”

About to climb into his truck, Kyle stopped.

Daryl nodded to the teammates that had come at Angela’s call. It was time to do what they’d planned and hope it would be enough.

Kyle braced as his team surrounded him.

The camp watched from inside and around their vehicles.

Daryl took his place in front of Kyle. “You are guilty of a moral violation.”

Kyle knew what was coming. He approved the choice even as he dreaded it. If the camp saw a punishment, they might not insist on a vote.

“Your team has chosen to deliver a punishment. Would you rather stand trial?”

Kyle forced his mouth to open. “I accept my team’s fists with gratitude.”

Satisfied the mobster understood this was being done with love, Daryl motioned to the others. “First wave.”

Daryl stepped back as the blows began, each team member around the circle taking their shot. The hits were ugly punches designed to drive in the point.

Kyle didn’t fight back. He just tried to remain standing.

*Thud!*

*Whap!*

*Thud!*

Daryl was the last to go. He stepped in front of his team leader with a clenched fist and a wounded heart. “If you cross the line again, you’ll stand trial.”

*Thud!*

Daryl’s blow took Kyle to his knees. “Do you under—”

“What are you doing?!” Jennifer shoved by Daryl to get to Kyle. “He didn’t do anything wrong!”

Kyle tried to push her out of the way. “Move. I deserve this.”

Jennifer glared when Daryl moved forward. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

Daryl hesitated, but the wolf didn’t. Dog padded around the uneasy man to grab Jennifer’s wrist. He carefully began dragging her away.

The Eagles expected a scene, but a moment of staring at the wolf made the girl reluctantly allow herself to be removed.

Daryl motioned to the others. “Second wave.”

Kyle closed his eyes. *She said yes!*

*Thud!*

Adrian didn’t stop Daryl when Kyle sank to the ground, nor when he held up a hand for mercy. Kyle had known this would happen and crossed the line anyway. He wasn’t above correction, and that meant none of the other Eagles were, either.

The camp didn’t like it, but they also did. It was awful to watch their top Eagle be beaten until he was groaning and spitting blood. It was also justice and a severe warning to those here who had plans to claim an underage female. The whispers that had started after the camp meeting would vanish. The new line was fifteen. It would be stuck to.

Across the creek, shadows moved through the smoke that was still lingering. Seth and Becky were in the back of his truck while Kyle was being reprimanded by his team for much less.

Adrian caught Daryl’s eye before he could order the fourth wave. *That one—now.*

Daryl followed his line of sight to where Becky’s bright hair could just barely be seen against Seth’s straining arm.

Daryl scowled, causing attention to turn that way.

Adrian allowed the camp to find out together, as they had with Kyle—confirmation that both team leaders had been breaking the rules. It didn't matter that Becky was now legal by the new age line. She hadn't been before, and there was no statute of limitations on a violation like this.

When the camp members started turning to look at Daryl and his team, Adrian nodded in personal satisfaction. *Do it.*

Daryl shrugged, motioning his unhappy team to follow. What the boss wanted, he got.

The wolf came to Adrian's side. *There is fresh food here—rabbits to the north.*

Adrian waved Kenn over.

Dog tensed but went on with his report. *People and animals are following us, living off our scraps. Those we pass are starving.*

Adrian felt that blow.

Dog stretched his neck up in concern. *Can we wait?*

“No, but maybe we can help them anyway. We're going to start leaving supplies in our old campsites, for those who come after us. Kenn will take care of it.”

They were carting around extra things. Water and fuel wouldn't be in the packages, but they had an abundance of basic medical supplies, soup, crackers, and Poptarts.

Not the least bit surprised to find Adrian communicating with the wolf, Kenn wrote it in his book. Knowing he had his own bit of magic had eased that savage beast in Kenn's mind.

“Also, get a recon together—go north.”

“We've already got one going to check out the city,” Kenn reminded. “Use them on the way?”

“No. Take a group of the females out. Do a rookie field evaluation and hunt.”

Kenn's head snapped up. “Me?”

Adrian snickered. “Afraid of being alone with a bunch of rookies?”

Kenn snorted. “It's the female part that concerns me. They all have guns now and I'm not their favorite person.”

The two men chuckled, Adrian sealing his emotions behind the mental walls that had allowed him to keep so many secrets this long. One exposure might cause the rest to tumble out, but until then, he was the guardian. What did he need with sex, or even love for that matter? He had absolution and power. That should be enough.

Adrian's gut twisted. But it wasn't. He wanted his son by his side, and he wanted Angie.

He distracted himself, looking at Dog. "Why don't the flies eat through your fur?"

*I'm an alpha. Our scent is stronger.*

"Will your scent on the other dogs help them with the flies?"

Dog's golden head swiveled up to stare at him with an incredulous expression that was too human for Adrian's comfort.

*I hope you're not serious.*

The blond leader shrugged. "It was only an idea. I don't like them to suffer."

Dog snorted. *If you want them to smell like me, tell them to keep sniffing Star. They'll die with my piss in their noses.*

Adrian grinned as the wolf resumed his patrol. Dog might not like mutts, but the vet had matched those two up well.

"Star is part wolf. I think that matters, but I'm not sure why." Charlie joined him.

"She's in heat, I'd guess."

"I don't understand much about that."

Adrian chuckled ruefully. "Few men do, son. Have you thought about talking to your mom on this one?"

## 7

"Would you like some company?"

Tracy's sultry voice sent chills through Kyle's stomach. After that kiss, he was on the edge and the camp knew it.

"No."

Tracy had been fairly certain. She frowned a bit, moving closer. "What do you need?"

Kyle couldn't tell her. It was wrong, but the fantasy played in his head in constant repeat.

"Kyle, I'd like to be your relief."

To have it spoken so openly, *so hopefully*, cracked Kyle's control. "I need to fuck and forget, and for her to never find out."

Tracy blinked at the growl, body lighting up at the passion. "The first I can do. The second, not even Adrian can. There are too many eyes here to keep even one time a secret." Tracy moved closer. "Unless..."

Kyle's head snapped up, waiting tensely. Now the whore would demand her price and he would pay it. Kissing Jennifer—*twice!*—had lit his fuse.

"Unless you see me out of camp."

Kyle waited. Surely she wanted something in return?

Tracy read it and shook her head. "It's FND, baby. I don't need anything else."

*Another convert*, Kyle realized as her scent blew over him, stole his breath. Could she handle his needs? There wouldn't be any consideration for hers.

Tracy picked that up too. She took advantage of only Daryl's eye being on them in the early morning shadows. "Your relief, big boy, not mine."

Kyle shuddered. He wanted...needed! to be as deep in something as he could get.

"What if I lean against that rail and give you sixty seconds right now? Daryl won't..."

Tracy stopped at the bruised muscles twitching erratically in his jaw, the fire filling his eyes.

Kyle wasn't sure if he meant it or not, but the question was out before he could stop it. "Will you?"

Tracy arched her chest as her nipples hardened. "Can we make it ninety, and you spend the extra time in the front?"

Kyle didn't remember moving, but she was in his arms an instant later. He held her tightly, not sure he could stop or go through with it. The lie to Jennifer had fallen easily, but the actual choice was torture.



Tracy, who had passed novice at this years ago, made it easy on him. She pressed a soft kiss to his clenched jaw and then slowly turned around in his rigid arms. She braced herself against the fence rail. “I want a kiss when you’re done, one taste of those lips before you go back to her.”

Kyle broke. He shoved Tracy forward, hand going to his buckle.

Daryl kept a sharp eye out for his team leader, filled with relief when Kyle raised the whore’s dress and growled in lust. Jennifer was safe for a while and so was the dream.

## 8

The Cessna’s engines were loud and choppy, struggling as the wind gusted harder. It jostled the plane’s two passengers violently.

Lightning flashed, brilliant and blinding. They both jerked as the control panel exploded in a series of sharp cracks and flaming sparks.

The cabin went dark.

“We’re going down!” The pilot sawing on the stick as he fought the downdrafts rattling them. “You have to jump! Tell them about our island. Take them to Pitcairn!”

The plane slanted downward as both engines cut out.

Charlie jerked up in the bedroll, the sound too real to just be in his dream.

He stumbled from his tent while still fastening his jeans. Half a dozen other camp members were already out of their tents and scanning the sky for the first plane they’d even heard in six months.

He and the others who’d been drawn from their tents stared at the gritty sky for a long time, but there wasn’t any smoke signaling a crash, and the sound didn’t come again.

By morning mess, most of them had convinced themselves it was a dream.

Charlie knew better. He stewed over it while he got his

shower. *The island woman made it. Kendle is home.*

Chapter Sixteen BK3

# The Wire Coming Down

1

**S**amantha paused on her way to the parking area, unable to stop from scanning the sky. No one had spotted the plane, but there was no mistaking the sound. A plane could mean many things; one of them was danger. It might mean there was authority somewhere, government who would want them to fall back in line with the old rules and the old ways that had destroyed everything. There was no way Adrian would allow that to happen. They would be fighting again, this time against the better armed government.

Samantha continued to the vehicles, aware of Doug and Peggy sitting together again at the mess. They were becoming an item.

“Look at that!”

Leslie, part of the six-female clique in camp that usually caused trouble, caught Samantha’s attention. She and her sisters, as they liked to call each other, were mocking a passing camp member for her brightly shaded hair.

Candy’s styling tent was popular with the females who had lived lives of monthly hair appointments before the war. The comments hadn’t been noticed by the woman yet, but Samantha didn’t think it would be long before the bullies got louder. They were having too much fun being the center of attention with the Eagles on duty. Now that a few of the females were rookies, they were being evaluated as mates and they knew it.

Samantha noticed Neil’s shadow lurking around the edge of the parking area. He hadn’t noticed her yet, too busy doing what the rest of the males here were. She thought Neil would take his time getting around to it, though. Samantha wasn’t blind to the way his attention followed her, how he stayed away even while making sure she had what she needed for the garden. He was

hurting.

Jeremy, on the other hand, had become preoccupied with his laptop for a reason he refused to tell anyone. The camp had several bets going as to what it was, but all Samantha ever saw him do was try a code system that she wouldn't have told even Adrian about. Jeremy hadn't asked her to keep it to herself, but she knew he trusted her with it. She wasn't spending much time around him either, but whenever he agreed to spare her a few minutes, the laptop was always along.

Jeremy joined Neil in the shadows.

Now both of her moody males were staring at the sisters. Something inside Samantha flipped. *They're wondering if the other females might satisfy them, might replace their need.*

*Can they get away so easily? Do I care?*

Her feet moved. Yes, but only because of her ego. It allowed her to be smoother than she'd planned to be as she stopped by the six females.

Leslie noticed her first and dropped her head. Samantha didn't give the others time to react. "If I ever see it, hear it, or hear of it happening again, I'll go to Adrian. Using dirty tactics to make the Eagles think you're hard won't fly with these men, ladies. They'll know the difference the first time Angela breaks your nose and you quit."

Samantha leaned back a bit, hands loose and ready. She thought she'd probably win, but she was hoping it wouldn't come to a fight. She didn't want to hurt any of them, and with these odds, she would. Anything less would guarantee a loss and Samantha just wasn't wired to take that. It was something she'd never known about herself before the war. She loathed losing—anything.

"It won't happen again."

The others stared at Leslie in surprise.

Samantha hoped it was genuine regret in Leslie's words as she faced her friends. Leslie was tall and blonde—the platinum kind that came from a bottle—and Samantha didn't consider her competition. Her beautiful nails and lightly painted face didn't last through a single lesson with the Eagles. She always looked like

the rest of them when it was over.

“I want to talk to you guys about some things.” Leslie turned to the others.

Samantha wanted to hang and observe, but she left instead. Leslie’s expression said they would welcome her into their group, maybe even give her the lead. It was tempting to the glory seeker inside, but to the Eagle, it was forbidden. Samantha would never cross that line.

Neil and Jeremy were helpless to stare as Samantha walked by, both revealing enough need to make each of the six sisters feel dismissed. Samantha didn’t notice, but the men did. Other women suffered in comparison. They watched her head confidently for the parking area, where their team was loading up for the hunting trip.

“Is she going where I think she is?”

Neil stared, heart thumping. She had to know who had duty over the run. “Yes.”

Jeremy groaned, spinning for his tent to get the laptop he’d been using as a buffer. “It’s going to be a long morning.”

“Yep.” Neil grunted, pushing his trooper hat back to watch her climb into the passenger seat of the truck being driven by Shawn. He grinned suddenly, catching a glimpse of her looking at him as she closed the door. “Maybe I can make that easier on you, buddy.” Neil hit the button on his belt. “Permission to switch out?”

“If you have to,” Adrian allowed with a frown in his tone.

“Jeremy out; Samantha in.” There was a stunned silence for all of five seconds. Neil held himself in place, waiting.

“It’s your funeral.”

Jeremy sounded relieved.

“Copy the switch.” Adrian now sounded amused.

Neil glanced at Samantha, hoping to have drawn even anger, but it didn’t appear that she’d noticed.

Neil’s shoulders slumped. “It *is* gonna be a long damn day.”

Inside Shawn’s truck, Samantha chuckled. She was studying Neil through the mirror. *So he’s ready to play again, is he?*

Behind her, Neil’s team also snickered. They liked the idea of her and their team leader, but they couldn’t imagine her sitting

around the fire with him like the other couples did. She wasn't that type.

Neil was thinking about her words. She didn't want any strings, only to spend time together when the mood struck. It felt so much like something a man would set up that his mind wouldn't even let him consider it for more than a few seconds at a time. She wanted him—*as a whore*.

Neil's body twitched at the thought of being Samantha's relief source. Sharing, no. Her occasional contact? In a heartbeat. It just wouldn't be enough for him.

## 2

“Someone will find out. It's too soon.”

“It's covered.” Adrian had his teaching wall firmly in place. “Today's training says flame throwers and shotguns, and the radio had elevator music playing.”

They also had smoke detectors on the perimeter to keep the camp from being twitchy. The next time a wildfire wanted to trap them, they'd have more than a two-minute warning. Another of the effects was for Adrian to tell each Eagle team to choose a member to send up as their medic. During the height of the chaos, John, Anne, and Angela hadn't been able to keep up with the flow of injuries. They had to have more doctors.

Nervous, Angela studied the targets, not sure she could do what he wanted. The only time she'd done this, she was in danger, and having Marc's eyes on them didn't help. He was her shadow.

“Angie?”

She met Adrian's eye, her own baby-blues narrowing. “Yes?”

Adrian snapped his mouth shut, understanding the challenge he'd been about to offer, Marc's method, was off limits. *Fine. Honesty is better anyway.*

“Yes, it is. Give me a minute and I'll try.”

Adrian waited, again thinking she was so much more than he'd hoped for. It was crazy the way she could keep up with him and the others here, but none of them really knew what she might be

capable of in time. Safe Haven held a lot of power now, but Angela was the strongest.

Angela dug deep, finding the fear and loathing that she'd experienced during the wolf attack, when Max had shown her that fire could save lives as well as take them. When she began to mutter, deep orange flames spun out of her fingers and began to travel up her hands.

Angela heard Marc move for the extinguishers and slung her arm toward the first tree in a bit of a panic.

Tiny flames glided through the air to dissipate with the light breeze.

Angela drew out another handful of fire, and lingered with it, realizing it wasn't burning her. She threw again, harder this time.

The fire died out before reaching the tree.

Adrian gave an instruction as she pulled more for a third attempt. "Try to shape them before you throw."

Angela paused, looking at him with power filled eyes that roiled like an ocean. "Will you do something too?"

Adrian heard the note of worry. She was oozing unease at this display.

Angela snorted, slinging her arm again. "Unease. Yeah, let's go with that."

The flame ball sprayed the lower branch and trunk but didn't catch.

Angela hated these weaknesses that he found and drew out, but each one they conquered healed something inside her. It was worth the pain.

"What would you like me to do, Angie?"

"What can you do?" she countered.

Adrian's eyes flashed. "More since you came."

"Like what?"

Adrian's hand rose toward the bottom of the first tree.

Angela heard the raw hum of power that she'd been so certain no one else put off but her.

It vibrated from the leader, causing the bubble above them to ripple with a fresh blast of golden color. The tree he was aiming

for, however, began to crack and wither, falling into splinters.

Angela turned to him in confusion as the tree died. She found him staring at her injury.

“I kill. It’s what I was put here to do.”

“You also create!” Angela was shaken by his demonstration.

Adrian thought of the blood on his hands and slid them into his pockets. “I’m a necessary evil for this new world. Later, when things have calmed, someone purer will take my place.”

“Purer?”

Adrian sighed. “Right there, and you can’t see.” He leaned against a tree that wasn’t in their target zone. “Why do you think we need female Eagles so badly?”

“Survival, the future.”

“But for what role? Why can’t it stay like it is now, with two separate halves of an army that can come together when needed?”

Angela had to think about that one. She did it while pulling the flames forward. They wound around her in a sensation of dangerous warmth and addictive power.

Angela brought her other hand up to form a ball, rolling slightly... The fire curved into the perfect sphere of her palm. She threw it as if it was a baseball, hitting the next mold covered tree in the lower branches.

The flames shot upward, cracking and cackling in gleeful release. But it didn’t take the tree down, quickly burning out on the mold.

“Again.”

Angela obediently pulled more fire, stifling a yawn. She used up energy fast doing physical magic. She wondered briefly if Marc would mind being drained tonight and flushed at the thought. No, he wouldn’t.

The flames in her palm weren’t hot, though there was no mistaking the heat coming from them. Angela stared at the fire for a long moment, trying to banish her fear of burning alive.

When she tossed it, a streak of Adrian’s golden light went flying by to merge with her ball of flame. It hit the tree in one huge blast, showering enough heat to send the moldy pine up in heavy



orange and black plumes. It burnt quickly, snapping and cracking.

Angela understood in a blinding flash. “There’s no limit to the damage we can do when we throw together!”

Adrian had to swallow the praise. He was too emotional to deliver even a single personal remark without crossing a line. “Yes. Harder days are coming. We’re going to need everything we can gather. That means magic, as much as beans and bullets.”

Angela gave him what he needed, scared but willing. “I conquered the Eagles. Give me a timeline to get the camp to accept me for what I really am...and behind me, the rest of us.”

Adrian’s chest cramped, but in joy rather than pain. He’d foreseen this moment long, cold months ago, and obsessed over what to say. Now, with so much death on his conscience, the words fell easily. “Before we leave our country. Only knowing what we can do will give them the courage to go.”

“I know we’ll have to, and that we will, but I’m scared of why.” She scanned the hostile landscape. “It’s bad right now, but we could make a stand here.”

“Things are going to get worse. We need them out of the crossfire.”

“So we can teach them how to rebuild America,” Angela confirmed. These nights, her dreams and his were often linked. They were learning it together and trying to catch everything. “When will you start bringing us together to do things?”

Adrian shrugged. Another of his secret dreams was coming to life and he couldn’t even celebrate it with her. “When the camp can handle it, and once again, it’s all on you.” That’s why it had to be someone who was stronger than she’d ever given herself credit for. This was no easy role that he’d assigned.

“Do you know yet, what it is that we’re all being brought together for?”

Adrian shrugged again, feeling Marc’s eyes burning holes into his back. “I have a list, with a few of the more likely at the top.”

“Do I want to know any of them?”

“Not if you want to sleep tonight.” He turned away. “Take down the rest of that line if you can. Marc’s got enough

restlessness to fill you back up.”

Angela didn't turn to look. Marc would do his duty and let her handle hers. Things were good with them that way now.

Marc waited patiently for Angela to burn the remaining trees. He'd heard enough of their conversation to have his other worry confirmed, but it was little compared to watching Adrian and Angela work together. That one combination blast had sent a jolt into his heart. *Why can't I have a gift like that? Then I could compete.*

Angela didn't frown or let him know that she'd caught the bitterness in his mind. *He doesn't understand what it's like.* Marc wanted to have power, but it didn't work that way. The power held them. They eventually learned to control or cage it.

Angela joined Marc, covered in a fine sheen of sweat. The last tree was the one she should have started with. Sending the ball of flames fifty feet was exhausting after the first throw. It had taken nearly ten to get the tree to flame up. Angela sagged against the fence. She didn't know if her terror of fire had been conquered yet, but if not, she definitely had a good start on it.

Marc gave her the towel in his back pocket, the one Adrian had handed him without speaking.

Angela smiled at the thoughtfulness.

Marc gritted his teeth. Adrian was trying to make it clear that he wouldn't interfere, but the smell of him on the cloth was causing Angela to inhale loud enough for him to hear.

*Addictive!* Angela covered, dropping the cloth. “Tell Hilda there might be mold in the laundry water. Time to change it.”

Marc snickered happily as they headed for camp.

Angela lowered her tired lids to hide the deceit. Every time jealousy brought something between them, she would either kill it or find a way to use it in their favor.

Charlie's quiet words sent apprehension through Kyle. They'd moved, gotten the camp reset and settled down. He'd done his usual job—after John's care in the ambulance while they rolled. He was covered in scrapes, cuts, bruises, but none of them were serious. His team knew how and where to hit as a punishment.

“Kyle.”

“I haven't been banned from her, have I?”

Charlie shook his head. “No. They know that will backfire but be careful. Not all of the camp is satisfied.”

Kyle nodded. “Tell her ten minutes.”

Charlie's tone was full of Angela's disapproval as he repeated her exact words. “*When she's asleep, so I can have your full attention.*”

Kyle's shame flooded his face, but triumph settled into his heart. Jennifer was his. Everyone knew it now.

Charlie shook his head. *Adults are so blind.* He walked to Marc, who was standing outside the tent where his mom was set up. They both stayed quiet until Kyle was out of earshot.

Marc wondered if this was going to be another of those private conversations. He'd dreaded them at first, not sure what to say, but that had changed.

Matt walked by on his way to the training area, but he didn't look at either of them. Marc understood the pimply teen was probably feeling left out of the new friendship Charlie, Jennifer and Becky were enjoying. Seth and Kyle were relieved by it, though. They knew what Charlie could do for their girls here, but more than that, the protective men hoped he would tell them if something was wrong that they hadn't accounted for.

“Anything I can do?” Charlie offered.

“Think it's all good. You're welcome to hang, though.”

Charlie nodded happily.

Marc studied him with quick glances. He was still getting taller, but thanks to the training and healthy food, Charlie was starting to fill out in other areas as well. He was more muscular, skin tanning, hair growing longer. He and Angela had both seen female gazes following their son. Ready for him to be a part of the

couples forming here or not, Charlie was a handsome boy who was drawing notice. Soon, some lucky girl would find herself the center of his world.

Marc slung an arm around Charlie's shoulders and noted they were firmer, wider than a week ago. The teenager looking at him in concern was so much like glancing in a mirror that Marc suddenly felt old.

"You're not. Stop it."

Marc grinned. "Then slow down a little with the growing up, will ya?"

Charlie's head rotated toward the mess, where Hilda was instructing a large group of new women. In that gaggle, half a dozen females looked at him invitingly.

Charlie stared at the tables, clearly appraising.

*You don't like anyone yet, my ass.*

Charlie sniggered, but didn't respond. When he'd said he wanted to be sure the first time, he'd meant it. And that required a basis for comparison. The problem was that he had yet to find anyone who compared so he could implement the test. The woman he had his eye on was just that—a woman. These younger camp females didn't even make him stare anymore. Actually, none of the herd did since he'd accidentally gotten a glimpse of Tracy through the peephole in the female camper. *She has the biggest breasts I've ever seen.*

She was also servicing a number of the Eagles—including Kyle if rumor was to be believed. Charlie thought that was improbable from the way Kyle doted on Jennifer, but he didn't care. Neither of Tracy's main men were interested in anything serious. They both had other plans. At some point, Tracy would be free, and Charlie wanted her. It didn't bother him in the least that everyone called her a slut. In fact, that was part of what Charlie liked about her. He had taken the talks with Marc and Adrian to heart. She would know how to keep him satisfied, and then he'd never cheat. It was a perfect solution to all the drama he refused to become a part of.

*And if you find someone else who draws you later? Charlie's*

witch asked spitefully. *Will you stay with someone you don't love?*

Charlie didn't answer. That was why he had to be sure. He didn't ever want to cause someone the pain that the people around him were suffering. As long as he wasn't sure, he would wait before revealing it. When he was ready to do that, however, he wanted to be set to compete for her.

"I'll be around." The teenager moved toward the training tent for a workout.

Marc sighed. *There goes trouble.*

#### 4

Kyle's tense shoulders in the flap drew a grunt from Angela. "I'm not the enemy. I used to be a teammate."

Kyle ducked into the tent, leaving the flap open. "I know."

"Then why the dread?"

Kyle only snorted, carefully lowering himself into the chair across from her and the small folding table. It reminded him so much of Adrian that he had to smother a frown. He'd noticed Kenn bringing it in as he climbed from the ambulance, along with a set of envelopes, but he hadn't made the connection. Adrian had her doing meetings for him. *What else did I miss during my obsession?*

Angela let him work through it, not interrupting with any of the scolds or praise she could have given. Kyle was an extremely smart man. He hadn't earned his place with impulsive decisions. She was sure Jennifer wasn't one either.

Nor was his time with Tracy—the worry he was trying to hide. Kyle didn't have to be concerned. Angela approved the choice, though she was unable to help feeling a bit vindicated that Adrian's relief source wasn't spending enough time with him to be satisfied. "Let's start with why. And don't feed me that shit you've spread around the camp. *I know better.*"

Kyle flushed, forced to reveal part of his long hidden ugliness. This was why he'd been staying away from Angela despite the incredibly strong bond they shared. "There's no way I can keep doing this job for him unless I settle my mind."

Angela waited for him to explain, sensing the determined person headed their way.

“I’m evil. The things I do are wrong. The Eagles are good. Getting rid of these killers is right. It’s as if I’m being ripped apart.” Kyle closed his eyes. “She can save me.”

“That’s a lot to put on one pregnant girl’s shoulders.” Angela leaned forward. “Exactly how will she save you?”

“I’ll teach him that it doesn’t matter if he kills, so long as it’s for the greater good.” Jennifer was in the flap, Dog at her heels.

Kyle dropped his head in shame.

And concentration. There was now a door in his mind that would always be closed to her. Kyle mourned the loss even while being grateful for the return of his control.

Jennifer didn’t look away from Angela. “Am I allowed to speak for him?”

“Yes.”

Reading them both, Angela discovered that Kyle didn’t want Jennifer to take any of the fallout if he was banished; that’s why he’d set it up this way. *How sweet.* And naïve on his part. If he were voted out, the camp would find a way to hurt her for disrupting the flow of the Eagles.

“Come in.” Angela noted the bigger belly, the stiffness of Jennifer’s movements. She looked better, but it was obvious she was much too young for what her body had been forced into.

Kyle stood, directing Jennifer into the chair.

Angela gestured. “What would you like to say?”

Jennifer wasn’t one to play games when it came to getting what she wanted. “Kyle asked me to be his mate. I’ve said yes, with conditions.”

Angela’s eyes spun to him in sharp disapproval. “Really.”

Kyle groaned. “I need her, Angie. In so many ways, I can’t list them all.”

“And what about her needs?”

“I’m taking care of them!” Kyle snapped back guiltily. “And I’ve made their deal!”

“But you haven’t stuck to it, otherwise we wouldn’t be here

right now.” Angela didn’t like this part of her job, but she didn’t cut him any slack.

“I *asked* him to kiss me, to be sure I wanted him.”

Jennifer’s words were a lie. Kyle’s stunned face was the evidence. Angela snorted, leaning back. “The camp won’t believe that any more than I do.”

Jennifer locked gazes with Angela. “That doesn’t matter to me. He and I have an arrangement in place, one that *I* like.”

There was steel in that tone, in those golden eyes that resembled Dog’s. Angela studied the girl, evaluating. “The camp will say you’re too young to know what you want or need.”

“But he isn’t,” Jennifer pointed out. “And you all trusted him before me, right?”

Angela admired the girl’s tactics. “Yes. We never expected Kyle to react this way to any female, let alone one so young. It makes us worry.”

“It does the same to him, but I’ve talked to Charlie. Wasn’t that how you and Marc started out?”

Angela opened her mouth to scold and realized she was trapped—by a fourteen-year-old girl who had the heart of Adrian’s *highest* Eagle. That said a lot, didn’t it?

Kyle was staring at Jennifer as though she was his reason for breathing. It was an expression Angela and Marc had shared for all the years of their childhood, and that included when it would have gotten him arrested. Love knew no boundaries of time or distance. “I’m going to recommend that you be declared an adult, so your choices are your own.” Angela raised a hard brow toward the surprised mobster. “That is what you were hoping for when you planned this, right?”

“Yes.” Kyle forced himself to talk past the lump in his throat. *Why did I think Angie didn’t know?* “She needed time to get to know me, to feel the connection. I’d never hurt her. I gave that promise during our first night together and I meant it.”

“And if she grows up and wants freedom? A new man? You gonna be like Kenn and stalk her?”

“No!” Kyle protested. “I’ll let her go.”

“Like hell you will! Just be good to me, and I’ll never want anyone else.” Jennifer scowled, flushing at her outburst.

Kyle was lost in the daze of getting what he wanted most—to be allowed to love her.

Jennifer smiled, hand over her stomach. “You make me feel safe.”

“A friend can do that too,” Kyle was starting to realize how crowding her emotions, trying to give her no other choice, had been wrong.

Jennifer tilted her head as he knelt in front of her. “You are my friend. You have been all along.”

“It doesn’t have to be more...” He was unable to hide the misery behind the offer.

Jennifer blushed. “I was going to insist on that, being friends only, but something Chris told me made me realize I want more.”

“That was where the...relief question came from?” Kyle asked, letting his hand cover hers as the babies jostled for position.

It was as if they were alone as they worked out the bonds holding them together. Angela took it all in, concern easing.

“Yes.” Jennifer forced herself to come clean. “He said you would take a woman here, in secret, to keep from hurting me if I didn’t want you like that.”

Kyle stiffened. “They’ve been informed I won’t be using their services.”

“They? As in more than one?” Jennifer’s cute face squashed up in anger. “That makes me want to hit you!”

Kyle chuckled, delighted. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“You can. I’d never hit you back.”

“Even when I tell you that I’ve already signed up for the Eagles?”

“No. Never.”

His hand over her stomach had tensed for an instant, but she hadn’t felt her usual flare of fear. It was liberating. Jennifer finished making it clear that she wasn’t nearly as innocent as she’d led everyone to believe. “When we were in that farmhouse, I had



to make a choice. I knew I could use the things you were feeling to control you. That's all it was at first for me, aside from how safe you made me feel. I saw what you could do for my baby and I chose to lead you on. I'm not sorry I used you that way." She looked at him in regret and victory. "I'm also not saying all this to keep you out of trouble."

Kyle took her confession to heart and delivered one of his own. "I knew you would, Jen. I used your worry over the delivery and Safe Haven's reaction. I'm sorry, I just..."

"Want me," she supplied.

"Yes." His hand curled protectively over the top bulge, caressing what would be his son or daughter in a couple of months. "Them, too. I can't take away what he did to you, but I can swear it won't ever happen again. We'll be the family you're missing."

She sighed as his touch began to settle the babies down. Her pale hand against Kyle's extremely tanned fingers was a harsh contrast, a bad omen of their compatibility her mom might have said, but Jennifer didn't listen to that voice. Her mom hadn't always been right, like being an escort. Jennifer understood now that her mom could have been one of Adrian's Runners if she'd wanted to be. Instead, she'd liked her life of moral depravity. Jennifer hadn't, but that experience had kept her alive during captivity and she was grateful for it now. Without her mom's voice whispering, telling her what to do, she would have been one of the hundreds of corpses Cesar left in his wake.

"I like the deal we have." She flushed. "And when I'm stronger, I think you won't scare me as much."

Kyle pressed an intense, chaste kiss to the back of her hand. "We'll go slowly, with *everything*."

Jennifer stood up, silently insisting on being held.

Kyle surrounded her with his killer's arms, heart complete for the first time in his life. *I'm wanted!*

Angela slipped out of the tent, smiling. *Love. It screws with everyone at some point.*

“Why are we stopping?”

Shawn pointed toward the edge of the creek where a group of wild turkeys was foraging in the bushes.

Neil’s truck came to a stop, lights flashing off.

Samantha realized this was their prey. She was relieved. She hadn’t been looking forward to more deer.

“You stay with Neil.”

She ignored the happily observing men in the seats behind her. “What?”

Shawn tried not to smirk. He liked Samantha and didn’t want to offend her. “He switched you for our XO. You’ll play that role today.”

Samantha swallowed nervously. Neil had done it on purpose, so she would have to spend time with him.

*Wasn’t that part of why you wanted to come along? You wanted human contact. Now, you’re getting it.* “Fine!” Samantha closed the door, heading for Neil’s truck, but even in her anger, she knew not to scare the birds away by slamming it. Safe Haven needed the food.

Samantha slid into the passenger seat of Neil’s truck with a sharp glare that dared him to try starting a personal conversation.

Neil kept his mind on the mission. “This is what I need.”

Samantha scanned the brief list he’d prepared while driving, judging from the messy writing. His scrawls were usually neat and tight.

It didn’t appear to be anything she couldn’t do. “Okay.”

“We’re the flushers. We make the noise, and the rest of the crew captures them in nets.”

“Taking some alive?”

“Yes. Chris thinks he can raise these too.”

Samantha shrugged. The vet appeared to be doing well so far. Most of the animals he’d added to the collection were still alive, with quite a few of them pregnant. That thought had need, sharp and heavy, settling into her gut.

Neil leaned over to pull something from the glovebox, letting

his scent hit her. Charlie wasn't the only one who was studying these postwar females. Neil had noticed Samantha used a light spray of perfume. He'd taken it to mean she liked her man to smell good too. He subtly waited for any reaction. With the windows up, she should be getting a full blast.

Samantha was. Neil's musky, tempting scent was one of her favorites. Polo on a man with that attitude of control was attention getting, but she was smart enough to know it was being used as a weapon to wear her down. She hit the window button and began breathing through her mouth.

Neil frowned, quickly sitting back. She didn't like it. *Damn. Something different?* Sighing inwardly, the trooper skipped on to the next ambush. He grinned at her. "Ready to go be covered in glory?"

Samantha couldn't resist his excitement or the challenge. She leered. "You know it."

Neil did. She wanted the same things that he and the rest of Adrian's army did, to be useful and be recognized for it. They were a perfect match. If only he could make *her* see that.

Samantha joined the men at the rear of the vehicles, taking her air horn and the long, thick leather gloves the flushers were required to wear.

As she and Neil softly stepped toward the far end of the creek, the nauseating thrill of battle fell over her mind. This is what she'd come for too, as much as the human contact. She didn't have to have a man, but she was desperate for this ego boost.

"Ready?"

Samantha was unable to keep from flirting at Neil's innocent question. "Born that way."

Neil's eyes flashed with hunger. "Prove it!"

Samantha hit the button on her horn instead of grabbing him, scattering the turkeys.

She and Neil stayed back, occasionally hitting their horns to keep the birds from fleeing. Gunshots rang continuously as the team took aim.

When they'd bagged enough for a good stock, nets were brought out to capture the requested dozen. The angry birds fought hard. It took them more time to load the birds into the trucks than it had to actually capture them with the nets. Turkeys were mean.

"You gonna live?"

Neil slung blood onto the browning grass. "Affirmative. Just got my first turkey bite. Can't go until the award shows up."

Samantha had a number of scratches and marks too, but only Neil was bleeding.

Neil did quick first aid, dumping alcohol over the wounds twice before adding ointment and a bandage. He looked up as he finished. "Did you do yourself?"

Samantha flushed at her thoughts, aware of the others lingering at the rear of the trucks. Except for the three snipers in the trees, they were alone. Her lips twitched. "Later, maybe."

Neil came over to the hood she was leaning against. None of her injuries appeared to be serious. He let it go but he didn't back off. "Can we talk a minute?"

She tensed.

Neil grunted. "I'll make it quick; then you can go back to ignoring me."

Samantha didn't tell him that was the only way she could leave him alone. "Get it over with, then."

Neil's pitch lowered, gaze softening. "I miss you. I'd like to spend some time together that isn't work."

Samantha wanted that too. "Not a good idea."

Neil snapped his mouth shut. "Fine!" He spun toward the creek to get their used equipment.

Samantha followed. "Neil, hang on."

He stopped but didn't turn.

She sighed again. "I can only treat you guys the same."

"You know, by now, our team will survive?"

"Yes." Samantha sighed ruefully. She should have known Neil was smart enough to understand what she'd done.

"What can I say to convince you?"

"I don't think there is anything. I'm not made for what either

of you have in mind.”

Neil spun around, embarrassed that he wasn't enough for her. “What do you want from me?!”

“Why can't you both be a friend?”

His response wasn't a surprise.

“I can't share. I'm barely okay with being your...” He stopped himself.

“Whore?” she supplied coolly.

Neil winced but didn't deny the title. “It's not what I want, but if that's the only place you have for me, I'll take it. I don't even see other women now.”

Samantha was instantly elated. It meant he hadn't picked anyone.

“I need to think.” She was flooded with nervous confusion. *Am I really going to do this to all of us?*

Neil grunted. “I've finished my shopping now. I'm ready to buy or steal, whichever you'll allow.”

It sent her to their second kiss, to the one he'd wanted for comparison. Apparently, it had done to him, what it had to her. Samantha paused on the way to the truck, nose filled with his scent. She didn't want the drama, but she did want him. “You smell good, Neil. Too good for a hunting trip.”

The trooper leered, confidence restored. “Wait until you get me fresh out of the shower. I smell like a French whore.”

She spun around, ready to let him have it at the continued game when she'd said she needed time to think, and saw he was just as surprised by the spark as she was.

Samantha groaned, moving for Shawn's truck. “Damn you.”

“For what? I was—”

*Splash!*

Samantha turned back but didn't see him. “Where'd you go, Neil?”

Her call brought the Eagles her way. Neil wouldn't leave her alone. They knew that.

Samantha hurried to the creek edge. Had he fallen in? “Oh, Shit!”

“Shoot it!” Neil fought for breath as he was dragged back down.

Samantha fumbled for her gun as her eyes found the end of the large python coiled around Neil’s body. Its head was floating on the ripples as they struggled. She fired without hesitating.

Neil choked, going under as the coils tightened.

“Neil!” Samantha jumped in with her knife in hand.

It only took them a minute to get the snake’s corpse off Neil and pull him onto the bank, where he lay coughing and chortling.

Samantha stayed by his side. “What the hell, Neil? You know things come out of the water now!”

He was still giving the occasional cough. “Distracted.”

Samantha flushed as his team frowned at her. “Not my fault. I didn’t switch out members.”

“But you did show up when you weren’t on the list,” Shawn pointed out. Samantha shooting at Neil hadn’t been funny at first, but now, it would become a team joke.

“I always go on the hunting runs!” Sam protested.

“Yes, you do.” Shawn eyed his team leader. Had Neil left her off the list on purpose?

“I didn’t think you wanted to be around...me.” Neil had started to say us but hated to draw attention to the way he’d left his XO in camp to take her along.

“I don’t!” She sighed. “Didn’t. Stop pushing me, Neil!” Samantha shoved to her feet but stayed close. “You want a hand into the truck, or should we just roll your ass back into the damn creek?”

Neil chuckled, full of the adrenalin that came from surviving. “A hand would be nice, thanks.”

The rest of the hunting team watched her slide an arm around his waist and tense when his came up to her shoulders. It was the first time they’d been this close since he’d kissed her; lust sizzled off both of them. Neil’s reaction was to be expected—he was a man, and he’d almost died. For Samantha though, the needs appeared to be just as great. None of the team was surprised when she placed

a soft kiss to his cold cheek.

“You gotta stop doing this shit to me, Neil.”

Neil was so surprised by her action that he grinned like a fool and caved without any further resistance. “Sorry, Sammi.”

The Eagles chuckled and went to finish loading the turkeys and supplies. It was time to go home.

## 6

Kevin drew on his courage. “Would you like to have dinner with me?”

Cynthia looked up in surprise. Other than lessons, the males here hadn’t shown her any interest. She raked him with a brutal gaze.

Kevin was neat and clean, and not so much bigger than her that she would feel intimidated. His body was lean and tight, his short, blond hair neatly kept. He looked like an all-American playboy. *What does he want with me?*

Kevin slid onto the bench without waiting for an invitation. He was certain there wouldn’t be one. “You’re legal now.”

That revealed a lot more than she’d expected. The reporter leaned back, studying him. She’d seen Kevin watching her, had run into him more than once during her sneaking and spying, but she hadn’t thought it was an attraction on his part.

Kevin waited patiently, taking in her scent, the glint of her hair in the brief sunrays struggling through the grit. He found her sexy and exotic, and always had. Now that she was accepted, and he’d waited long enough to be sure she and Jeremy really were finished, he intended to make himself known. The other Eagles hadn’t decided how to handle her yet, except to treat her as a teammate, but Kevin wanted more. Especially after sticking his nose in her business.

“Yes.”

Kevin blinked. “Yes?”

Cynthia snorted, slightly attracted to the heat she read. He wanted her, and he wanted her to know it. “When?”

“After I get back from Little Rock.”

“Sure.”

Kevin stood up, waving to someone over her shoulder. “I asked Adrian to put us together for some of the training lessons, to see if you might like spending time around me. Is that okay?”

The feeling of being chosen, of it being done publicly, made Cynthia blush. She was willing to give him the same chance that he was extending to her. “Thank you for telling me. I wouldn’t have liked it if I had heard that from the camp.”

Kevin slowly reached forward and took her hand, officially declaring her as his choice. He placed a soft kiss to the back of it and met her eye. “I’ll never lie to you or cheat. I don’t beat women, and I’ll help make you strong enough to kick my ass anytime you feel like it. I’m not much on kids, but we can compromise in the future. Oh, and I like Matt. I could help you with him.”

Cynthia gaped. *And people say females deliver too much information at one time!*

Realizing he’d revealed more of his feelings than he’d meant to, Kevin let go and stepped back, cheeks dark red. “Sorry.”

He left with a stiff stride that told her she would have to make the next move now or he wouldn’t come near her again.

The reporter tried not to smile at the feeling as the camp stared at her, but she couldn’t stop the curve of her lips. *Being wanted feels nice.*

## 7

A loud whistle got Seth’s attention, but it was already too late. “Becky?”

The couple scrambled for clothes. Despite the beating he and Kyle had taken, they hadn’t been banned from their females and both men were still spending every minute alone with them that they could steal.

“It’s your mom...” Peggy froze at the sight.

Seth helped Becky finish pulling the shirt over her bare skin, then wrapped his Eagles jacket around her shoulders, lovingly



adjusting it.

“Mom.” Becky stiffly greeted her parent.

Peggy’s daze broke. She left Seth’s tent without a word.

Now on duty nearby, Samantha saw the older woman and understood where she was going, what she meant to do. The storm tracker reached her before she got to the mess. “Don’t do it.”

Peggy didn’t answer, too furious.

Samantha grabbed at her arm. “Listen—”

*Slap!*

Samantha reeled back from the unexpected hit, letting go.

Peggy turned toward the crowded mess, toward the people who would help her lynch Seth. It wouldn’t take much to convince them that fifteen was too young.

Sam grabbed her again, ducking the swing this time. She gave Peggy a light head butt that sent her to the ground. “Sit there a minute!”

Peggy didn’t answer, only raised a hand to her throbbing chin and glowered hatefully.

Sam knelt down and kept her voice low. It didn’t hide her loathing. “This mess is *your* fault. You were too busy caring for Adrian’s kids to tend your own. You owe her!”

Peggy’s face turned bright red, but she didn’t interrupt.

“Rick raped her; he would have killed her. If not for Seth, she would be dead, maybe even by her own hand. He’s helping her in the only way she *asked* for, and she’s surviving. Don’t you dare make her feel ashamed for that!”

“He’s a monster!” Peggy spat, meaning Seth.

Disgusted, Sam stood up, glaring. “By all rights, she should hate you. Accepting Seth might be your only chance at saving your relationship with your daughter. I’d think about that before you go gathering a mob.”

Samantha left the woman on her ass in the dirt, where she belonged.

Around them, the Eagles nodded in agreement and respect. Samantha was earning her place among the Eagles. They had orders to prevent a riot from happening, but she had beaten them

to it.

Peggy stared as the blonde woman vanished into dawn's shadows, the words stinging. It was all true, every bit. Realizing she'd gotten her child hurt was a terrible burden. Peggy began to sob in guilt and shame. "I'm so sorry!"

Surprising everyone, Doug appeared behind her, unable to ignore Peggy's anguish even though she deserved it.

He knelt down. "Come here, lass."

The emotion in his voice allowed Peggy to accept his comfort. She let the big man hold her close while she cried.

Samantha's day had been a full one. Her night, however, was slow and frustrating as she struggled with the last line of morality holding her back. It wasn't that she wanted to act like a whore. She wanted to act like a man. It was a hard adjustment mentally, to be evolving in these things while she went about regular camp life. Some nights, she wasn't sure how she was doing in her fight.

*Something's coming.*

Samantha felt the chill and closed her eyes as the mental door swung open.

On duty nearby, Neil and Jeremy both noticed, but it was Marc who came to her side and gathered the information.

Neither Eagle mentioned it, but both men felt left out. Neil's choice to give his team a break had been a solid one, but that wouldn't hold much longer. They were almost ready to get back into the action.

## 8

"She's right." Doug tried to be gentle. "It's gone too far now." Peggy didn't answer.

They were in a dim corner of the mini mess with Allan covering Doug's post. He'd let her calm down and then brought her here, glad to be doing something more useful than just guard duty for a change. "Lass, he—"

"Saved her life."

Doug let the curt interruption pass. “When you see them together, you’ll understand.”

Her hand tightened on the cup at the thought of being around the couple.

Doug understood in a sudden flash of intuition. *That* adult male wasn’t the one she’d chosen for her daughter. How much of Becky’s freedom had been intentional? “You set it up for her to be with Neil!”

The hard woman didn’t blink. “I want her to be more than some Eagle’s woman. He would have taken her there.”

“*You* want. What about hers?”

Peggy’s snort was bitter. “She doesn’t know anything about the real world.”

“Not true,” Doug denied firmly. “She’s a war survivor, a rape victim, and Seth’s lover. Those things are unchangeable. Your dreams for her are dead, like she should be.”

*Slap!*

Doug didn’t react, though everyone close enough to hear or see it did. He knew what he’d drawn, what he was forcing her to accept.

Peggy shoved herself to her feet. “I hate you!”

Doug was surprised to register the sting. He hadn’t felt much of anything for a long time. “No, you hate yourself.”

Fury...and awareness. “I have, for most of my life.” She stood there, torn.

Doug nudged her cup of untouched coffee. “Sit down and tell me why.”

He didn’t think she would. The gambit of emotions crossing her lined face was dangerous for a man with only a small amount of female experience.

The fight went out of her in a rush. Peggy sank down, looking at the bright red handprint. “I’m sorry.”

Doug gave her a small smirk. “I expect you’ll find a different target next time.”

To his surprise, she chuckled, bitter but no longer violent.

“Aye.”

There was a lilt to her word that shook him. Not so much the sound of their shared heritage, but the attraction it aroused.

Doug shifted subtly and refilled his cup to buy time. He stole a quick glance at her. She was staring toward the male tents.

Doug grunted, drawing her attention. “You have questions, I’d imagine.”

Peggy traded some of her anger for fear. “What happens now?”

“They’ll leave until she’s older if you refuse to accept it. They’re not going to be split up any more than Kyle and Jennifer are.”

“She’ll leave me?”

Doug didn’t tell Peggy the couple was making plans. Seth hadn’t taken his correction as well as Kyle. “They’ll probably trail camp. You could go out for visits, but if you can’t support them here and now, so they can stay, I’d guess you won’t be welcome.”

“I won’t see her?”

Doug delivered the rest of the truth without malice. “It all depends on what choice you make right now. She doesn’t need you to rouse these people against Seth or Adrian. That won’t help her and she’s smart enough to know it. She needs you to be her mother.”

Chapter Seventeen BK3  
**You Caused This**

10 miles south of Muskogee, Oklahoma

**June 19<sup>th</sup>**

**1**

“**C**onvoy halt. Emergency plan A.”

There was a pause of fear...then the entire convoy began yanking on steering wheels and searching the apocalyptic landscape through dusty windows. The heavy winds that Samantha had warned them of were gone, leaving fresh debris to be cleared or avoided. It also added huge trees that hadn't been able to withstand another storm, making driving tense as limbs cracked and popped above them.

Adrian waited. Kyle was probably staring at Jennifer right now. The hum of raw power had to be filling his truck.

*One minute, moving slow.*

Adrian waved the scheduled guards forward as his camp fled for the mess that was going up in record time. The canopy over it was now lined in lead. Three full teams struggled to erect it as camp members ran into them and each other, shoving.

*I don't feel a direct threat, but...*

“But it's dark when you look.”

*How do you know that?*

Adrian got out of the semi without answering, heading for Marc's Blazer.

Marc was on guard outside it.

Charlie and Dog stayed near Jennifer as Kyle patrolled the stopped refugee camp with his team and a group of female rookies.

Adrian waited impatiently, ready to reveal all sorts of secrets to save lives this time. He was tired of letting people die because the herd couldn't handle the things they could do. He wasn't sure

how much more of that he could take.

*Thirty seconds.*

*Which direction?*

*Ahead.*

Adrian waved two teams to their flank and sent three to the front.

Angela got out of the Blazer with the witch's red eyes in plain view for anyone to see. "Be careful of these!"

Marc started to step in front of her, but Adrian was already there. He grabbed her arm, meaning to turn her back to the vehicle.

Lightning flashed overhead, thick and hungry.

Angela moaned at the feel of Adrian's hands on her skin. *Yes!*

His instant wave of need in response washed over her as if they were alone and allowed.

Adrian jerked backward, but too late. The witch lunged forward, drawing what he'd been denying even in their dreams.

Marc blocked the view from the overloaded mess, simmering. He knew she occasionally took energy from other men, *but to see it!* He instinctively knew that Angie didn't crave *him* that way.

*May I?* the inner Marine begged.

Marc growled. "No."

The sound of it snapped Angela and Adrian out of the intense power-lock. They stared in horror. There was no one to blame, no scene to cover up and no crime committed, but the line had been crossed.

*They're here!*

Adrian turned from Marc's fury, now more determined than ever to stay back. When she and Marc failed, it had to be because of them.

Marc didn't care about the approaching threat or the asshole that had just walked away. What he cared about were the dangerous realizations he saw in Angela's eyes. She had all of the truth now—Adrian wanted her in his bed—and her reaction, *that moan!* said she felt the same on some level.

Angela scowled, full of shame and anger at the unfairness of paying for not having done anything wrong. "I've always known,

but you just couldn't leave it alone."

She grimaced, confirming Marc's suspicions. "And neither could he."

Angela left him there, moving toward the front of the convoy to join Kyle.

*Now, may I kill him?*

*No.* Marc moved to Angela's flank, not bothering to stand between her and Adrian as they waited for the slowly approaching vehicles. He'd already thought of trying to keep them apart. That was a waste of time. Marc still hadn't found a better solution than the one he was already employing.

"Because there isn't a solution to be found," Adrian forced the words out. "Feed her more and shit like that won't happen."

Marc wanted to snarl, but the man inside asked when she'd drawn from him last.

"It's no excuse." Angela couldn't take the shame. "I'm sorry for the disrespect I've shown you."

Marc's inner man almost came forward anyway when Adrian didn't tell her the truth, that his need was pulling, not hers.

"Not true." Adrian moved forward as the five vehicles got closer. "She'll always have to draw from someone else. Her needs are more than *you* can satisfy."

Any hope Angela had for peace between them vanished with that one statement. Now that Marc knew, he would always suspect, always search her with those concerned blue eyes. His jealousy wouldn't give him any peace and Adrian knew it. He'd made certain Marc would hurt too.

*Not like what Adrian is suffering, the witch reminded. How does he continue to function while being eaten up that way?*

Angela shoved the witch back in fury. *You caused this with your dream walking, promising him what he can't have!*

The witch cackled ruthlessly. *And who says he can't, my pet? Keep the shields of the past up if you must, but there is no denying what we saw—what you **felt**.*

Angela's frustration boiled. There had to be some way to change that future. She didn't want to be Adrian's. She wanted

Marc!

Marc turned suddenly, waving Neil over to take his place. Angela and Adrian weren't acting as if the approaching cars were a threat and at the moment, Marc didn't think he could stand to see even a single look pass between them. It wasn't just Angela's fragile emotions that Marc worried over. This time, his competition wasn't a sullen, powerless wifebeater or a group of rookies who didn't know what they were doing. It was Adrian, and that extremely manipulative man was none of those things. He was dangerous.

Angela motioned Jennifer toward Adrian. *Keep helping him.*

It was the first silent order she'd given to any of the females.

Jennifer gaped for a few seconds before reluctantly moving that way. Dog and Charlie were her escorts.

Angela followed Marc's stiffly marching steps. When he got into his Blazer and began to dig in his kit, her footsteps quickened. His rifle was in there.

Marc considered it, but only briefly. Not only would it make her hate him, it wouldn't change what had happened. He would have to find a way to live with it.

*Not just you,* Angela sent, hesitating by his door.

Marc grunted, hitting the window button. "Need a few minutes."

Angela got into the passenger seat instead.

Marc growled, not lighting the smoke he'd taken from his kit. "This isn't like last time, Angie, where a quickie in the training tent will fix me."

Angela recoiled in surprise.

"Damn." Marc leaned his head back against the seat. "I'm sorry for saying that."

Angela tried to meet him halfway. "I'm sorry, too. I've tried hard to control the hunger. That's the first..." Angela paused, unable to finish. It had gotten away from her once before, back in South Dakota. "Second time."

Marc's face tightened as he understood, but Adrian's words were rendering him incapable of thinking about anything else. "Is



it true?”

Angela wasn't in any shape to lie to him. “Yes.”

Marc's grip on the wheel tightened. “But, with him?”

Angela forced the words out. If she didn't tell him, Adrian would. “His energy is like mine; it refills the power.”

Marc's pain was on his face as he looked at her. “I'll step aside.”

Angela forgot about the edge he was dangling over. She grabbed his jacket and dragged him toward her. “No, you won't!” Angela stopped them inches apart. “I've wanted you since we were kids, Marc. That hasn't changed!”

*May I?!*

Marc nodded and stepped back. The usual consideration she got from him would be absent with the Marine.

Angela moaned softly when he kissed her, but she felt the difference. Marc's hands were rough, pulling her closer with no care for her fear. His free hand went behind her neck and pulled her onto his lap before she could protest. His hands went to her head, bringing her to him for an intense kiss.

Angela was swept away. This was the old Marc, but all grown up. He didn't hold back or worry over mental issues. He was wild and hers!

Angela kissed him back.

Marc began to understand that all the holding back he was doing had backfired. Marc pushed her sweet lips away, eyes blazing. “I need you!”

Angela nodded shakily. “Whenever you want.”

Marc hissed. He'd been waiting for her to be ready, but it was clear that he shouldn't have. She needed to be bonded with him on every level.

Marc was watching emotions flash across her flushed face. He wasn't hot and bothered like he had been in the training tent—this was a different type of heat—but if she kept looking at him that way, she might get a reminder of why vehicles had back seats.

Angela leaned forward, smiling a bit at the thought. “I'd prefer a bed.”

Marc grinned, eager to get her into one. “What the lady wants, she gets.”

Marc saw the first trace of apprehension enter her eyes.

“Soon?”

Marc sighed. He’d figured on three more weeks of barely satisfying necking, but that was no longer necessary. Except, it was. He wouldn’t change his plans because of what had happened. That would be letting Adrian come between them and the man inside refused to allow that.

“Will you kiss—”

Marc lunged forward to claim her mouth.

## 2

After a few minutes of talking, the five vehicles continued on their way, and the camp watched them in uneasy surprise. They weren’t joining? Didn’t they understand they’d just found safety?

Adrian climbed into his semi and lit a smoke. His hand shook as he keyed the mike. “They’re passing through. Let’s get things loaded up, and our passenger lists checked.”

The small caravan was seven cars and trucks, each with a glittery name on the windows or doors. There was a tool truck, a heavily barred mail truck announcing currency exchanges, a clothing jeep covered in poles and plastic, and even a book wagon. Each store was lined in shelves and baskets that were woefully lacking in what they claimed to have.

The vendors were all female, as were the passengers. It gave Adrian concern, even as he understood the need for it. The females running that show, Carol and Marsha, weren’t about to give up their independence and join Safe Haven, where they had to live side-by-side with those who’d destroyed the world. Adrian was sure they wouldn’t be the last all-female group they met in these new apocalyptic times.

Adrian didn’t watch the group leave, confident his Eagles would. Right now, he needed a few minutes to get back in control.

Adrian’s eyes went to the mirror. He would have to fix this

when they made camp and he had an idea of what would help, but it was hard. *Her reaction!*

Adrian drew in a thick lungful of smoke and blew it back out in a furious stream. Tracy had better be available. The heat would have to be released this time.

Adrian watched Angela kiss Marc, saw Marc's hands tighten on her shoulders.

*Fuck!*

Adrian started his rig and then ground the cigarette out on the back of his hand in a frustrated attempt at distraction.

His teary eyes went to the mirror. Her head was on Marc's chest, a small smile on those cherry lips.

Adrian grimaced in misery. Seeing them together hurt more than any burn. It was the worst pain he'd ever felt.

### 3

Marc was aware of Angela's lingering tension as they climbed from their vehicle. Instead of words, they chose to watch Kyle get camp set up.

Things had changed for Kyle here. He was no longer as admired or respected, but there was little anyone could say about his actions. He was polite to Jennifer, treating her as a ward while everyone got used to them being together. The camp and Eagles weren't taking it easy on him, but he did have a bit of backup. If he hadn't, Angela was sure Adrian would have helped the couple. Ten minutes around them said the same thing Seth and Becky had already given up trying to explain to offended people. Right or wrong, they were going to have their way. The easiest thing to do was let it run its course and protect the females if they ever needed it.

Angela doubted it would become a problem. Both of those males were smitten, unable to think straight at the slightest brush of their mate's hand, and the females were wearing grins and secure cloaks of contentment. Those pairs were here to stay. Safe Haven would have to get used to it. It appeared some members

were trying. There hadn't been a request for a moral vote yet in either case. As long as Peggy didn't protest, and Kyle waited until Jennifer was older to touch her, they might end up happy. It was a perfect setup, guided into place by fate and their perfect leader.

"I'm nobody's perfect anything."

Angela winced. Hadn't she shut that door, not wanting Adrian to sense that she and Marc were about to...get closer?

"Too late for that." Adrian, on his way to the parking area to supervise, pointed toward the small farmhouse. "Enjoy your clean bill of health in a real bed."

Flushing, Angela went to unload her things and get set for tonight's meeting. She didn't like the camp thinking she was getting special treatment, but Marc wasn't above taking advantage of Adrian's need to keep her safe.

*And you, as well,* the witch reminded. *You've more than enjoyed being alone with him.*

She was cleared for full duty now. Angela didn't plan to mention it. She was sure that Adrian hadn't gotten Marc's okay, only John's.

Angela let go of her annoyance, waiting to enter the house until Daryl said it was clear. She marched by the recon team with red cheeks at the knowing looks and comments being exchanged, but she didn't insist on a tent. She wanted any private time with Marc that she could get. That hadn't changed since their first meeting all those years ago. In a few days, she would have to give up their late nights in place of her duty, though. She was going into Little Rock. Marc wasn't.

Kyle caught up with Angela before she made it inside the house. "Do the babies die? Is that why you're looking her over for your team?" He'd tried hard to resist asking the question but failed.

Angela stopped, wanting to tell the truth, but also to keep hiding it. What was the right thing?

"Please! I have to help her."

The witch wouldn't look for Kyle, but it was a question that Adrian had already asked. "What would you give to prevent it?"

Kyle was crushed. That meant they died. He'd expected to be upset, but this pain! He wanted Jenny's babies. "What do I have to do?"

Angela pushed the witch back, preferring to handle this one herself. "Adrian already made that deal for you. If it can be done, he'll see to it."

Kyle's face relaxed as much as he was capable of. "Thank you."

"I see darkness when I look, Eagle." Angela delivered the short warning as she headed inside the house to drop her gear and get cleaned up before the tryout. "Brace for it."

#### 4

"It's good that everyone brought their guns. My Eagles don't go *anywhere* without one." Angela swept the slightly crowded tent, almost shocked by how many women had shown up to try out for her team. She'd been optimistic when she directed Samantha and Cynthia to set up one of the common tents that would hold forty, but it had been a good choice. She had nearly that many waiting patiently for her to begin, eager to fight for her right hand. The honor, the sense of power, was enough to make her laugh aloud. But she didn't.

"We're going to talk; I'll take notes. If I need you to do something that the others have already done, they'll instruct you, so holster those competitive attitudes. I want women who will work together, no matter who directs them. If you already know you can't do that, bow out now."

Samantha forced herself to her feet. "I should go, then. So should Cynthia. We'll kill each other for that slot."

Angela motioned them both forward. "One minute. Tell me why you should get it."

The females had only been prepared for battle. Neither of them spoke.

Angela didn't mock them, but she made her dissatisfaction clear. "Both of you deserve the place, but neither of you can give

me what I need from it. You're too full of yourselves, still, to fit the role."

Before they could protest, Angela held up a hand. "It's not a terrible thing, ladies. Every soul in this camp is going through hard adjustments, learning to adapt to the challenges that are thrown our way. You two are no different."

"Does that mean we're excluded?"

"Only from XO. You'll both have a place on my team—if you can handle the pecking order when I post it."

They left, cloaked in disappointment and failure they weren't sure how to handle.

As they exited the well-guarded area, Samantha and Cynthia stayed together. Doing rounds had become a routine for them, as well as taking the late shift, but there was nothing else to do right now.

"Do you think it was the drama with our personal lives or the fact that we don't get along?"

Samantha shrugged, stinging. "Both, I'd guess. Probably more, too."

"But, you're like them. I don't understand why she passed you by."

Samantha let the truth out, no longer wary of the reporter. "A lot of people like them are here now. Adrian's been gathering our kind."

Cynthia hadn't considered that. "What happens when there are enough?"

"I don't know. Maybe we can heal the world." She headed toward the garden. "Or maybe we'll finish destroying it."

Cynthia noted the unhappy tone that matched her own. "You need a hand in there or something?"

Samantha started to shoot down the pity offer; then she saw how Cynthia was braced for scorn. She was making a genuine offer. *Why?*

Cynthia read it and shrugged. "I'm a bit...lost. I thought you might be, too."

Samantha let go of their grudge in that moment. "I am. Not as

much as before the war, but the last weeks have been rough.”

“It’s as if there’s no anchor,” Cynthia agreed. “The camp’s divided. I sleep alone at night, and I’ve lost the one thing I thought I wanted most.”

Sam raised a brow. “Thought?”

“I wasn’t going to be the best papergirl,” the reporter confessed. “I’m a lot like Kenn when it comes to being a glory hound.”

Samantha was surprised to hear such an admission; she delivered one of her own. “I was more concerned about trying to keep up with her mentally. Angela’s so much like Adrian that it’s a bit intimidating.”

“I know, right?”

On duty, Kyle listened to the females going through the same levels of anxiety his own team had and understood the moment Adrian had hoped for was here. These two had surrendered their competition and come together. It was only one instant in time, but it would lead to more. It was how he and Cris had become so close after competing for Top Eagle.

Kyle winced at the thought of his late XO. Daryl was good, but he and Cris had been a matched set.

Kyle saw a small group of scowling females come from the tryout tent. He slid into the shadows to get the uncensored version he would report later, if he thought it was called for.

“How was I supposed to know? I didn’t think females had to kill. I can’t do that.”

“I think I could, but only if my life was threatened.”

“How many of them who stayed can?”

“Only a few,” Kyle muttered, wondering if that was the line Angela had chosen to use in her selections. Having a right hand who would kill for you was hard to find and invaluable to have in this world. Curious and oddly flattered, Kyle kept observing.

The next feet to leave the tent belonged to those who

halfheartedly complained about the physical requirements, but Anne didn't appear unhappy as she ducked out of sight with the others. Instead, the nurse looked extremely satisfied.

Kyle guessed she knew the last weeks of training had been what pulled so many females into that tent. Angela would end up with roughly twenty workable recruits from which to choose a team, and Anne was now off the hook. She could spend her time with her husband—where she'd wanted to be all along—but now, she could protect him. The little old lady may not be able to keep up as an Eagle, but she was definitely a gunslinger.

More women emerged—a small group wearing the slumped shoulders of people who knew they weren't making the cut this time around, that more work was required.

“So I panicked and said something stupid,” one of them muttered to herself as she avoided the other sullen, silent females. “Not the first time. I'll try again.”

The trio vanished from sight.

Kyle inched closer. The noise from the camp dropped as everyone settled in for the night. Kyle found he could now hear the voices inside the tent.

“Two more, ladies, and then we'll get a bit more personal with those remaining. Answer this question honestly of yourself because it will be a requirement. Can you handle being injured? Since I joined Safe Haven, I've been stabbed and shot.”

Kyle heard Angela exposing her scars and then their timid reactions, thinking she was smart to handle it that way.

“Wow.”

“Ah, man. That's gross.”

“Uh-huh. No way.”

Another group of females exited the tent, leaving roughly half as Angela asked her last question. “Will you defend me and this team against the camp?”

There was complete silence until Angela broke it.

“There will come times that your orders go against camp rules. When they find out, they'll resent you, as they have all the Eagles



who've had to make that choice. In time, it always changes to acceptance because the reason behind it was valid, but at the time, it is extremely hard to live with. If you can't stand with me against everyone else in camp, including Adrian, it won't work."

"We think you should be leading anyway—the camp females."

Kyle had expected most of the remaining females to leave; he was surprised by not only the answer, but by its source. He hadn't noticed the redhead entering the tent. *How did she get in?*

Angela studied Tonya's flushed face in the thick tension. "Why? He's done well by *all* of you."

Tonya didn't drop her eyes. "Kenn says you're purer, that you won't sacrifice as quickly or risk lives as often without better reasons."

Angela leaned back in her chair, more than surprised. "Why does Kenn think you'll make a good Eagle?"

Now, Tonya did look away, shrugging. "'Cause he's sleeping with me, maybe. I'm not sure."

Angela suspected that too. "Why do *you* think you can?"

"Because I'm harder than any of the women you've interviewed." Tonya's voice lowered into a slightly shocked misery as the others protested. "And, because I didn't even know I wanted it until he said you wouldn't take me."

Angela understood that challenge had brought Tonya to the tent. She raised a brow, ignoring the other smirking females. They thought the redhead had blown it, but honesty was everything. "And if I told you that I won't stand for a team member who spies and reports to Adrian?"

Tonya lifted her chin. "Then I'd say good luck, 'cause that's in the job description."

Angela stared at her. "Yes, it is." She studied Tonya's tense profile, her acceptable clothes, and those fiery green eyes. She was trying to fit in and succeeding. Would she be able to bring that determination to a team? "Can you shoot?"

"Level three."

"Self-defense?"

"Level two in kai. Kenn teaches me in his downtime."

“Organization, following orders?”

“Won’t be a problem, no matter where I’m put. He’s helped me get a schedule down that I’m good with.”

The other females realized Tonya was being interviewed. Her answers were too good for this to be a joke.

“What about your lust for power?”

Tonya spoke her heart. “It’s fading in place of the dream, like with everyone else who joins this damn refugee camp.”

Angela was satisfied. “Thank you for coming.”

Tonya shrugged, turning toward the flap. “Just seemed like I was supposed to.”

## 5

“Hang on.”

Kyle caught Tonya’s attention as she ducked out.

Tonya braced to hear that she’d never be allowed to be one of them. Kenn had warned her the senior Eagles wouldn’t like it.

“You gave good answers.” Kyle studied her thoughtfully. “You really think you can kill?”

Tonya was astonished that Kyle hadn’t cut her dead yet. “Yes. I have enough hatred to let out when it’s needed.”

Kyle motioned to a mutated ant hunting in panicked circles as it tried to pick up the scent of its colony over the dog odors. “End that. Now.”

Tonya had noticed the training lessons using knives on the mutations. She slid hers out of its sheath. She didn’t know why she was being given a chance, but she wanted it.

The throw was good. Not great, it only stuck in the ant’s rear end and caused it to emit a low shriek. Still, she hit it. Kyle was impressed.

“Finish it off this time.” He tossed her his knife and was surprised again when she caught it.

Tonya flipped the knife around and threw harder. It pinned the ant to the ground.

“Very nice.”

They both spun to find Angela at the flap.

She raised a brow. "Anything else I should know?"

Kyle shook his head. "Nope."

"Good. Carry on."

She vanished back into the tent.

Kyle snorted. That felt so much like Adrian that it was perfect.

She was going to be a good leader.

Tonya retrieved the blades with no sign it bothered her to rip his free of the ant.

Kyle took his knife, seeing she automatically wiped hers on her jeans. Interesting. How much was this one ready for?

Tonya gave him a nod, understanding she'd gone up in Angela's opinion. "Thanks."

Kyle pointed at the training area where half a dozen of his remaining team was practicing on the ant colony lining their western perimeter in search of scraps. "Tell them I sent you. Stay a few minutes and make an impression."

Tonya's mouth fell open. "Why? You hate me."

Kyle thought of how Adrian had put her to work during the sinkhole, and of how she'd still been at it come dawn. "No one hates you anymore. You've been forgiven. Don't stop earning it."

Tonya smiled, one without greed or seduction. It made her beautiful. "You're in good with the girl. She digs you a lot now."

"I hope so." Kyle grunted, fading into the shadows of the tent he was guarding. "I'd miss this shit."

Inside the tent, Angela's stony gaze raked the twenty-two females waiting restlessly. They were the best of the lot, minus those she'd sent away first. Angela gave them a challenging smirk. "Who's ready to get dirty?"

She approved of their wary expressions. They were right to be concerned. Next, to narrow down the field, was work with animals. The vet was bringing a load of dogs by, the ones they'd found in the Library in Wichita, and they stank. The rest of the evening would be spent grooming those fortunate animals and noting who had the stamina for it. After that, she would take them

to the kids' area.

Adrian had three failsafe ways to determine the character of a camp member. Angela planned to use them all. No one could hide their true nature around animals, children, and the elderly, all in the same night. Come bedtime, she would have her list ready to be posted. As it was, she now knew who was going to be on her right, and it was as much of a shock to her as it would be to everyone else.

## Rookie Rules

1

“Can I go with you?”

Kenn regarded the sexy redhead who had just appeared at his side, pleased that she'd spent the last half hour helping clear ants from the perimeter with Kyle's team. He was also shocked that the mobster had not only allowed it, he'd evaluated her during, studying her as he did with all their rookies. “Depends.”

Tonya frowned. “On what now?”

“On you being able to keep your mouth shut and follow orders for two hours.”

Tonya didn't censor her reaction to his joke. She hugged Kenn tightly and pressed a quick kiss to his scruffy cheek. With a shaggy crew cut and pouty lips, she still thought he was as good looking as Adrian. *Does he think about me that way, compared to Angela?* Tonya let it go. It didn't matter. He was hers now, and that did.

Seeing Kenn and Tonya moving through camp together drew attention. Tall and dark next to slender sexy red, it was sometimes like watching a model and her bodyguard with the way Tonya liked to strut and Kenn liked to smirk. Cool and calm again, Kenn had started to regain the respect he'd lost. The camp females were beginning to let him know they were interested again too, but he wasn't. Earning back his place and providing one for Tonya were his goals now. No one could hold a candle to that. Kenn felt he'd done something nice for Tonya by securing her a chance for a team slot, but in reality, she would probably cause chaos. He might even get in trouble for it, but if she did well, Angela would honestly evaluate her, like she was doing with Samantha and Cynthia.

That sent Kenn's thoughts to the small group who'd been enjoying the bonfire lately. Seth and Becky were often joined by

his team, and Ray and Dale, with the vet sometimes in tow. Adrian was pleased to discover that they'd made friends. Seth and Ray were directing camp traffic and putting up with glowers and silence, but Kenn had little doubt where they'd be in a few hours. And the thing was, it was drawing other people he hadn't thought would ever mix with them, such as Kyle and Jennifer. The campfire group, as they were becoming known, had nearly a dozen members. Adrian said they were healing each other's wounds. Kenn didn't question it. His need to fight was gone. And he owed them for that, didn't he?

Kenn wasn't sure, but he was willing to keep proving he belonged here, though many of Adrian's top men had now shown that they too, were human enough to screw up. All he had to do was join the group at the fire, Tonya with him, and he would be accepted. Maybe even forgiven, but if he did, that wouldn't be the reason. If he went, it would be to tell the camp that he'd had enough of their treatment. Seth and Becky, Kyle and Jennifer, Ray and Dale, and himself with Tonya—they'd all made mistakes, but it was time to let it go and pull together. It was something Adrian would do himself if he could have gotten away with it.

## 2

“Got a minute?”

Adrian followed Angela into the deepest shadows, where only their two personal guards could hear them. When she turned around with that V standing out in her chin, Adrian caved. “Just tell me and I'll do it.”

Angela was satisfied he understood. “Make sure he sees you with someone tonight. And then, make sure he keeps seeing it.”

Adrian had already thought of that. “Anything else?”

Angela held out a sheet of paper. “This is my team.”

Adrian looked it over without revealing how he felt about those eight names.

Angela didn't wait for a response. She left him there and went to get cleaned up.

Nearby, Marc watched with dark eyes. When Angie was inside the shower camper—Jeff lurking in the shadows—Marc turned to look at Adrian.

Adrian pretended not to notice Marc, instead breaking his own rule about being with a woman publicly. He motioned toward a willing female and was out of Marc's sight seconds later.

The camp wasn't surprised to see Adrian with one of the relief sources; they'd come to expect it after understanding he wasn't the type to have a mate yet.

Marc's eyes narrowed in thoughtful speculation. He looked toward the showers, and then back to where Adrian was disappearing into the rear of his semi. Angie had set that up, he was suddenly certain.

What did it mean?

*Nothing*, he decided. She wanted Adrian satisfied so he would stop sending out those waves of need. Marc could live with that.

### 3

Word spread that Kenn was taking a team of female rookies out of camp.

The women Angela had interviewed in the tent began to show up at the parking area where he was packing the truck. Some stared in envy, some snorted in embarrassed scorn, but the rest understood a big moment could change things. By the time Kenn had the vehicle and gear ready, there were twenty women waiting at the tape with eager faces.

Kenn started pointing, picking a team of eight lucky rookies for their first mission out of camp.

“Samantha, Cynthia, Tonya, Crista,” he paused, ignoring the mutters at his girlfriend being chosen. He swept the group and picked out one he was surprised to find. Shouldn't she be at the bonfire with Seth? “Becca, Tracy, Leslie...” There was only one spot left. Kenn sighed, doing his duty. “Peggy.”

The older woman didn't move; she swept the teenager in

worried concern. She'd come for a minute with her daughter, not to chaperone, Kenn realized in relief. Then he frowned. She still didn't understand that little Becky wasn't little anymore.

Kenn waved at the stack of double vests in the rear of the truck. "Get one on and get in."

After they reluctantly helped each other, the females automatically headed for the back, leaving the front seat for Peggy.

"Hey!" Kenn pointed as heads swiveled. "She's here as a rookie, same as you. No special consideration is warranted."

A mad dash for shotgun ensued.

Kenn snickered as the first three women there began to fight it out. While they were struggling, a slender form climbed into the rear and then over the seat to claim the spot.

"Time's up!" Kenn's shout directed the fighting trio's attention to the now claimed passenger seat.

"Hey!"

"You didn't fight for it!"

Becky raised a brow at their surprise. "Why fight for it if I just can take it? Rookie Lesson 9: How to properly supply your own needs." She sneered, showing an ugly side that made her mother's eyes narrow. "I'll be able to give her everything as XO because there's nothing else I want. She knows that, and now, so do all of you."

Becky was the youngest female here, but she'd made it clear that she wasn't to be dismissed.

"Let's go." Kenn was worried about a real fight starting.

Becky wasn't finished. "I want time from each of you, training me in the ways the men won't."

Samantha sat up, shoving Tonya's tightly packaged butt over so she could see Becky. "Why would we do that? You're obviously holding a grudge, and we've pretty much let it go."

Becky's eyes blazed. "Of course, *you* have. You didn't pay for your mistakes the way I did!"

Instead of the expected guilt, Samantha's mind flew to her journey to Safe Haven. "That's not true. I've paid the same price



you have, a few times over.”

Becky considered that. Knowing Samantha was also a rape survivor absolutely made a difference.

“You know we’re going to have to work together?” Samantha asked pointedly.

Becky snorted. “Teamwork is a hard lesson. I hear you guys aren’t so good at it either.”

Samantha had the grace to flush, still stinging from Angela’s dismissal.

“We’ll learn it together.” Tonya was overjoyed to find herself here, a part of the solution instead of the chaos.

It drew attention to her, including Kenn’s.

Tonya scowled in return. “What? You guys weren’t the only ones who had shit to work through. Even outcast pole dancers can have a place in paradise.”

Kenn waited for them to deny it and finally allowed himself to celebrate his success at her transformation when none of them did.

“Boo-ya, baby,” he murmured too low to be heard. Tonya wanted to be an Eagle, a real one, and Adrian could now support that. Some of the camp’s hardest, most loyal and trustworthy women were the outcasts—females the men went to in secret when Adrian’s strict rules became too hard to obey. The boss wanted the entire herd in his army—that included those who had been kind enough to offer quiet comfort to his Eagles.

Kenn looked at the silent females still on the ground and then to the sneering girl in the passenger seat. All of this had come about because Angela had had the strength to overcome what he’d done to her. The shit he’d put her through had been bad—enough to break some of the men he’d served with before the war.

Kenn felt his heart, that small, cold, organ he’d had no use for, swell with new life. He had no hopes of holding her again, or even getting closer than they were right now, but it was a tiny secret that he would hold close as he went through his days. By never giving in, Angela had healed him enough that Kenn was finally able to love someone other than himself.

“Are we done here?” He used gruffness to hide the happiness

his male mind told him he was required to cover. Decades of training beaten into him wouldn't allow anything else.

“Yes.” Becky sounded more adult than any of the camp had ever heard from her. “We were something else before. Now, we’re Eagles in his army. We’ll all honor that.”

The tension broke with those familiar words.

Samantha offered Cynthia a hand and pulled her up. They shared a rueful look, then offered a hand to Tonya. She took both hands with a smirk, then shoved her way past them to take the seat behind Becky.

Everyone else chuckled, including those watching from the perimeter tape. They’d caught glimpses of the men at moments like this and hadn’t understood. Being set free from society’s preconceived notions that women were weak was intoxicating.

Another sharp flood of happy excitement filled the cabin as they left.

Kenn knew that he’d chosen the right females for this quick recon. He’d been training the women, but he hadn’t been allowed to be alone with any of them except Tonya, until now. Knowing that he had regained the boss’s trust boosted Kenn’s mood and increased his willingness to keep training them. He would please the entire camp with it, but more than that, he would be atoning to Adrian and Angela.

“Did that just happen?” Marc was shocked.

“Yes.” Angela understood what it meant. “Things will be better now for the Eagles.”

Marc sensed she didn’t want to talk about her team. “Charlie’s had a lot of questions lately.”

Angela sighed, not ready for her son to become a part of the couples forming in Safe Haven.

“Angie.”

She stopped. Charlie did have a crush on someone. Marc was thinking it. “I know he’s growing up. I don’t have to like it.”

Marc chuckled. He hadn’t told her the details, but he knew she suspected they were guy talks. “We’ll handle it. Another day.”

She smiled gratefully. She was tired and a bit restless, a feeling all of the Eagles were sharing as they pushed hard to reach Little Rock. Despite the personal torment, Adrian would have slowed their pace to avoid spooking the herd. Kenn and Angela, however, agreed that the evidence of nature's determination to wipe humankind from existence would keep this camp rolling with few complaints. They didn't like being out in the open anymore. As a result, they were now just days from Adrian's goal.

Marc guided Angela toward the room he'd prepared for them. It ran the length of the house and had a wide mattress he had checked and covered in clean sheets not long after seeing Adrian direct her there. Thick drapes would even hide their shadows. Marc's respect for their leader increased even as the inner male gloated. Giving this couldn't have been easy.

Marc flashed a menacing glare at two rookies lingering in the shadows, their envy clear for all to see. *She's mine. Go away or die.*

They left in a hurry.

"Where's the fourth tattoo?"

Marc's head swung her way. Angela snickered at his expression, stopping at the door. "Just curious."

"My ass."

Angela's heart thumped; heat rushed to her chilly limbs. "What is it?"

Marc leaned against the door, folding his arms across his chest. "That's for me to know and you to find out."

Angela loved it that she was getting the old Marc. She had Adrian to thank for it. He'd let the tiger out of the cage. "Come on. Tell me your secrets."

Marc's breath caught. He had a lot of those, but the only one he could think of right now was wrapping his hands in that silken hair and kissing her until they were both aching. "On my left cheek. It was a dare."

"It better not be me again. On the hip works, but I don't think I'm okay with you sitting on my face."

Marc chortled and advanced. He reached out to tickle her. The

instant their skin touched, electricity flew.

Angela tensed and backed up.

Marc followed her. "What is it?"

Angela wasn't sure what to say. Flirting was fun, and she was attracted to him, but the fear of physical contact hadn't gone away. She'd just learned to hide it better. She wouldn't be healed until these flinches were gone. She suspected letting Marc make love to her was the key. If she got through it without him hurting her...

Marc gently placed his hands on her shoulders. "I scared you."

She flushed, loathing her weaknesses, and right at that moment, Kenny. "I'm sorry."

Marc pulled her close for a soft hug. "You've got nothing to be sorry for, baby."

"I don't want to be this way."

"I think I've got it covered."

"You've made plans?"

Marc didn't deny it. "I keep going over them in my mind too. Wanna be sure I don't miss anything!"

Angela laughed, shoving at his chest.

Marc quickly leaned in to capture her lips. He stayed still, sending heated thoughts.

Angela pushed back, arms coming up. She loved his kisses.

Marc caught the thought and slid a hand to her hip as his tongue rubbed her bottom lip.

Angela gasped.

Marc dipped in to taste her. *Sweet.*

Her nipples hardened against his chest, tongue brushing his...  
Lightning flared.

Marc pulled back. *Not so fast. Slow down, think!*

Angela's lips were cherry red and already swelling. He smirked. *Okay. A little more.*

Adrian ducked into the privacy of the training tent, only to find it full of Eagles. He disappeared into the big hay room, nearly

growling at Doug.

The males exchanged curious glances. What had the boss so pissed?

Headed for the showers, Neil paused in the flap at the sight of Marc and Angela kissing. The embrace was torrid, heat flaring.

Behind him, others came to the flap and gawked. The pair had been a legal couple for a while now and had exchanged a couple of public embraces, but this was the lust of a man and woman wanting to complete the act. It was easy to understand why Adrian was upset when each of them was now filled with a milder version of blinding jealousy.

Angela broke the kiss reluctantly, gently stepping back with sexily mussed curls and well-kissed lips. “Feel better now?”

Marc understood the why and the where, realizing she’d made sure it was seen by everyone, including Adrian.

“Yes, actually.”

Angela didn’t grin. “I won’t do it again, hurt someone this way to prove I’m loyal to you.”

“You didn’t have to this time.”

She cocked her head, the slightly disdainful curl of her lips saying she hated the idea, but she wasn’t above hurting him. “Yes, I did, but now that it’s done, you have to do something to ease one of *my* fears.”

Marc’s interest picked up. “What?”

“Tell me tonight isn’t about making sure he can’t come between us.”

“Nothing’s happening tonight, Baby-cakes.” Marc grinned. “Unless you jump me.”

Angela laughed and let Marc guide her inside.

Neil went back inside to talk to Adrian. He entered the hay room, staying out of the way of the blond working out with only his hands and his shadow. Neil understood. Didn’t he have his own jealousies when he saw Samantha being given lessons? In this case, it was Angela being reintroduced to passion. Adrian wanted

that slot for himself.

Neil's thoughts of a coming meltdown resurfaced. Adrian hadn't reached a limit yet, not by any means, but he was finally showing the pressure. It was time to try to head it off.

Adrian stopped, turning to look at him.

Neil had another of those moments of instant realization. *Adrian heard that thought.*

In too much pain to pretend at that moment, Adrian grunted. "Yes, I did."

Neil blanched. *Another thing he kept from everyone.*

"Not everyone."

Neil's first thought came out of his mouth. "Why not me, boss?"

Adrian gave a slow, bitter smile. "That was the question I asked when those two flanked me through the dust storm, but you chose the mess."

Neil didn't respond, locking down on his thoughts.

Adrian went back to his workout. "Is this a problem?"

"No." Neil had accepted that Adrian was different a long time ago. It was the shock and embarrassment of discovering Adrian had been reading their thoughts. It explained how he was able to keep up.

Adrian quickly disabused him of the notion. "Her magic rubs off. I couldn't do that before she came."

Neil forced his mouth to work. "But you *can* do things?"

"My gifts are what I've always done, manipulate pieces into place. Before the war, it was used for government and personal purposes. Since then, it's become a weapon to fight extinction."

"Who knows?"

Adrian's face flashed sorrow. "Kyle, Seth and the woman now moaning in Marc's arms."

Neil was appeased. "We should keep it that way."

"Yes."

There was a minute of silence as Neil tried to figure out what he could offer in place of what Adrian was hurting over. "Do you... Can you talk to me about it? Or Kyle?"

Adrian shrugged. “When it boils, I may. All good right now.”

Neil understood the leader was still fighting and took hope from it. As long as he was strong enough to do the right thing, it might all work out. Neil left the hay room with a censored version of an explanation and a lighter heart. He wasn’t as upset over the love triangle thing now, despite knowing how badly it could go.

Adrian couldn’t say the same.

## 5

The radio crackled with Kevin’s alert voice. “Recon team is on the way back, Boss.”

Marc woke, looking down at Angela’s sleeping form. She was curled onto his chest, hands tight in his shirt so if he moved, she would know.

*That means as much as the way she calls for you in her sleep,* the inner man stated. *Stop pushing or you’ll force them together.*

Marc knew that to be good advice. He would try to act as if nothing had changed.

“So will he,” Angela stated sleepily, glad Marc had calmed down, “But it doesn’t matter either way.” She slowly sat up, locking eyes with him. “I’ll say this once, Marc. Please listen.”

Marc nodded, expecting to hear a promise of fidelity.

“I miss my baby.”

Angela didn’t add anything, just let him put it together. It was an endless ache that she hadn’t shared with anyone.

Marc’s heart broke for the pain in her eyes, even as that inner voice said this was another clever distraction technique.

“That was earlier, Marc! This is real. When we settle down and it’s safe enough, will you give me—”

Marc was kissing her before she could finish the plea.

## 6

A group of camp members were lingering around the QZ when the rookie recon team pulled in. A full team of off duty Eagles also

labored on make-work nearby. Everyone wanted to see how Kenn had done. The training sessions and classes were awful, with fighting, flirting and repeated explanations taking up most of the time. After Kenn's promise that it would get better, they were eager to see how he had handled all eight females alone.

Angela and Adrian also needed that information. They were standing together, watching as the Excursion pulled into the parking area. Behind them, Marc stood in the shadows, sweeping with his mental grid.

Kyle lingered nearby, eyes on Adrian.

"Welcome back," Kevin greeted them on the radio.

The truck lights flashed in response. When no oral answer came, the Eagles on duty moved closer. That wasn't Kenn's usual MO.

Angela also took a few steps forward.

The doors on the Excursion opened; the female rookies got out. They all headed to the rear in a rush, not looking at anyone. The women weren't fighting or even talking. They were...pulling a gurney from the rear?

"Hang on." Angela stopped Adrian from moving that way.

They watched the females take up places around the gurney and heft it into the air. From the way it tilted dangerously, it was obvious that Kenn was on it. The women struggled to keep it balanced as Becky and Tracy directed the other six women toward the medical camper.

Eagles rushed forward to help.

"Let them be!"

Angela's shout froze the men who were obeying centuries of training. They looked to her in confusion as the women hauled Kenn's unconscious body into the camper without dumping him out of the gurney.

Angela ignored the silent requests for clarification. They didn't need her to tell them what Adrian had been trying to teach them all along. Instead, she moved toward her rookies with a pleased smile she made sure they each felt as they came back out of the camper and gathered around. "Who has my sitrep?"



Adrian grinned. He hadn't been sure about how she was handling them. He had let Kyle into his head a lot more than she was doing with any of these women, but female Eagles had to be handled differently in some areas. He was coming to realize that through watching their reactions to her aloofness. It got results.

Angela motioned toward the mini mess when none of the rookies answered. "After each run, you'll meet me for a sitrep. Eventually, my XO will perform that honor."

Samantha kept her eyes on the ground. "When do you want us there?"

"Ten minutes." Angela's tone hardened. "The first thing I'm going to want to know is what happened to your team leader."

There was a round of uneasy, guilty looks exchanged among the eight sweaty, dirty females.

Angela raised a brow. "He got hurt saving one of you when you failed to listen to an order?"

Again, Samantha spoke, voice barely a mutter. "Not exactly. He, uh, forgot rookie rule six D."

Angela's mind pulled it right up. *Always account for the reactions of your team.* Her lips curved upward. "Caught in the crossfire?"

The females shared another round of glances, all guilty.

Samantha shrugged uneasily. "In a manner of speaking."

"Okay." Angela let them go. "Ten minutes."

Samantha glanced around at her team and then motioned toward the filthy Excursion. "Get the nets over to the holding chiller so John can run the tests."

Angela noticed the immediate obedience and stored it. Apparently, the women had worked some things out and Samantha had come out on top. *Interesting.*

## 7

The mini mess was crowded.

The group of rookie females hesitated in the flap as three teams of Eagles turned to grin at them.

“Damn it!” Samantha swore under her breath with harsher words.

“Understatement.” Cynthia flushed darker as she spotted Kevin and Jeremy in the crowd.

The six females behind them nodded in agreement. They all moved toward the center table with red cheeks and stiff shoulders.

Angela had set it up for Li Sing to bring over beers and pretzels—a favorite of the returning teams. The small man moved happily through the crowded tables.

Samantha took a beer with a tired smile, understanding they were being treated as full Eagles. The feeling would have been incredible if not for the report they had to give now.

Angela waited for the rookies to get settled and then opened her notebook.

Samantha and Cynthia automatically followed her lead.

Angela shook her head, motioning. “You’ll use these from now on.”

Charlie dropped a stack of glossy notebooks onto the table and backed into a far corner to observe.

Angela passed the books down the table. “I was told Kenn is awake, okay, and refusing to take an all-female team out of camp again. *Ever.*”

Eagles around them snickered. They’d already made bets on what had happened. If it were a threat to camp security, Samantha and Cynthia would have already told someone.

“Well?” Angela insisted.

Samantha cleared her throat. “We rolled north for a little while and saw lights.”

“Kenn wanted to check it out.” Peggy was sitting next to her daughter.

They also looked like they’d managed to work some things out.

“So we get the usual lecture about staying close, blah, blah, blah.” Crista tried to ignore Jeff’s eyes on her. “But we kinda freaked out when we saw the rabbits.”

Angela opened her mouth to question, already missing a piece.

“It’s Kenn’s fault.” Becky jerked her thumb toward the medical camper.

Cynthia nodded. “That’s true. All he said was get the nets out and be ready.”

“And we were.” Tracy flushed again. “Sort of. It might have been okay if Tonya hadn’t thrown her gun.”

“Well, I thought shooting was a bad idea right then!” Tonya defended, hand coming up. “It’s not like I could make out what he was screaming.”

Cynthia glared at the redhead. “None of us could, genius. It was just incoherent babble at that point.”

“Stop.” Angela couldn’t take any more. She turned to Samantha. “Start from the beginning.”

Samantha drew in a calming breath. “The light was a small brush fire. We got close and found a bunch of rabbits.”

“Swamp bunnies,” Becky added wistfully.

Frowning, Samantha continued. “The fire was flushing them our way, so Kenn had us get the nets out.”

“Only he forgot to tell us what to do when the entire herd ran our way,” Crista stated.

“Hopped,” Peggy corrected.

“They panicked.” Samantha tried to remain calm. “Nets dropped, women ran, rabbits bit and scratched. It was *lovely*.”

Angela ran a quick look over them. “Bit and scratched? You guys look fine.”

Samantha glared toward Leslie. “*You* tell her this part.”

Leslie cringed. “I, uh...screamed,” she admitted with an embarrassed grimace. “Loudly. And the herd turned...and ran toward Kenn.”

“Hopped,” Cynthia corrected.

“Right, hopped toward Kenn. He shot a bunch of them, but man, were there a lot of rabbits.” Leslie’s voice lowered. “So I suggested we throw our nets.”

“We realized it was a mistake when he started screaming.” Samantha swallowed the laughter as best she could. Kenn under the netting with all those rabbits was the funniest thing she’d ever

seen.

“Samantha yelled to cut him loose... So we all rushed over with our new knives,” Leslie informed them.

Angela groaned. The people around them weren't even trying to contain their laughter. The sound was rolling across the camp. “What then?”

Samantha wasn't capable of continuing. She had her head buried against her arm. They'd gotten a teammate hurt. Laughing was wrong.

Cynthia took over the sitrep. “He screamed some more, then we got him up and made sure he was okay. He said he was going to move the truck so we could try again. He growled at us to gather the bodies of the rabbits and then take the live ones left in the nets and put them in the truck.”

“So we did,” Tracy said quietly, seeing Cynthia wasn't going to get much more out before dropping her own head. “Man, was he pissed when he got in. Those rabbits were all over him.”

“He ran out of there so fast!” Becky exclaimed.

“Hopped,” Samantha corrected without raising her head.

“He did hop, didn't he? They were really latched onto him that time.” Crista shrugged. “Anyway, he was screaming again, and we didn't know what to do. We couldn't shoot them off him. And then Tonya stepped right up like she had it covered. When she threw her gun, we all just thought *Hey! That'll work!*”

“So they all did too,” Samantha grunted from under her arm.

The mini mess was an explosion of laughter; men were on the floor all around them.

Angela was struggling not to join them. “And after that?”

“Samantha and Cynthia got us to stop throwing things, and we started using our boots on the ones still biting him.” Tracy didn't look up. “We're not sure who got him in the head. We were just kickin' away...”

Peggy was the only one capable of speech. She finished the sitrep with a straight face. “We only dumped him twice on the load up. All in all, I think it went pretty well.”

Chapter Nineteen BK3  
**All That Buzzing**  
The Arkansas State Line  
**June 22<sup>nd</sup>**

1

**M**arc studied Angela from the tent flap, unnoticed by her or the group of Eagles she was putting through their paces in the first aid class. Even healed, Angela's shoulder wound was the ugliest thing he'd ever seen on a female. It was clear the students also viewed it that way, but it didn't matter to her. She felt a duty to these people; nothing would stop her from honoring it. Marc had chosen to help her...and Adrian.

*There's a flash of the bitterness.* Marc hadn't thought he had anything in common with Kenn, but over the last month, he'd learned more about himself than he ever wanted to. That possessive streak was news, but it had been there all along, and now, he had a place to put it. Every time the flashes came, he planned to think of how it felt to walk into that rest stop and see her body.

Marc shuddered, unable to stop the reaction. *Yeah, that's where it belongs.* Better to carry the heart-crushing sense of loss than to become Kenn and push her straight into Adrian's waiting arms.

Angela noticed his mood change and raised a brow. *Do you need me?*

Marc shook his head. *All my life.*

The blush rose over her cheeks, gaining Eagle attention. To their credit, none of them cracked a joke, though it was clear from the smiles the guards wanted to say a lot.

Marc ducked out of the tent to take up a spot in the nearby shade. She had a number of guards in this zone, but Marc liked to

stay close. These men were good, he knew that, but he wanted to be able to sleep at night. He often lingered nearby even when off duty. He tried to give her space during those times, understanding it was his fear that needed to be sated. The Eagles mostly approved, though he'd gotten a few glares from people who sensed his edge of possessiveness, but it wasn't for anyone's benefit but Angie's. *The things she's capable of!*

Marc lit a smoke, scanning the area. Her gifts were growing, daily it seemed, and the camp was noticing. She was the first one to alert them of new arrivals now, usually settling into the chair as they pulled in. She was predicting and confirming Samantha's weather reports, something the camp didn't know of yet, and she was giving answers before they were asked.

Marc had talked to Adrian about it this morning, but the leader said she knew what she was doing. After everything that had happened, Marc had doubts that Adrian would have stopped her anyway, even if it meant trouble with the camp. He was getting too much of what he needed to interfere. Marc frowned slightly. *It's almost as if she's in charge.*

"I am, I think, on some things."

Angie was standing behind him, smoking and staring. Behind her, the rookies were leaving the class with knowing, slightly challenging glances.

Marc glared, showing sharp white teeth and a willingness to fight for her.

The single males hurried on.

"Is this still a problem?"

Marc knew how to handle it now. She wasn't the only one who could use distraction. "Only if you keep digging into my brain, princess. I might have to bail you out of the well."

Angela snorted, relaxing at his joke. "I won't go so deep that I can't get back out."

Sparks flared. Marc's body woke. "What if you like it there?" He leaned closer. "Sometimes, I'm a fun guy."

Angela regarded him in surprise. "Are you flirting with me?"

Marc had her in his arms an instant later. "I think you could

say that.”

Angela was aware of his tactics. He hadn’t given her time to be scared. “There’s only one issue with that, Braveheart.”

“What’s that, princess?”

Her eyes flared at the second use of the hated nickname...then narrowed.

Marc braced.

Angela smiled, slowly sliding her arms around his neck.

Marc felt her strength, the muscles flexing under that pale, scarred skin. She was definitely recovering.

“I’m not *satisfied*.”

Heat flared; his grip on her waist tightened. “We can’t have that, baby.” His mouth lowered, hands tangling in her thick hair.

“Angie, to the mess.”

They both jumped at the radio call, then shared a snicker.

Marc groaned as she keyed the mike. “Timing.”

“Copy.”

“Later?” Marc leered at her.

Angela ducked in for a copy of his fast peck and then fled. “You know it.”

*Left me with a smile.*

Angela reluctantly pulled away from their connection and forced her mind to the schedule making lesson Kenn was set to give her. It wouldn’t be a fun class, but Kenn wasn’t full of hate now. It was easier to handle being around him. He had finally accepted that her gifts would never be under his control. They could make peace at some point, the real kind, she hoped, but there was still a black spot on him that she was leery of.

“You ready?”

Kenn sounded surprisingly amused under his bruises and bandages. She shrugged. “Whenever you are.”

“Just waiting to see how many radios I’m replacing.”

Angela scoffed at his joke about the pulses she sometimes sent. “I’ll try to take it easy on you.”

It was one of the things he used to say right before he hit her. They both winced.

When Angela would have stated the intention behind her words, Kenn swallowed the guilt. “I know you didn’t.”

Angela let out the tense breath she’d drawn in. “Thank you for knowing that.”

Kenn was able to be grateful now. “Thank you for letting me keep my place.”

Angela didn’t deny that it was her choice. She gestured toward the schedules. “Like anyone other than Adrian could teach me this shit.”

Kenn gave a snicker.

The tension in the mess eased. People went back to eating and chatting.

The lesson went by quickly. Things were improving throughout the camp and people were now in tune with the emotions of those leading them. When there was a disruption of the peace, they knew it almost instantly because when it was good, it was really good, and any variation of that was noticeable. The golden bubble of light around the camp was so strong whenever the six of them were near each other that it was almost impenetrable.

## 2

“That’s a cute pair,” Kenn commented sarcastically a bit later, referring to Doug and Peggy sitting together again.

Marc frowned. “I think they look happy.”

Angela closed her journal to observe. The lesson was over, plans were set for the trip into Little Rock, and a few of Adrian’s leaders were enjoying Li Sing’s cookies and tea.

“Not in about one minute. Here comes the rest of the family.” Kenn nodded toward the couple entering the mess.

Seth and Becky stepped into the food line, staying close to each other as they tried to ignore the disapproving comments.

The center table tensed as the couple finished in line.

Becky spotted her mom first, freezing. She hadn’t known about Peggy and Doug.



Seth nudged her forward, then spotted the problem. He stopped, expecting Becky to fly off the handle.

“That’s sure different. She hasn’t shown interest in anyone since my dad died when I was five. Let’s go sit with them.”

Seth gaped. Becky had been adamant about making Peggy come to her. *The trip out with Kenn must have gone well.* Seth hadn’t wanted to let her go. He might not have if he’d known it was Kenn in charge, but Samantha and Cynthia being along had helped. He hadn’t known her mother was going too. “Okay.”

They stopped by the table; Seth was aware of a mess full of witnesses expecting an ugly scene.

Peggy stopped midsentence, picking up Becky’s curiosity, but no anger. She cleared her throat. “Would you like to sit with us?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

Becky looked at Seth pointedly.

Peggy flushed a bit, mouth tightening. “Him too.”

Becky and Seth sat down across from them.

The mess went back to quiet murmurs as they saw a truce being made. It wasn’t spoken, but the moment was clear in the hope that it gave to those observing.

Peggy took in the strawberry hair drawn back in a tight bun, the bags under those pale eyes, sunken cheeks that made the freckles stand out, and realized she *was* needed. Not sure how to help her too thin daughter, or even if it would be welcome, Peggy kept her mouth shut. She didn’t look at Seth.

Around the mess, came thumps and groans of men *and* women learning to defend themselves, to survive. Even the clicking of the cicadas was drowned out by it. The hungry bugs were finally starting to die off, but the other insects were increasing. The ears of all of their livestock were coated in salve, as were those of the working dogs, but it wasn’t enough to keep away the biting flies. Adrian was working with the vet to find a stronger chemical to use, but so far, they hadn’t discovered anything that worked. It was as though the flies didn’t notice the fumes and grease anymore. They just chewed through it to reach the blood.

“So, when did you guys become a couple?”

Becky’s words made Peggy grin and Doug flush.

“We’re not a couple, Lass.” Doug missed Peggy’s hurt expression. “We’re friends.”

Becky started to tell him she was just teasing, but Peggy stood up. She marched swiftly away from the mess with stiff shoulders.

Doug was aware that he’d done something wrong, but he didn’t know what. He stood up to go after her.

Becky shook her head. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Why not? I hurt her somehow. Need to find out what I did.”

“You denied the relationship,” Seth pointed out. “Women don’t like that.”

Doug scowled. “Damn it! I didn’t know she wanted it made public.”

“So there is something going on with you and my mom.” Becky waved. “Sit down, Mr. Patrick. We need to discuss this.”

Doug snorted and followed Peggy. “Sound just like your mom.”

His grumbling made Becky giggle. “That’s so sweet! He really likes her.”

The mess heard the sound of her amusement and knew it for what it was. Little Becky was recovering, rejoining life. By now, it was clear that she’d suffered something ugly during the final slaver battle. Many of the senior Eagles thought Seth’s days of being treated badly might be over now. It was clear that he’d helped her. Becky leaving camp to go on the run with Kenn had also sent ripples through the camp and forced them to accept that she had earned the right to make her own choices.

“Are you okay with them being together?”

Becky leaned against Seth’s arm in happiness that dared anyone to protest the innocent contact. “Yes. I hope they find what we have.”

Seth smiled, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head. “Me, too.”

The camp was slowly beginning to understand that Seth had hidden his feelings for Becky, that he’d cared for her long before

Rick had come into the picture. Neil and others were casually spreading that information and making their opinions known on it. The time had come to forgive and forget.

### 3

“I’m sorry.”

“Aye.”

There it was again, that slight revelation that she was his kind. It hit him just as hard as the first time.

Lust wasn’t something Peggy could give into. If he wanted her, it had to be the legal way. “I’m not a whore.”

Doug recoiled. “I never thought that!”

“Just so we have it straight,” she intoned coolly.

Doug picked up on her meaning. “I don’t have anything to do with them. They want Eagles.”

Peggy was sympathetic, but only shrugged. “I’m sure one of them would be happy to comfort you. Eagle or not, you’re in the chain of command.”

Doug didn’t know what to say. Should he tell her how the camp women often snubbed him because of his limp, or how he felt so inferior around them that he couldn’t form sentences, let alone pickup lines? That he still didn’t understand why she was interested in him? His shoulders slumped. “What do you want from me, Ms. Kelly?”

Peggy smothered her disappointment. “Not a damn thing, Douglas. Not a damn thing.”

He watched her stomp off, confused and sorry for whatever it was that he hadn’t given her.

“Would you care for a word of advice?”

If it had been anyone but the doctor, Doug would have told them to get lost. “I guess I need some.”

John looked up at the big man, full of good health and vigor. “Claim her legally and settle down. Shack up in bliss and forget about the past. It’s gone.”

John left him standing there, speechless. Claim Ms. Peggy?

Shack up with her? Was John crazy? She didn't...

Doug replayed their moments and saw what he'd been missing. That was what she'd meant when she'd said she wasn't a whore. If he wanted her, it had to be legal, in front of everyone.

*Can I do that? Is that what I want?*

Not sure, Doug went in the opposite direction. Maybe he'd go find Marc and get his nose broken again. That would be easier.

#### 4

Matt struggled, pulling his head out of the toilet, but the two boys shoving him down were stronger. He sucked in a breath as his head went back under.

Timmy yanked him up and shoved the gagging boy down at his feet. "Don't ever rat someone out again!"

Eric laughed as Matt began to throw up. The two bullies left, locking the door.

Glad they hadn't punched him this time, Matt continued to vomit, but the self-pity he usually felt after a moment like this was absent. In its place was a cold knot of hatred that couldn't be untied.

Becky heard the banging as she walked by the port-o-lets that were off limits because they were overfull.

*Thud! Thud!*

Becky realized someone was inside the last john and quickly unsnapped the lock that had been put on it by the Eagles. She looked around suddenly, wondering why those on duty hadn't noticed the banging.

She spotted Tucker and Anderson snickering in the shadows and understood as the door slowly swung open. They'd let this happen.

Matt's condition was indescribable, and she was downwind. Becky turned and threw up.

Matt walked toward the shower campers with his hands balled into fists. All thoughts of Cynthia, the newspaper and his dad were

shoved to the rear by his rage. *They won't get away with it this time.*

Becky waved off Seth's concern as he rushed to her side. "I'm okay... Hang on... Blehhh..."

Seth caught a whiff of what had caused it and saw Matt. He started to ask the guards what had happened, and then understood as he saw who they were.

"They're the ones...letting Dale get hurt too," Becky forced out, needing the distraction to settle her guts. "Scared to get Adrian's fists. Set the rookies up for it instead."

Seth understood more than she thought. Those two were also being watched for the way they were hanging out with the younger girls in camp.

"Adrian should give them a personal lesson." Neil came over from his place on the showers. He'd traced Matt's shit trail to here.

Becky tried to spit out the taste. "Matt's had enough."

They all looked toward the showers, where people were rushing out, half clothed and gagging, as Matt went in.

"I don't know what he has in mind, but anyone who ever picked on him should be careful."

"You're kidding, right?" Neil scoffed lowly. "Matt pay it back?"

Becky wiped her face with the shirt Seth had taken off. "That was just a breaking point for him. Matt's gonna change now. I think maybe some people are in danger."

Seth and Neil took those words to heart, instantly flashed to the mass shootings of the old world.

"We'll watch him."

Becky tossed the shirt into the fire can that would be lit later. "Good." She moved toward the medical tent, stomach rockin' rough.

Seth was staring at her in a thoughtful way that had Neil raising a brow. "Everything okay?"

Seth shook his head, reeling. "No. She's been lying. To me, the camp, Adrian, to all of us."

“Who?” Neil frowned. “Becky?”

Seth nodded, watching her hold her stomach as she ducked into the large medical tent. “She’s like them, Neil. And…” Seth’s face flooded with fear. “She didn’t get off with just a rape.”

Neil blanched. “She’s late?”

Seth nodded in misery. “Five weeks since he took her. Not one drop of blood.”

Neil thought quickly. “Only a week over. Life is stressful now.”

Seth’s voice lowered. “This isn’t the first time she’s thrown up.”

Neil frowned. He’d seen her getting sick last week after evening mess but thought the chili hadn’t sat well. It sure hadn’t with him. The bed farts had been awful.

Neil didn’t want to pry, especially since this was the first conversation Seth had held with him in that five weeks. His words of Seth being dead to him hadn’t felt right after talking with Kyle. The obsession these men felt toward their younger females was hard to loathe after seeing the results.

“And how long have you two been…?”

Seth’s eyes didn’t lose their misery. “Three weeks after.”

Neil nodded, thinking the moment he’d seen on the tent wall hadn’t been their first time. He was still pissed over it. “Might be yours, then.”

Seth hadn’t thought of that. “I…”

Neil moved away as that stunning realization sank in. The odds on it were slim, but at least there was a hope for them. Neil had no doubt about Seth sticking by her and that helped to calm his anger. He didn’t like it that Seth had let their relationship become physical so soon after Rick’s attack, but it was over and done now. Becky was slowly improving. If that changed, he would know it. After all this guilt and remorse, Neil assumed he would be checking up on her for the rest of his life.

“I won’t do that.”

“But I don’t want one right now.” Becky’s face became set in stone. “If ever.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s against my moral code, as well as Adrian’s rules. I won’t do that.” John was horrified to be having this conversation.

“I will.”

John and Becky looked up to see Jennifer in the flap.

Dog glanced around her leg to check the tent and then vanished.

John scowled. Despite seeing Becky nearly every day since her attack, he still hadn’t gotten into her head. He might be able to do so now, while she was so scared.

“She’s scared because she thinks it’s Rick’s. Can you tell her differently?”

John hated Jennifer in that moment. “No, but it doesn’t change anything. We need babies, and there’s a chance that he’s not the father.”

Becky listened to their lowly held argument, stomach settling from the pill John had given her. The positive test was on the tray between them.

“You have no right to deny her an abortion.”

“You have no right to offer her one!”

Becky stood up. “It’s my choice, right?”

“I’d like a say in it, too.”

Becky cringed at Seth’s voice behind Jennifer.

Instantly uncomfortable, Jennifer stepped aside to let Seth go by.

Not angry, Seth gave the pregnant girl a comforting nod. Jennifer and Becky had become friends. He had no doubt Jennifer would support her keeping the baby if that’s what Becky really wanted. Her own impending motherhood was proof of that.

John eased out of the tent to give them privacy.

Jennifer fell in with his angry stride. “I’m not evil, you know.”

John stopped and spun around, meaning to say exactly what he thought about that.

Jennifer cringed back in fear.

The doctor froze. “You’re scared of me? I couldn’t hurt you if I tried.”

Jennifer couldn’t stop the tear that rolled. “I’m sorry I made you mad.”

John watched her waddle away, shocked into understanding that she wasn’t nearly as hard as those females had given her credit for.

“I assume you’ll make that up to her?”

John nodded at Kyle’s curt order. “Yes. I didn’t realize she was...”

Kyle supplied the words. “Terrified of men? Of *all* men? She is. I’m working on it, but so far, she doesn’t respond much to other people.”

John thought of how Jennifer had stepped up to defend Becky’s rights, but backed down from Seth’s presence. “Adrian can help her.”

“After the birth.”

John shook his head, ashamed for his assumptions. He’d known Jennifer was like Angela, but as with the camp, he’d thought she was manipulating Kyle. “Set it up now. She’ll need the strength if her twins don’t survive.”

Kyle blanched. If the doctor and Angela were preparing her for it, then the deaths were set.

## 6

“That’s what you want?”

Becky flushed. “Yes.”

Seth understood, even though he didn’t agree. “I’ll clear it with Adrian.”

Becky shook her head. “I don’t want him to try to talk me out of it.”

Seth saw her fear and had to ask again. “You’re sure?”

Becky began crying.

Seth found another box of tissues. Her silence said she wasn’t.



What did she need? “You know I’d stick by you, his or not?”

“I know. I just don’t think I can do it, Seth.” She stepped closer, needing him to know what was in her heart. “If I knew for certain it was yours!”

Seth surrounded her with his big arms. There was no way to know that until the birth, and by then, she would be attached. She was afraid of hating her own child. “I’ll talk to Adrian.” Seth was heartbroken for her. “I’ll get him to agree.”

A tap on the flap got their attention, but neither of them moved.

Peggy stepped inside with a neutral face. She didn’t like Seth, but Becky needed her. John’s quick words had made that clear.

“What?!”

Peggy blinked at Seth’s snarl. “I want to talk to her—alone.”

Seth looked down to see Becky shaking her head. “Later, maybe.”

“After you’ve forced her to kill my grandchild?”

Seth growled in angry frustration. “I don’t want her to do it either, but that’s not our choice to make!”

“You haven’t...” Peggy stopped, confused. “You want it?”

“More than you do.” Seth grunted. Mother-in-laws never changed.

“And she doesn’t...”

Seth rubbed Becky’s shaking shoulder. “She doesn’t want to have *Rick’s* baby.”

Peggy hadn’t realized, had mostly forgotten about the rape in favor of hating Seth and Adrian for keeping her away. “Rick’s?”

“We don’t know.”

Seth’s words were sharp, but the mother heard the concern, the plea for her to help change Becky’s mind. That’s what she’d come here for, but the thought of making Becky have her rapist’s baby was something no mother wanted to do.

Seth motioned toward the chair. “Sit down?”

Peggy went slowly, watching her teenage daughter cling to Seth. *Becky wants to be with him. Seth has been by her side throughout her recovery. He wants the baby even if it isn’t his.*

Sinking into the chair, Peggy was forced to accept that she'd been wrong.

Seth slowly guided Becky to the other seat. "I'm going to send someone to cover my post, and then I'll be back. Okay?"

Becky slowly let go of him, face red and shiny from her tears.

Seth paused in the flap, looking back. The two females were staring at each other with more true emotions on their faces than he'd ever seen them share. Seth ducked out as Peggy held her arms open and Becky instantly went to her.

Adrian was near the tent. "Whatever she chooses. Anne and Angela will handle it if John won't."

Seth was grateful, but his own need was clear too.

Adrian sighed. "Freedom, Eagle. It's not always as easy as just letting them fight."

Seth let his boss see his pain, the only one he would share it with. "I long to be a dad again."

*So do I*, Adrian thought, eyes going to Angela as she moved into the training tent. He looked back at Seth. "She'll remember how it felt to carry life, even if only for a little while. You'll have the opportunity again, and then, there won't be a ghost to mar it."

Seth took those words to heart and let them ease some of his fury at the situation. Adrian was right. In time, he would fill Becky with his sons and daughters, and Rick wouldn't be anywhere in that picture.

Adrian motioned toward the showers, where Matt—naked as the day he was born—had just come out and begun drawing attention. "I want him in the Eagles. Can we do that?"

Distracted with a challenge, Seth grunted. "If he doesn't snap first."

"That's why he needs to be an Eagle, Seth. If he isn't, that snap might come on this camp. I'll have Kyle remove him before I let that happen." Adrian gave the undercover cop a hard look. "You've saved Becky, given her a chance at a future that shouldn't have existed. Do the same for Matt and let the victory fill your heart when she follows through. Becky doesn't want to be a mom yet. She wants to be one of us so she can kill the next man who

tries to hurt her.”

Seth nodded. *I want that too.*

## 7

“North looks bad. We only paralleled it for a little while. The mutations and smells are unbelievable. I thought I was watching a bad horror flick from the 80s.” Kenn had just gotten his full clearance from John and come to deliver his report in person, despite already sending it in on paper.

Adrian sighed. Oklahoma had been known for a rich, black soil that was perfect for raising food, but not any longer. The deer here were deformed and mutating with every litter. Since the deer were herbivores, that meant the ground was now contaminated enough to produce poisoned food. Predators would get a strong dose with each meal, and eventually, so would the humans who had to hunt those predators for food. An ugly cycle, it would take a decade for the effects to wind down.

They were camped on the state line; Adrian was glad to be entering another area, but he wasn't expecting better conditions. Now surrounded by empty fields instead of rotting plants, Adrian was sure they would start finding starvation as they traveled. They'd thought the west was bad. Adrian had been grateful to find Middle America almost intact, but the eastern edge... It was ugly. The death tolls from their battles with nature had leveled off, but what happened when they went into Little Rock might start it all up again. It was a shared thought.

“We also saw something you're not gonna like.”

Adrian braced for it. “What?”

“Tenkiller Lake was totally dry, like it hasn't held water in months.”

That boded ill for the springs they hoped to gather water from. The camp was going that way to start collecting it as soon as the mission team returned from Little Rock. If there was no water here, the springs might also be dry.

“Up to fate now.” Adrian sighed. “We're too low on fuel to

get to another area.”

Kenn put his notebook away, ready to follow through on the idea he'd had earlier. Tonya deserved what he was about to do. “If not, we'll find another refinery or treatment plant.”

“Yes. We're far from beaten. It's just going to get a little tougher to keep us all alive now.”

Kenn indicated the group around the bonfire. “Harder for some than others.” It was Kenn's way of asking if it was okay to try.

Adrian clapped him on the shoulder. “I think you'll be surprised.”

Kenn went that way, motioning to the nervous woman waiting in the shadows. “Come on, rookie. Just don't throw anything at me.”

Adrian was still surprised to be including Tonya in anything, let alone the Eagles. He watched as the couple approached their two biggest enemies and waited to be judged forgiven or not.

Seth and Kyle exchanged resigned glances as the couple waited, not speaking or forcing anything. A simple head shake would get rid of them.

Kyle gestured at Becky. “There's room for you, if they slide down.”

Meaning it was up to them.

Becky was aware of Seth's tension, his need to keep old grudges flying, but her mind was in other places. She put a hand on Seth's arm to keep him from protesting. “There's room.”

Seth gave in without an argument. He too, had other things on his mind. “Fine. You can tell us about the look on everyone's face when the rabbits attacked.”

Kenn guided Tonya to the inside place, where she was surrounded, protected. It was noticed because the action said he cared about her safety.

Tonya kept her mouth shut, allowing the contentment to linger instead of chasing it out with the next plan or goal. She'd never been around people who could accept her flaws without taking advantage, but some of Kenn's talk was rubbing off. She'd always

known about the dream, but until she had let herself view it through his eyes, she hadn't understood. If she had, she might have stood an honest chance as Adrian's legal mate. If she'd just stopped and listened, even once, she would have wanted to be a part of this.

Back in Nevada, Tonya had thought only the top man would work for her, but after all these months, she'd come to think that where she was, was good enough. Maybe it wouldn't have been with any other man in Adrian's army, but Kenn knew how to handle a real woman.

It helped that he was as lusty as she was. They had sex in cars, over motorcycles, in the showers, against walls and trees, and anywhere else the mood hit them. She didn't have time to work on another man or plan. When she wasn't sneaking around with Kenn, she was cooking, cleaning, babysitting, collecting trash for nightly burning, and a hundred other nasty chores Kenn called FND work.

"Room for another?"

Becky stiffened.

Seth looked at her, questioning if her forgiveness extended to someone who'd actually done her harm.

Becky stared at Neil, choosing his fate and her own. She didn't hate him as much anymore, but they would never be friends.

Neil waited, hoping she would give him the chance to atone.

Becky's stomach lurched, reminding her that she wasn't able to cast stones. Neil wasn't the only one who'd made mistakes. Hers, in comparison, now seemed worse. "Sit down."

Becky's choice broke some of the tension.

Neil took a seat by Kyle.

He flashed a grateful smile and watched Becky's face tighten. Her eyes narrowed into that squint he'd been warned about.

Neil broke the contact, not wanting to ruin the gift she'd given by allowing him to be here.

Becky pushed the hate back down, controlling herself like Jennifer had instructed. The things she could do were different than Adrian's other special people; they were more volatile. When

she wanted to see blood, it flowed.

Silence settled over the group, each lost in their own thoughts about the trials they'd gone through. With the exception of Neil, Seth and Becky, this group was almost content now.

"Damn." Neil remembered to breathe as Marc and Angie came out of their tent, clearly fresh from an intimate moment. They were still holding hands and smiling, exchanging quick kisses. It was enough to make a trooper sick.

Neil got up and left the fire, vanishing into the darkness. Maybe he'd take one of the camp women up on their offer and at least have a warm heart next to him occasionally. He missed human contact more than he could say.

"Is he okay?"

Kenn's question was met with scowls and shrugs.

"He might be if he gets laid," Seth answered, staring at his former friend.

The group burst out laughing, amusement breaking the tension.

"Maybe we should help him."

They all turned to Becky, surprised.

Becky rested against Seth in a direct violation of camp rules. "Rick hurt her too, in other ways. I know that. Maybe Neil can help. Like Seth is helping me."

They considered the implications; of them all, the clearest was that little Becky had grown up.

"Hot, steamy showers that last long enough to run out of heat," Jennifer offered in the silence. They had been talking about what they missed most when Kenn and Tonya joined them. She hadn't wanted to ruin the calm mood by saying her mom.

"Mmm. Me, too." Tonya moaned, also leaning against her man's big arm. "Except, it was baths. I could spend hours in them."

Kenn stored that information and answered like a guy. "The Pornhub."

The group cackled again, males the loudest.

"Saturday morning cartoons."

The campfire group stared at Seth in surprise.

He flushed, body rigid as he shared his private agony for the first time. “My daughter, Bella. She loved the damn things, and I...I loved her.”

Becky slid her hand over his, marveling at how much their skin looked alike. If only she could count on that! “You lost her in the war?”

Seth’s voice was thick with anguish. “Never found a sign.”

Becky understood that, in a small way, coming to her rescue had been driven by the death of his daughter. Right at that moment, she’d been Bella, needing him. He hadn’t been able to help his daughter but saving Becky had freed him from some of his guilt at surviving when Bella hadn’t.

“That’s why you search the new arrivals?”

“Yes.”

Understanding how hard her choices would be on him, she tried to lend comfort. “I’ll help you look from now on.”

Caught in his own moment of healing, Seth stared at her. “You’re good for me, too. I didn’t expect that.”

“I think the same can be said of everyone around this fire.” Kenn was a bit stunned. They’d each had their trials and survived because they’d had someone to help them. It was a part of the human spirit that nature, or any other enemy, would never understand. Together, they were stronger.

## 8

When Matt stepped under the mess canopy, there was a loud round of snickering and laughter that turned his cheeks bright red. He hadn’t spoken a single word after the attack, just entered his tent and got dressed. After that, he’d gone to do his usual chores, but on the inside...

Matt’s hands were in his pockets, drawing attention from those who knew he was on the edge.

Jennifer and Charlie stood up at the same time, but Matt had counted on them. He was ready. Moving without his usual

clumsiness, Matt pulled the tightly filled balloon from his pocket. “You all think it’s funny? Try laughing now!”

The stink bomb exploded, sending the deep reek of fresh feces across the eating crowd. Seth and Kyle were smart enough to grab their females and get them out of the zone, but most of the camp wasn’t as lucky. The sounds of gagging and vomiting echoed through the night.

Matt didn’t run from the Eagles as they rushed his way. He wasn’t done yet.

The second balloon bomb was ammonia. The harsh fumes dropped all of the males crushing each other in their attempts to get to him.

“Clear the area!” Adrian motioned for the canopy to be taken down.

Matt inhaled deeply. *I hope death doesn’t hurt.*

Adrian tackled the teenager and sent them both rolling through the dirt outside the mess. Adrian started to shake the boy until his teeth rattled and then he realized Matt wasn’t breathing.

“Medic!”

## 9

“You want me to do what?”

“Put Kevin on hold and spend that time on Matt,” Angela repeated evenly.

“One is a good man, and the other is a kid who just tried to kill half the camp!” Cynthia tried not to yell. “Are you nuts?”

“Matt needs a hope for the future, or we’ll leave his body on the side of the road in the morning.” Angela grunted. “Is that what you want?”

*No.* Cynthia liked Matt. She had thought she was making progress with him.

“You are. He was pushed today.” Angie filled Cynthia in on the port-o-let incident and was satisfied by the anger she saw there. “When Kevin asks why, you say FND work. He’ll wait.”

Cynthia’s eyes snapped to hers.



Angela smiled, one of those hard, female exchanges that allowed no disobedience. “Get close to the boy, show him there’s another world, and I’ll take you with me for the next three runs into any city after Arkansas. As my XO.”

Cynthia’s greedy heart made her agree. “What exactly do you want me to do?”

“Help him, like Seth and Kyle have done with their abused charges.” Angela’s voice lowered. “Love him. It’s what he needs the most. No one ever has.”

Cynthia didn’t respond, instead moving for the flap. She had to think about this one. It went against her beliefs, but more than that, it might make her an outcast with the camp again and she’d just gotten in. It would only be temporary, until Matt was strong enough to stand on his own, but...

Cynthia felt Kevin staring at her from his place on duty over the supply trucks. *I was looking forward to that date!*

## 10

Matt opened his eyes to find himself still alive. It was the last thing he expected. Tears began to stream down his cheeks. *I don’t want to be here anymore!*

“Matt?”

Cynthia’s voice made him stiffen in fury. “Get out!” Matt blinked at his barely audible croak.

“It’s the ammonia. Should wear off.” Cynthia took the chair next to his bed, ignoring the scowling Eagle in the corner who was Matt’s guard. “If you had used bleach with it, we’d all be dead now.”

Matt was too wrapped up in his own mind to care. “I couldn’t find any.”

Cynthia and the guard stored that. Matt really had tried to kill everyone. The camp thought it was an awful prank.

“Why are you here?”

Cynthia took his hand. “I’m your friend. Where else should I be?”

Matt recoiled. "I don't have any friends!"

"Sure you do." Cynthia leaned closer. She used her feminine powers of persuasion. "And I care."

Matt wasn't sure how she meant it and didn't ask. There was nothing she could offer that would bring him back from the dark side.

"Matt?"

He looked up, still worshiping her, still wanting what his slowly maturing body was whispering of. "Why are you here?"

At his repeated question, Cynthia let her fingers rub his, not grimacing at the feel of his rough skin. "To offer you an arrangement."

The Eagle in the corner tensed, sensing what was coming. That someone higher up than the reporter had arranged this, Billy had no doubt.

"A what?"

"An arrangement." Cynthia let go of Matt's hand and slowly stroked a soft finger down his pale wrist.

Matt's skin flushed under her attention.

Cynthia pushed harder, cringing at the thought of this story flying through the camp. "For the next month, you'll live with me."

Matt couldn't speak, but his mind was working perfectly. He was getting his heart's fondest wish instead of Kyle's bullet. "Why?"

"We'll atone together."

"You're lying!" Matt accused hoarsely. "It's FND!" The boy shoved her hand away. "I don't want your pity, bitch!"

Cynthia delivered a light slap to Matt's mouth. "*Ms.* bitch."

Matt's hand came up to his mouth, eyes filling with fury. "I won't take..."

*Slap!*

Matt's arm came up to hit her back.

Cynthia nodded. "I'll let you get one in, and then I'm beating your ass like your dad does."

Matt hesitated.

Cynthia watched his arm go down. “Wise choice.” She handed him a paper from the front pocket of her shirt. “The boy who gave me that said art was his only dream. Is that still true?”

Matt slowly shook his head.

“Good, ‘cause I have needs to be serviced, and I’m asking you to see to them.”

Matt was floored by the adult conversation, by the smell of her and the concern in her eyes. “You want me?”

Cynthia gave him a soft smile and avoided the question. “Is that a yes?”

Matt nodded quickly. He would live with Cynthia!

“Good. I’ll arrange it with Adrian. When John releases you, you’ll come straight to me. Understand?”

“Yes.” Matt didn’t know how to express his emotions; tears welled again.

Cynthia gave him a sharp pinch on the wrist that snapped his attention back. “No more tears, Matt, unless you just can’t keep from it. Okay?”

“Okay.” He quickly wiped them away. He would have a new life now, one where crying wasn’t needed.

Cynthia slowly opened her arms to him and let the teenager curl into her protective embrace. She’d done what Angela wanted and claimed Matt. *What the fuck did I just do?*

Billy listened, not surprised. He would have been shocked if Adrian hadn’t tried to save the boy. These methods would seem extreme to the camp, who wanted Matt and Mitch banished now, but Billy thought this could turn out well. In time, Cynthia might come to care for Matt. It would leave Kevin on the outs, but it was a needed sacrifice for the dream. Banishing Mitch and Matt would hurt Adrian and that man was suffering enough. He didn’t need another weight on his shoulders. Watching Marc love Angie was more than enough to bring things down. They didn’t need any more help.

Chapter Twenty BK3

# This Is Safe Haven

[Route of Travel](#)

1

“Are you sure?” Kenn hated to question Adrian’s choices, but his nuts had drawn up and his gut was churning. They’d just caught sight of their target.

Adrian stared at the devastated city with a fierce determination that caused the Eagles on duty to take repeated glances at his face. “Yes. More of our people are down there. We’re going to get them.”

Kenn didn’t doubt that; he was just leery of the chore. Going into a city that hadn’t been leveled was dangerous. Going into one that had been toppled over like dominoes was suicide. They didn’t know where in all those miles of collapsed buildings that they needed to search, though Kenn was sure Angela would help. Kenn was almost certain he’d get to go this time. He was eager to leave Samantha, John, and Marc with the responsibility of leadership. He wasn’t as fond of it as he had been before Adrian’s hiatus with the slavers, but this run already seemed like a no-win and it hadn’t even started yet.

“Do a long lunch out of sight. Double the guard, with Marc and John as first and second in command while we’re clearing but tell Samantha they might need help.”

Kenn wrote it in his notebook, the sixth one Adrian had given him. He wasn’t upset that Marc would be in charge. Most of their fighting was over, had been since he’d realized Marc could have taken his place all along. *Besides, Marc will only be in charge for a day and he won’t have an easy time of it. Safe Haven is hard to handle when the boss isn’t there.*

Adrian jumped down from the idling semi before Kenn could

ask any of the dozen questions that came to mind, slamming the door.

Kenn picked up the mike and got to work.

Seconds later, the lines of jeeps, cars, trucks, and vans began to come around, using the smooth technique they'd been taught. All it took was patience, but sometimes that was the hardest thing to come by.

The last vehicle in line, full of level seven Eagles, backed up in a wide circle and pulled around, freeing up space for the vehicles in front of them to do the same.

A lone Blazer broke the chain.

People stared as Angela pulled onto the shoulder.

The simple ballet continued, but with even one car missing, the magic was broken.

Angela parked next to the rig and got out, giving Kenn a casual glance as she went by. She could feel his jealousy, the small flashes of the past he was still battling. His greedy, resentful thoughts bounced off the cab walls.

She tuned him out. Everyone was having a rough morning, but it was mostly the same with Kenn whenever she checked. Marc was at the top of his shit list. She was right after that, with Neil in third.

Adrian took a small recorder from his pocket. "Mitch got this two nights ago. It's broadcasting over a lot of waves." He hit play.

*"Say again."*

*Thick static came in response.*

*Mitch tried again. "We are an American Red Cross convoy. Who's calling?"*

Static came again, and then a young voice floated out of the tape player, horrifying Angela as she registered the fear and helplessness behind it.

*"The grownups left us! We need help!"*

It was whispered but clear, even though odd noises in the background should have drowned it out.

*"Where are you, honey?" Mitch asked, not as steady now.*

Angela flinched at an awful cry in the background. The child waited for it to stop. It did, in a long, unbroken howl of agony that finally ran out of breath.

*“Little Rock. Hurry! They’re closer!”*

“Where exactly? We’ll come and get you!” Mitch’s tenor was full of outrage and worry as he tried to find out exactly where the abandoned kids were.

Static garbled the transmission.

*“You’re breaking up! Say again!”*

There was only more fuzz. Adrian switched the recording off. “He tried them for the next two hours and got nothing. We heard it on another channel yesterday. Same message, different kid. We won’t be the only ones hunting them.”

Angela closed her eyes. “Play it again.”

He did. They both winced at the loud moan when it came.

Angela pushed, stretched, listened. When Adrian cut it off, her eyes snapped open. “Trapped on the east side, near the flooding.”

He ignored the sound of the dead coming from her lips. “I want to go in and get them.”

“If it’s a trap, if we’re ambushed?”

“We go in assuming it is.”

Angela concentrated on the unrecognizable city below them. *They’re down there. I feel them waiting to be captured and killed, or rescued, and I can’t even find a way in.* It was all pile after pile of rancid debris.

“Let me worry about that.” Adrian blew out a tired breath, staring at his people as they began to make camp with Marc in charge for the first time. “We’ve observed armed men. They act like soldiers. I need to know if they are.” Adrian waited as patiently as he could while she searched.

“They’re not all from the same branch. Bounty hunters, I think. There’s a small group on duty inside that mobile home.” She shivered. “They’re waiting for us. Word has spread about what we’ve done.”

Adrian was now the one frowning. Eliminating the slavers was

only a small part of the death his army would end up dealing. “Mercs are as bad as slavers.” He was unsure how to bring it up to her. Neither of them had fully recovered from the last massacre. “If they follow us in—”

“They won’t come out.” Angela cut him off.

He gave her a stern glance, skipping the lecture she obviously didn’t need. “Stay close to me once we’re in.”

Angela frowned suddenly. “You should watch your six on this run...”

Adrian tensed. “You know something?”

Her daze cleared slowly. “A bad decision goes wrong? I’m not sure.”

“We make those every day.”

They laughed halfheartedly, but Adrian took her words to heart. “I’ll keep you out of the ugliness as much as I can.”

Angela knew that. “I need a map.”

Adrian pulled one from his pocket, putting the tape player away. “We’ll go down after dark. Be in the mess in half an hour.” He turned from her many questions, like what would happen if she couldn’t convince the kids to come out and talk.

Angela walked slowly to her Blazer, searching what used to be Little Rock, Arkansas. There were no landmarks to use. The entire city was crumbled on top of itself like broken Lego blocks, making it almost impossible to tell where a building started or ended. The only thing to navigate by was the Arkansas River, which was now surrounding Little Rock on three sides due to postwar flooding. That mass of scummy liquid would be a nightmare for Safe Haven to cross after they were finished here.

Adrian lingered a few feet from the truck. He knew Kenn was impatient to get started, but it was quiet here and he could think. It was foolish to risk their lives again so soon for what would probably be so few, but his heart demanded he do it anyway. His blood was down there in that hell, alive and waiting for him to fulfill his promise, and he would. Adrian gave the death trap below one last lingering glance and then joined Kenn.

Kenn had his pen ready when Adrian opened the semi door.

The boss man began speaking as he shifted the big rig into gear. Kenn copied it exactly with a lightly trembling hand.

*It's just excitement, Kenn told himself. I'm not afraid. We're about to go into battle again, and this time, I'm second in command for the run.*

Fate snickered. *Keep telling yourself that, foolish mortal. Fear is the only thing keeping you all alive.*

## 2

“Are you happy?”

Charlie wasn't expecting the question. He hesitated. “Most of the time.” He looked over at his mom. “What about you?”

Angela recognized the distraction technique with a smile. “I'm content.”

Neither of them was satisfied with those answers. They each wanted happiness for the other.

*Maybe I can help,* Charlie thought.

*What else can I give him?* Angela wondered.

Their thoughts crossed. They both chuckled even as they brought up mental walls and continued with plans.

“Yeah, you're mine.” Angela hugged him. She missed moments like this.

Charlie hugged her back loosely, afraid to scare her away by saying the truth. *Now, I'm happy.*

Angela held Charlie as long as she thought he would allow, scared of ruining the moment. She didn't want to ask for more than he could give. Being a teenager wasn't easy.

Worried he was clinging, Charlie slowly backed away.

Angela turned around to wipe at the light tears. He would have a great future. She wouldn't rest until he could live in safety. “Here they come.”

Angela lingered with Kyle and Cynthia as Charlie got their charges settled inside the training tent. Seth and Becky were reluctantly here, as well.



Charlie motioned to the girl. "This way."

Becky wasn't sure why she'd been put in this class or even what teenage recovery lessons were. She suspected it was Adrian's version of reform school.

"Not at all, though the camp probably will think that." Angela was watching Becky. "And you don't have to come back after today. It's not therapy."

"Liar," Becky accused without malice. "He wouldn't have us all here if it wasn't going to help."

Angela didn't respond.

Becky went toward the tent, sending curious glances over her tense shoulder.

Angela waited until they were all inside and then spent a minute with the adults. "They'll come back wound up and eager to practice if this goes well. If not, they'll need a release at the defense ring."

Angela blocked the various concerns and images, only giving as much as she needed to. "Each of those teenagers is special. It's time it was put to use for the greater good."

The guardians would have given tips and specific instructions, but Angela didn't want that. "Be back in two hours, ready to handle them."

Angela left them exchanging concerned looks—three adults bonded by the trials of youth.

Seth let go first, turning for the parking area, where Kenn and Marc were modifying their chosen mission vehicles. *They might need some help.*

Kyle and Cynthia lingered as Angela ushered the kids into seats. The mobster's fears were obvious, but the reporter's concerns were also clear. With Matt and Jennifer out of control, anything could happen.

Eased a bit to see rookie Eagles move into a tight perimeter around the canvas, Cynthia relaxed. *Angela has it covered.*

She didn't tell Kyle that, but it wouldn't matter to him. He loathed being away from Jennifer and with his team set to go into the city, this was taking time that he'd hoped to have with her. It

didn't help that she was just six weeks away from hitting the date when John might be able to save the babies. Kyle didn't want her doing anything to jeopardize it.

"I haven't had a second kai lesson yet." Cynthia glanced at Kyle, meeting his eyes. "Neil's list is long...and I don't really get on with Jeff."

Kyle grunted, suddenly realizing he was okay with Cynthia—more than he'd ever thought he would be. "Okay. Now?"

Cynthia shook her head in amusement. "No one can say you don't serve him."

"Nope." Kyle led the way, not correcting the assumption. Angela didn't want the babies as much as he and Jennifer did, but Adrian did and what Adrian wanted, he got. Angela would keep that in mind.

"I can't keep you safe."

The four teens understood there was a problem at roughly the same time and began looking around in concern.

Angela let them stew for a minute. If this was going to work, they had to be clear on the danger.

"Each of you can do things to help these people, but when they find out, you'll be in danger. Someone tell me why. No cheating, and don't think I won't know if you try." Angela had a link into all four of them.

"They'll want us to do things." Jennifer was already sure what was going on. "The magic they can't do."

"Yes." Angela leaned against the wide desk she'd helped bring in late last night. "I won't always be here to cover things. Safe Haven needs defenders, the kind who can perform the miracles Adrian's Eagles can't."

"Then why am I here?" Matt popped up, stutter mostly gone now that he'd snapped. It was as if multiple switches had been flipped at one time. The result was a mess he had to sort out. "And why's Becky here?"

"Don't call me that!" Becky waved her fist, face getting hot. "It's Rebecca, you retard! Remember it!"

“Shut up!” Matt quipped back. “Shouldn’t you be crying or screwing?”

“Hey!” Jennifer frowned at him. “That’s rough, Matthew.”

“Don’t call me that!” Matt growled.

Becky began gloating. “Matthew! Matthew!”

“Come on, guys.” Charlie could feel his mom’s anger growing. “Leave him alone.”

“Oh, it’s us, huh?” Becky crossed her arms over her chest. “He started it.”

“Get. Out.” Angela’s fury washed over them, stinging and burning. “Go on.” Angela moved around the desk and dropped into the chair. “Older people here are waiting for this opportunity. I’ll give these positions to them.” Angela began to write on a blank paper, scribbling to make it look good. She didn’t react when the teenagers stayed sitting and began whispering to each other.

“Tell her we’re sorry.” Jennifer gestured at Charlie.

“Why me?”

Becky pointed. “It’s your mom!”

“You guys all caused it.” Charlie ignored their anger and disappointment. “You can all fix it.”

“How?” Matt was having fun just being around kids his own age, even if they were fighting. He didn’t want it to be over yet.

Charlie shrugged. “How do I know?”

“But you do though.” Jennifer was sure. “Don’t you?”

“Yes.” Charlie sighed. “She wants me to take charge of you guys.”

As the other kids frowned, Charlie hurried to explain his side of it. “I told her I don’t want that. I like having friends.”

“Take charge for what?” Becky was intrigued.

Charlie looked to Angela, not sure if he was supposed to trust them with these secrets.

Angela kept scribbling. “Go on.”

“She wants...”

“Safe Haven needs...” Angela led, staying busy with her imaginary note making.

“Safe Haven *needs* a team of defenders that no one would

suspect.” Charlie smiled. “She wants us to be like, well, spy kids, I guess.”

The tent erupted with excited promises and apologies that allowed Angela to put the pen down and take back over.

“The first rule, the only one that is to never be crossed for any reason...” Angela paused to be certain they were listening. “is loyalty to the group. We are a team. The four of you, myself and Adrian, and in time, a few others.”

“Will we do things?” Charlie didn’t try to hide the eagerness. “With you and Adrian?”

“Yes. We’ll meet at least once a week as a complete team. There will be endless lessons, drills, tests.” Angela looked at Matt. “Repeat your question.”

Matt swallowed nervously and then let himself grow. “You answered it, I think.”

Angela nodded. “Good. Share your discovery with the team.”

Matt reddened a bit. “I’m dangerous.” He looked across the student desks. “Rebecca’s here because she’s a killer. She doesn’t wound. She goes for your weak spot and squeezes.”

It was a level of intelligence that none of them, Charlie included, had thought Matt capable of.

“Yes.” Angela finished the point. “Show them what you and Matt will contribute in the future.”

Becky concentrated.

“I saw that!” Jennifer didn’t feel threatened by other descendants her own age. It made her feel almost normal.

“So did I.” Charlie was glad they were getting along now.

“Me too.” Silence fell as Matt looked at Angela. “How is that possible?”

Angela’s eyes glowed crimson. “*Power rubs off in many ways,*” she and the witch stated in eerie tandem. “*It can also be shared.*” Angela concentrated. “For exactly ten seconds, each of you will join for a moment. Try to relax.”

Finding and then linking into so many minds was demanding work. Angela drew harder from the rookies outside the tent.

“*What was that?*”

*“Don’t know. Record it and shake it off.”*

Angela tuned the outside voices to a lower setting and shoved the doors open all at once. “Ten seconds. Get to know each other.”

All four teens tensed, gripping desks and muttering as they struggled to close off their secrets.

Angela made them hold out for the full count.

“Ten.” She broke the line.

The rookies outside reacted first.

*“We’ll have Li Sing check the stock dates.”*

*“Maybe the mylar bags aren’t keeping things out. We’ll do it when we’re done.”*

Angela stifled a yawn. “For ten seconds you were vulnerable, unprotected except for your minds. Imagine what I could do if I were evil, or if someone else like me comes here who is evil.”

She had their attention now.

“Our mission is to protect these people and that means guarding what they need. I mean the supplies and camp itself, of course, but also the chain of command.” Angela pulled them into the dream. “Your attitudes, your flaws and anger—all of it. Put them together and keep us alive, so we can do the same for our country. We’re all walking targets. We need you.”

### 3

Kyle, Cynthia, and Seth were waiting nearby as Angela stepped out of the tent.

She ignored them to wave the rookies over. “You guys feel anything strange while we were in there?”

All but three of them nodded or said yes. Angela smiled. “Thought it was just me. Everyone who did, go see John and get a quick check. If you didn’t, stay on duty.”

Kyle watched her thin the rookie herd in admiration. The three men who hadn’t spoken up were exchanging satisfied looks Angela encouraged with her low words when the others were gone. “After your shift, have a good meal and some extra water; add another hour of sleep so you can build up a tolerance.”

Kyle grinned as she joined them. “You just made their day.”

Angela lit a smoke. “It was a good two hours. The kids have chosen to spend a few minutes alone, practicing. You three are welcome to go in, but please remember to watch only. They know what they’re doing, or I wouldn’t have them doing it yet.”

Angela, exhausted, headed for the tent across from them. She slid inside and stopped. She’d hoped to find Marc or even Zack here, but Adrian was running the workout canvas tonight. She hesitated.

Adrian didn’t look up from his clipboard. “Brace for a pulse, gentlemen.”

Angela needed the refill. Directing the weak, wild teenagers had drained her. She inhaled greedily, openly.

The teams stiffened at the draw.

Adrian blocked the stream, not sending any of his light.

Angela was grateful.

She was also disappointed.

Kyle led Seth and Cynthia into the teen tent, not sure what to expect. It wasn’t four quietly working kids.

“Too hard,” Charlie muttered, wincing. “Don’t get my fingers.”

“Too bright!” Jennifer protested. “Ease off some.”

Matt put his head on the desk. “Stop thinking about that.”

Becky giggled. “I smell him. Sorry.”

Matt moaned. “That’s disgusting.”

Now Jennifer laughed and Charlie groaned. “No more, please. We give. Right, Matt?”

“Yes,” Matt surrendered. “We’ll take the first shift.”

Jennifer laughed again, making Kyle’s heart clench. It was a beautiful sound.

“Nice job,” Jennifer smiled at her friends.

“I agree,” Becky affirmed. “We make a good team.”

“I think I know what else me and Bec...Rebecca were supposed to understand.” Matt stood up, feeling better than he had in a while. “You guys need us for energy, but for strength too. You

couldn't have kept the doors open without our concentration.”

Their first exercise had been boys vs girls—one trying to open the line, while the other tried to close it.

Kyle and Seth were surprised at the cooperation, but Cynthia was shocked. Matt was laughing, getting along, fitting in. It was amazing. “We owe him.” Cynthia kept her voice low. “He’s a genius.”

Kyle eased Cynthia out of the tent. “Not him, her. This is Angela’s project.”

“She’s the genius this time,” Seth reinforced. “And you’re on her team.”

Cynthia got the point. “I’ll make sure she knows how much we appreciate it.”

Kyle felt Jennifer come to the flap. “Tell her our gratitude will extend to Marc, as well.”

Seth added another layer, watching Becky and Jennifer joke as if they’d been friends for a lot longer. “We’d also like to know some personal things, like her favorite color, scent, and book so we can deliver them with chocolate and wine.”

Cynthia laughed as the two men grinned at her. Each of them had an antisocial teenager to care for, but now, they also had a support group. The kids, and the adults.

“I need to practice. Will you help me?”

Becky’s question to Seth was repeated by the two other eager teens.

Cynthia spoke up. “We could go to my tent and make campfire pizza afterward. I have a few boxes of mix stashed.”

“Yeah!”

“Sure.”

The group moved away together, leaving Charlie standing by himself. Instead of feeling forgotten, he was full of pride and eager nervousness. They’d voted him team leader. His mom had given him one of his secret wishes. Team leader and Tracy went hand-in-hand. He wouldn’t get one without the other.

Charlie looked over his shoulder to see his mom now leaning against the outside of the training tent. Before he could thank her,

she directed his attention to the lone female stepping into the back of the mess supply truck.

Charlie's heart thudded painfully as Adrian entered the truck a few seconds later.

"Stiff competition." Angela joined him, aware that they were feeling the same pain.

Charlie didn't want to sympathize with her on this one, but with his own emotions boiling, it was hard not to.

Angela left the mental doors open, needing him to see that she didn't want to feel like this either. "You fight it, or you give in. I love your dad. There's never been any other choice for me."

"I want her in the same way I feel between you and dad, but I don't understand love." Charlie's tone hardened. "And I'm not sure I want to."

"You're scared of it." Angela turned her back as the truck rocked sharply. "Want and need are always there—sometimes even with people you hate. With love, you'd die to be near them."

Charlie followed her slow retreat. "But you care for him so much! It's like you lo—"

"Stop." Angela couldn't stand to hear it, not from her mouth or his. "Human hearts are not confined by man's laws, Charlie. You can't set a limit on how many people you care for. If fate says to...love someone, you do." Angela held the flap up on her tent. "The only thing that matters is reaction. I have a commitment, willingly made, and I would never break it."

Angela got him settled with a bottle of water and a bag of apple chips. "You don't have any limits. The female you're looking at isn't claimed or bound to someone. She's fair game, with no challenge or dishonor."

Charlie was relieved that his mom knew his secret and wasn't flipping out. He hadn't been sure if she would forbid it. "What does she want?"

Angela leaned back in her seat. "Funny you should ask. I picked up some things a few nights back."

Angela didn't feel guilty about the weaknesses she was set to reveal. The realization that her son was in love had brought a lot



of thoughts out, but the most important was how to help him get what he needed. Today had reminded her of that goal and provided a perfect opportunity to deliver it. “She wants to be needed all the time, not just when a man wants to play with her.”

Another parent might have shut it down already. Angela thought she would have gone that way too, if not for a conversation she’d overheard. “I was on duty outside the showers. My girls haven’t accounted for female Eagles on duty being allowed to get closer. I took advantage.”

“And what you heard helped?”

Angela nodded. “It swung me in her favor.” Angela connected them; she let him hear the words for himself.

*“He put a flower in your tent again.”*

*Tracy sighed wistfully over the running water. “That little man needs to grow up faster.”*

*Leslie understood what that meant and gasped. “No way Angie goes for it! Get it out of your mind now.”*

*“I don’t think he plans to tell her,” Tracy confided lowly.*

*“You’re encouraging him?” Leslie was surprised. “You better stop it now. He’s getting serious.”*

*Tracy’s miserable sigh echoed. “I know. He’s too young until October.”*

*“Young, hell. He’s going to be a leader here, Tracy. He can’t have a whore for his mate”*

*Silence fell for a moment where Angela was forced to consider her bias.*

*“I’ll let him down soon,” Tracy confirmed unhappily. “And that’s the only reason why. I won’t hurt the dream.”*

*Leslie didn’t understand. “You have Adrian, among others. Why would you want little Charlie?”*

*Angela stiffened at the confirmation, breath held as she waited for the answer.*

*“They don’t really need me, not like Charlie. He already craves time with me, and it’s never been sexual. When we... If we ever got that close, I might...”*

*“What?” Leslie pushed. “Fall in love with him?”*

*“How could anyone not love that sweetheart?” Tracy thought of the trinkets and poems she’d found on her pillow over the last month. They meant nothing compared to the way he looked at her. “It’s more of a satisfaction issue. He’ll please me, instead of the other way around. And I don’t just mean sex.”*

*Leslie was shocked. “You can’t pick Charlie in any way, and then go service Adrian. It would break Charlie’s heart.”*

*Tracy stunned them all with her answer.*

*“Maybe, if I had him, I wouldn’t want to do that for these men anymore. I’d want to change.”*

Angela had finished the shift in deep contemplation. When it was over, she’d found herself looking for the right way to give them both what they wanted.

Angela regarded him tenderly. “You’re a good son. I couldn’t be prouder of you. If she’s what you want, you have my blessing to try.”

Charlie was elated to discover he’d been making progress. “Thank you.”

“Need her for more than fun, and you’ll have a bond that will last forever.” As she said it, Angela reluctantly accepted that she shared the same connection with Adrian. And after only months, it was unbreakable.

#### 4

Samantha concentrated, falling into that beautiful place where only she and nature existed. Called the zone or a groove, she sometimes wished she could stay there forever.

The buzzing got louder.

Samantha steeled herself. What she was doing would probably get her stung, but she was curious as to how the shield would react. They could make it go up with enough worry and keep it from going up if one of them was out of the perimeter, but how did it pick those boundaries? Did it recognize the caution tape? That was

today's question to be answered.

Samantha had brought two female rookies with her. She'd had them adjust the caution tape to include the tree she was standing under and then made them back up so they wouldn't be hurt. On one of the low branches of the tree, an enormous beehive was alive with violently protected activity.

When she tapped the hive, the mental concern from her and her witnesses should trigger the shield. They'd been instructed to observe, one each, the tape and the perimeter line, to discover where the shield came up.

*Am I ready?* Samantha was strangely ecstatic to be doing such a stupid thing. "Born that way."

She sent out her senses, searching, reading what nature had to say. It was easy to pick up the unease of the bees as she stood below them. Samantha quickly jumped up and punched the branch, not crazy enough to hit the hive directly.

As she touched the ground, bees exploded from the hive.

Samantha found herself being jerked away and pushed into the creek that she'd planned to jump into if chased by the bees.

Jeremy dove in after her, grabbing her arm and pulling her body tightly up against his. As the bees flew over, he hit the button on his air horn.

The blast sent the bees away.

Jeremy lumbered to his feet, dragging Samantha up. He pulled them onto the bank, ready to defend them against the things that sometimes came out of the water.

Sam gasped air into her lungs, coughing. She'd hit the water with her mouth open in surprise.

Jeremy waved the rookie females back as they came to the bank. "Keep the camp away. Tell them someone fell in the creek and we fished them out. No danger."

The two women left with slightly envious glances.

Jeremy gave Samantha a rough shake. "Stop being crazy and do it right now!"

Samantha, who thought she'd had things under control until he interfered, surprised them both by laughing.

Jeremy was instantly offended. It broke through the cool reserve he'd been treating her with. He jerked her forward and kissed her.

Samantha had chosen Neil by the lines that he and Adrian had noticed, but the deciding factor had been one they hadn't known to use because they were men. Pleasure was easy for them, but in her life, few men had roused true passion in Samantha. Rick, her shame, and Neil, her light, were two of only four men she'd ever felt lust for. At this moment, with Jeremy breaking the rules and tasting her as if she was the best dessert he'd ever had (His small groans were enough to tighten her chest and send heat into her stomach.) he became the fifth. She'd sensed it all along, that they were more than a match physically.

Samantha curled her arms around his neck and caught a fiery gasp with her mouth. When she kissed him back, he shuddered against her hip and sealed her decision. *I'm going to have them both. God help us all.*

Jeremy drew back, expression wild. "What do you want from me?!"

Samantha swallowed the pity. In this new world, *she* made the future. "Friendship." She wrapped her arms tighter around him, letting him feel that impossible-to-fight lure of a woman determined to have her way. "And relief."

It was a line he'd recently used, successfully, on a camp groupie, but hadn't followed through.

Samantha waited, letting the temptation of her being in his arms do the heavy work.

Jeremy fought...for seconds, and then he caved. He wanted her too much to refuse whatever she would give. He'd never been so lonely. "How does this work? He and I alternate nights, start fighting again?"

Samantha let her hair brush against his cheek and saw his jaw tighten. "How does it usually work when two Eagles pick the same female friend?"

Jeremy didn't want to answer.

Samantha did it for him. "It's my choice as to who or when. It

always has been.”

Jeremy was layered in the humiliation of cheap use. *Like the camp females must feel*, he realized with shame that he hadn't known he should be carrying. He would never treat them the same way again. “Has *he* agreed?”

“About as much as you have.” Samantha grunted, not moving out of his arms even though she knew the two males were now locked in eye combat over her shoulder. Neil was the senior guard on this area. It was one of the reasons she'd chosen to do the experiment today. She'd felt safer, knowing Neil would be here.

She heard Neil leave them in peace and was flooded with shame and elation in equal measures. She finished the scene as gently as she could. “I'm greedy, Jeremy, and it's so wrong for me to ask this of you. If you can't handle it, I understand, and I'd never hold it—”

Jeremy kissed her again, unable to take the rest of the speech each of the Eagles had given to their chosen relief source at one time or another. It was humiliating. ...and he couldn't wait to be called to serve. Jeremy drew back. “What were you doing?”

Samantha sighed, resting her head on his shoulder instead of letting him put space between them. “Shield range test.”

Jeremy chuckled, arms tightening. “It follows our perimeter, meaning the Eagles, not the tape. Next time, just ask. Adrian and Angela have been running tests on the shield since it appeared.”

Samantha groaned. “I should have known!”

“Yes, you should have,” Jeremy agreed jokingly. “But rookies take time to adjust, to understand.”

“To understand what?”

Jeremy placed a kiss on her head. “That Adrian has it covered. If it could help or hurt these people, he and Angela have considered it.”

Samantha tested his line a bit. “Makes it seem like they're gods and they don't need help from the camp or the Eagles.”

“Actually, it means they need us more than if they were powerless.” Jeremy's tone implied a double meaning. “*You* need us.”

“How do you figure?” Samantha still didn’t move from his strong arms.

“Because it’s never safe. As long as you guys have power, someone will always want it. Without protection, you’d spend all your time just trying to survive and we wouldn’t get these amazing results.”

Samantha hadn’t thought of it that way. She nuzzled Jeremy’s jaw, loving the openness of their embrace. “Thank you.”

Jeremy let her happiness do battle with his unease over the situation and was pleased when she won. He kissed her cheek and then her lips. It was official now. Jeremy had no plans to hold himself back any longer. “You’re welcome, baby.”

Samantha melted. *Now I can fill this gaping wound in my heart and remember how to love again.*

## Part Three BK3

**Provocation:** *an action or words likely to cause physical retaliation.*

# Required Blood

5 miles West of Little Rock

June 27<sup>th</sup>

## 1

“She fits all of my requirements.” Angela stared back at seven furious, stunned, confused female faces without sympathy.

Her team list had come out an hour ago; they’d all come to express their displeasure. She had indicated they should sit and wait. Now that her new XO had just entered the small tent, Angela stood. “I chose it based on the things I need— organization, communication, a willingness to follow *my* moral lines, and devotion to whatever job I assign, no matter how hard or ugly.”

Many of the females protested, but Angela ignored them. “To some degree, all of you have those, which is why you made the cut in the first place. To be honored with my right, however, you have to be overflowing with that last one. And frankly, you ladies can’t give me that.”

“What makes you think she can?” Leslie was used to fighting dirty to get what she wanted. “Hell, she might die squeezing out those Mexican puppies!”

Angela spun around.

*Thud!*

Leslie fell backwards and landed on the canvas floor, holding her bloody nose. “Oww!”

“Three strikes and you’re gone. That’s one.” Angela didn’t think any of them would need a demonstration like this again, but if they did, she could handle it now. “The same goes for everyone. If I have to hit you that many times, you’re too dumb to be on my team.”

She had their attention now, over personal concerns.



The Eagles outside the flap grinned and crowded each other for listening room.

Angela walked to the front of the tent, wiping her bloody hand down her jeans. “Tell them why Cesar’s former slaves hate you.”

Kyle started to protest; he already knew the answer and could still barely cope with it. He wasn’t at all happy about being here. When Jennifer had mentioned joining the Eagles, Kyle hadn’t known she and Angela had already settled her place.

Jennifer put a hand on his arm. “I want this.”

Beaten before the fight started, Kyle stormed from the tent, scattering the crowd of men outside.

“Tell them,” Angela repeated.

Jennifer used the steel she’d found while facing Cesar. “I was the one they came to when they got pregnant. They couldn’t do it themselves.”

“Do what?” Samantha asked reluctantly, a horrible idea forming. There was no way this girl had had the strength to do that to others and then still keep her own. No way.

“I made them miscarry,” Jennifer confirmed.

“How?” Cynthia refused to believe she’d lost to a pregnant 14-year-old girl.

“The only way I could.” Jennifer lifted her chin. “Cesar saw the bruises and assumed one of his men was responsible. I gave him names. Then he would slaughter the men. I killed two birds with every baby.”

The tent was full of a thick, revolted tension that Angela fed with her next prompt. “And the ones who attacked you when you first joined Safe Haven?”

Jennifer looked around in defensive anger. “I cut them, the ones who didn’t ever want to have enslaved kids! They came to me, begging, because I managed to keep my hope when they didn’t! And even when I told them I wasn’t doing it to mine, they still came to me.”

Crista tried not to judge and failed. “You could have refused.”

“No, I couldn’t.” Jennifer’s face tightened. “Those women had no power in Cesar’s camp. Their kids would have been

unprotected. They were better off never being born.”

“And why do yours deserve to live?” Cynthia now disliked Jennifer, but she still didn’t believe the story.

Jennifer’s voice went up. “I never said those babies deserved it! I said they were better off.”

“Tell them why.” Angela hadn’t coached Jennifer on this moment, but their abilities were off limits. If the teenager made a mistake on that, she would be replaced.

Jennifer had already spent six months walking that line. “I wasn’t hurt by anyone but Cesar and the other slaves. His men thought I was crazy. They said I was the reason he couldn’t be killed. Our children would have been exempt as long as I kept them believing it.”

Now, there was complete confusion.

“How did you do that?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You have to be lying. The other slaves have never mentioned that.”

“Yes, they have,” Angela interrupted the angry females. “It’s in their glances every time they walk by her, in their words when they run into her at meals and showers. They’re envious and scared that she’ll tell everyone what they asked her to do.”

“I was a target with the women, but my children would have been left alone—at least until they were older.”

“And by then?” Samantha was sure she knew this time. “You hoped he’d be dead, right?”

Jennifer’s expression stretched into a hatred each of them recognized as lethal.

“I was waiting to feed him the poison until after the birth, so I survived the fight for control. I would have become the woman of whoever won. My place, and that of my kids, was set until I could get strong enough to find a way out. Or maybe I would have killed them all somehow. That’s why the women hate me. I’m smarter. I always play for the future.”

Angela leaned back as the other females eyed Jennifer warily, expressions full of dislike, but there was also respect now.

Samantha turned to Angela. “You put a killer on your right!”

Angela was satisfied. That was what she needed them to understand. “Yes, and a pair of hard-asses behind her.” Angela glanced at Cynthia’s shocked face. “If you guys can take the order.”

Angela strode back to Leslie, locking gazes. Her tone was rough. “I’ve never liked you, but Jeremy thinks you’re a hard-ass too, and that it will swing the other *sisters* into Adrian’s light.”

Finding out that Jeremy had spoken up for her went a long way in soothing the woman’s ruffled feathers over her bloody nose. It also created an instant rivalry with Samantha.

“I’ve started to do it.” Leslie gestured. “Samantha knows.”

Angela held out a hand. “Good. There will be more female teams to be filled in the future. The leaders of those teams could come from this tent.”

Leslie accepted the hand up as the others murmured in surprise.

“You have to make a choice, ladies. You’ve been rookies long enough to feel the magic. When I tell you that is nothing compared to being on the inside, take it to heart. If I absolutely had to pick between being an Eagle, and being Marc’s woman, I’d arrange for one of the whores to console him.”

Angela didn’t glance at Tracy. She didn’t want to even consider that match. Tracy was one of the few women in Safe Haven who actually stood a chance with Marc.

Now there was complete silence in the tent.

Angela went on with the half-truths, hoping Marc wasn’t close enough to hear. She honestly wasn’t sure which way she would go. Both meant the world to her. The only thing more important than either of those was her son. “Until Jennifer is ready, Samantha will cover that place. Keep in mind that I won’t ever tell you all of my reasons for putting Jennifer there, or for anything else that I do. You have to be able to accept my choices.”

Those who knew Angie’s secret felt some of their anger fade. If Jennifer was as strong as Angela was, she belonged on the right—where she would be useful.

“Though the camp needs to think it for a while, I did not just pick you for my team.” Her words rang through the tent, capturing them. “I’ve chosen you all to lead your own.”

Angela looked at Jennifer as the others muttered in surprise. She was careful with her wording. “Will you serve, even though it will take you away from your family?”

Jennifer was honored. “You know it.”

“And the rest of you?” Angela was certain of the answers. “Anyone want out now?”

Silence.

Angela smirked—a hard, cold expression each of them would get used to seeing right before she had them do something important for the camp. “While I’m in Little Rock, think and be sure. I’ll expect everything from you, and then demand more.”

“Who are you taking in...to watch your six?” Becky hesitated to volunteer, not sure if she had the sand yet.

Angela didn’t pause in her answer or her exit from the tent. “Adrian.”

## 2

“You can go in tonight with the clearing crew.”

Silence fell over the center table at Adrian’s words.

The clearing crew had been to Little Rock for the last three nights, making a road where one hadn’t existed since the war, but it was far from safe.

Angela kept her tone even. “*We’ll* be ready.”

When Adrian didn’t deny the request, Marc relaxed a bit. The females who had emerged from the tent earlier on Angela’s heels were still wearing determined expressions that usually only Adrian could inspire. She had them in line now.

Kenn glanced up. The sky hung closer, clearly about to dump something on them. “Smells like rain.”

Angela played along. “About time. It’s been...” She glanced over at Adrian. “Months!”

“Not since the rest stop,” Adrian replied. “We’ve had a couple

chilly days and a few warm ones, but we've mostly hovered in the 60s for the last two months."

Angela felt his concern. It made her consider the deeper implications. What she came up with scared her. "We're about to take a drop."

"Nature's finally running out of things to throw at us, maybe." Kenn didn't want any more struggles for survival that involved the camp.

"She's only used her energy store." Adrian corrected the impression that nature had a limited arsenal. "This is the growing season. She'll rest through the fall. And come winter..."

Nearly everyone began working on it mentally.

Angela leaned toward Marc, smiling.

Marc knew what she was doing and let her. He was no longer above using her manipulations to get what he wanted. *In fact...* Marc flashed a wild leer. "I'll be up."

Angela flushed furiously, head dropping to hide her pleasure. *I really do need to thank Adrian for releasing that tiger.*

Adrian studied the small line outside the hair cutting canvas, spotting Lee on duty over the smelly tent. Adrian gave that tired man a hard look. It was obvious that Lee still wanted Candy. Why hadn't he pulled her in yet?

*He's making it clear where his loyalties are, Angela sent. When he thinks she understands that, he will.*

Satisfied, Adrian stood up. "Be ready an hour after mess."

Angela didn't waste the time. She pressed a fast kiss to Marc's cheek and went to their tent to gather her gear. After that, she would pick her girls and they would spend an hour or two working out before the run. Rookie nerves were not to be taken lightly.

Before she made it to the couples' area, Angela had a surprising pair of footsteps on her heels. She paused outside the flap, studying them.

Jennifer didn't bother to stand up straighter the way Leslie was doing, but she did make sure to keep eye contact. The chances of her being allowed to go were slim, but she wanted Angela to know she was capable of some duties now.

“Consider it noted. And no. After.”

Jennifer left without the disappointment the others would have felt. Unlike most of them, she knew she wasn't ready.

Angela studied Leslie and her fat lip for a long moment, still not liking her. “Can you be trusted?”

Leslie frowned. “With which secret?”

Angela snorted. *No denying that.* “All of them.”

Leslie hesitated, thinking her own skin didn't have the same glow as Angela, but at least she wasn't showing any gray yet. “I assume that's part of the job.”

Angela couldn't bring herself to accept the answer. “Next time, maybe.”

Leslie's shoulders drooped. “I'm not sure what I'm doing wrong with you.”

“That makes two of us,” Angela admitted. “We'll both work on it.”

Leslie nodded, moving away.

Angela ducked into the tent before anyone else could spot her. She required a minute to decide who she *needed* to take. The rescue team was set to go into the city tomorrow, but she wanted the most serious of her team tonight—the ones who were already capable of killing. There was only darkness when she searched. More trouble was coming, and Adrian already knew what it was.

### 3

“You got all that covered?”

Marc slid the envelope into his coat pocket. “The Eagles will help me through it.”

Adrian leaned back, mental shield at full strength. Marc was in no mood for accidentally discovering anything.

“Home by dawn?” Marc queried curtly.

Adrian didn't answer, mentally adjusting. When it came to Angela, the man was sharp.

Marc pushed the chair back and stood. He didn't shout or accuse, or even speak at all. He only glowered in hatred.

Adrian let out a harsh sigh. “I should have known better than to keep you out of the loop.”

Marc folded his arms over his chest instead of lunging. “Tell me.”

“The number of people watching has increased each night. They’re building up numbers in plain sight while we clear the road to the kids. They’re ready to attack. I plan to use the chaos to slip underground and find my son. I need her along for that.”

“Your what?!”

Adrian waited, letting it sink in. Marc was incredibly smart. He’d likely get it all.

Marc dropped heavily back into the chair as the pieces began to fall in place. *So many lies!* And none of that mattered to him now. Marc locked eyes with their leader. “What if you can only save *one* of them?”

Adrian let the lie spill with no guilt. “I’ve already left him for dead. He’ll expect it.” And the truth? He loved them both, though it was something Marc would never be strong enough to hear. Adrian wouldn’t abandon one or the other, but he would trade his life for either. “She’s alone in Kyle’s tent. I have her doing make-work to settle her nerves. She needs to be fed before we go.”

Marc’s pulse leapt eagerly, but his anger didn’t fade.

Adrian dropped his jealous gaze back to the notebook. “She needs as much as you can shove in there. When we get to the kids, she’ll drain herself to ease their misery.”

Marc headed for the flap. That was Angie—give it all away and keep nothing for herself. And, as usual, that would put her in danger. “You’ll stand watch?” Marc asked, not turning around and throat punching Adrian like that inner voice suggested.

“Yes.” Adrian stood as the flap closed, gut burning. He was hours away from the end of a six-month leadership that couldn’t compare to anything else he’d done in his life. A few hundred minutes from losing it all.

Adrian was fighting panic laced depression. Marc needed to be careful with personal challenges, even ones only made with his eyes. Adrian now understood how Kyle felt about Jennifer. *If I’m*

*damned anyway...*

4

Marc ducked into the next tent, watching Jennifer take a place on guard duty with Kyle. Charlie's words came to him, but after letting it go so long, Marc wasn't sure Kyle would welcome a gesture of friendship.

Marc sat down, always a little amazed at the things Angela could do—and this time, he was a touch bitter, as well. If not for her gifts, he might be going with Adrian and coming home to her.

His scent floated to Angela, that deep musk she craved. Her eyes flew open.

“Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you.”

“You didn't.” She locked gazes with Adrian over his shoulder as the blond took up a post just inside the noisy flap. Was that jealousy? *His relief source must not be that good.*

“He sent me to *feed* you.”

Everything flooded in a guilty mess. Angela stiffened, embarrassed. “I'm fine on my own.”

They both heard Adrian's snort.

Marc rested his arms on the wooden table. “Take what you need and use it to keep a shield around yourself. I know that you can.”

“All right, Marc.” She gave in without more arguing, understanding how hard it was for him to let her go at all. Angela slid her hand into his, ignoring his intake of breath and her own racing pulse. “Close your eyes.”

Marc leered. “Not on your life!”

Angela rolled her own before closing them.

Marc's fingers wanted to caress her skin, but he kept still as the wind picked up, blowing her dark hair around. The world shifted suddenly, and he was forced to close his eyes as a drowning sensation washed over him.

The force increased; she tightened her grip, drawing harder. Neither saw the bright blue sparks around their hands.



Adrian did, expression layered in mental agony. He hadn't thought Marc was like them, but that bonding blue said otherwise. *Damn. What else did I miss about Angela's boy scout?*

Angela pulled her hand free. It had become a caress on her part. When she opened her eyes, Marc was staring at her with concern.

"It's enough?"

His energy was coursing through her body like lightning as she grinned. "I'm full up." She glanced over his shoulder at Adrian, who still stood in the doorway, and back. "Did he ask you to keep an eye on Jennifer?"

"No."

"He's worried about her giving birth while Kyle's gone."

"I'll take care of it."

Marc's concern for her flared hotly. Angela gave him what he needed. "I'm coming back, Marc. On my own feet this time."

"You've seen it?"

"Yes." Angela was glad she didn't have to lie. "Two days, maybe a little longer, and I'll be home."

Marc let himself breathe, leaning forward to press his mouth to hers. They'd shared a much more private goodbye this morning in their new tent.

"Miss you already," he whispered against her lips.

Angela smirked. "You still smell like me."

Marc groaned in desire, but he knew not to follow it with a crude remark. Having her spread open before him like a buffet had been amazing. And frustrating.

Angela laughed. "Go get our boy, will ya? I want a few minutes with him before I leave."

"He'll find you after his shift at the mess. He's helping Li Sing."

"Okay."

Marc waited for Adrian to move out of his way before getting close. "You'll look after her?"

Adrian locked down on everything. "If she needs it."

Marc forced himself to walk away, going to the next tent. *I*

*need a workout.*

“Who goes?” Adrian stayed back from her as she came to the flap. He knew what it was like to be full of energy and have nothing to do but wait for it to be needed.

“None of them. They’re not ready.”

Adrian approved the choice. It was the one he would have made, but he wouldn’t have overruled her. Team leaders had to be given support, even when they made the wrong decision. If she’d chosen to bring them along, he would have let them do a half shift and had them escorted back.

Angela was high on Marc. She hadn’t had so much of his energy since they’d made Charlie; need smoldered. She kept her head down until Adrian was gone and then went to the training tent where Marc had just started to work out. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t need to.

Marc took it in, grinning in surprised happiness. Her face was full of flaming need. “Now?”

“I’ve got half an hour.”

Marc started to grab a towel and follow her to their tent, but she slipped into the small hay room, waving her shadows to stand watch.

For just an instant, Marc lost the mood and gained a flash of Adrian that chilled him. She’d chosen a relief source.

*That’s you, jackass,* the inner man reminded bluntly. *Get in there!*

Marc had also chosen his. He’d eased it into need and desire with a gentle touch, and his reward was almost at hand. In a half hour, they would both be pleased. When she came back from Little Rock, he intended to be satisfied.

The mood flared back, bright enough to burn. Marc dropped his coat in the doorway to let people know it was occupied. “Close those beautiful eyes, baby, and lean against the wall.”

Adrian continued on his rounds, pushing back the bitterness. *She* was happy. That was what mattered.

Adrian neared the vet setup, approving of the new animals.

With constant additions, the area now resembled a small zoo. Pens and crates sat in carefully thought out correlation to form a winding circle, with Chris's tent and metal table in the center.

Across the deserted two-lane street and through the moldy, but surviving fields of wheat, the only building in sight was a weather-beaten nursing home. Adrian had sent a team to explore it as soon as they'd arrived. With the care facility sporting that kicked-in door they all now took as a clear sign of the draft, he had expected only a few boxes of supplies. Instead, he now had a new group of refugees. The entire third floor of the brick nursing home had survived—twenty-eight more hungry souls who were instantly bonded to Safe Haven's leader.

They hadn't planned to come out of their barricaded level until all the food was gone; that was how they'd survived the looting after the war. When the Eagles had come through, thinking it was abandoned, the residents had tried to fight for their remaining rations. They'd quickly been persuaded to come along, but not before Kevin had earned a nasty cane mark across his arm and a new respect for the elderly.

“Oh, Marc!”

Angela's passion-laced voice echoed through the trees.

Adrian's stomach tightened, fists clenching. *I almost hope I don't come back. If I survive, a choice has to be made. I can't keep feeling this.*

## 5

At dusk, the mission team rolled out.

Angela had been thrilled to be cleared for the run, but the sight of where they were going took that feeling away. In fact, there was a complete sense of doom riding the thick air over the Little Rock skyline. The clouds hung in an ugly gray that was the shade of old concrete, perfectly matching the color of the rubble below.

Adrian picked up the mike. “Radio silence, by 9.”

Angela automatically switched to channel 18.

Adrian started the engine, slid his sunglasses on, and got them

moving.

As the mission team cleared the trees, Angela studied the destruction with powerful binoculars that Adrian kept behind his seat. She could still hear that awful moan from the recording in her mind.

Their private radio crackled with Kenn's stony voice. "We have movement behind the brown trailer."

Adrian keyed the mike once to show he'd heard but said nothing. He switched on the second CB system and put it on the channel where they'd first heard the kids.

As they neared the crumbled city, the mission team was reminded of how these gory scenes always appeared so unrealistic in films. Except, with the windows down, they could smell the bodies. Most were only skeletons, flesh long gone to predators, but the team could hear the hordes of flies that circled and stopped, circled and stopped. This was no movie set.

The grass was dead too, replaced with thick mud from the water rising through and over the land. It should have drained, but a cluster of ships had been washed upriver by Hurricane Amanda, forming a thick blockade with the wreckage. As a result, the river had been backing up into nearly every city and town along the banks. It probably would only have taken a few hours and a little dynamite to clear it, but no one knew about it and few would have been able to do the job now. The war had changed everything.

"They think they're ready." Angela started reading their enemy. "They only expect to take one person from this city. The others they're hunting are for fun or bait."

"Who?"

"You." Angela's fog lifted and left worry. "Everyone in this dead city is on the watch for Adrian Mitchel. All sightings will be reported. They've been well paid."

"Who gave the order?"

"A Major, but I don't have a name yet."

"Garret." Adrian slapped the wheel. "We'll end it this time."

Angela didn't ask what the sneering man in Adrian's mind had done, instead concentrating on finding a weakness.

“He doesn’t have many,” Adrian shared reluctantly. “The only one I was able to use was how he’ll sometimes underestimate his prey. He’ll have the bases covered, and he’ll act fast. Don’t hesitate if you get the chance.”

Angela didn’t say anything, but inside, she was eager. *I joined the Eagles for many reasons; one of those is being ordered to kill. At a moment like this, there’s no hiding that fact.*

Adrian delivered a quick, pointed look. “We’re out of camp, Angie. There’s no need for you to hide anything.”

Angela took that freedom to heart.

## 6

Three hours later, they had gotten 140 feet into the city and reached the cleared street Adrian had known was there. This had been done after the war. The piles were too orderly to be random, but it wasn’t encouraging that there were no other signs of rebuilding. Likely, it had been someone trying to flee, or someone determined to get in and find family.

“Gentlemen, start your engines!” Adrian encouraged them cheerfully, as if announcing the start of a race.

It drew tired snickers from the team who understood they would be crawling along. There were cars in the way, along with buses, parts of buildings, and they could already make out the first place where they would have to get the Cats out to clear. Part of a school was lying across most of the street ahead.

“Something up?” Adrian didn’t like how quiet she’d been for the last three hours.

“I can’t get just one thought from the blur,” Angela complained. “There are more people here than we thought, a lot more.”

“Can you get them to come out?”

Her uneasy glance made his stomach shift.

“Even if I could get one, I’m not sure how to convince them they’ll be safe.”

“Yes, you are,” Adrian intoned. “Say it.”

Angela scowled deeply at not being allowed to lie. “We have to do it again. We have to eliminate the evil.”

“Yes.” He waited for her to protest.

She didn’t.

Adrian was proud of her and quickly running out of things to teach her. This would probably be the last time a mission would have only male teams. Within the next month, Adrian expected to have the rest of Angela’s rookies, minus Jennifer, out toiling for the dream. Angela wasn’t a level four yet, but she would still lead them to glory. Of that, Adrian had no doubt. His private lessons with her, combined with the attention she was receiving from Marc and nearly every senior Eagle, would take care of that.

Adrian thought of the special training he’d been doing with her, the leadership lessons she’d soaked up like a sponge. The mental warning that he had to have a successor was one that had driven him to put things in place so soon, and only for her, where he hadn’t for any of the others. She wasn’t as experienced, but she valued life more than his men. He couldn’t duplicate that or train it into his men. He’d created an army of killers to protect his camp. Now, he’d chosen a pure soul to lead them. It was the perfect setup. All that was missing was his death to clear the way for it to happen.

## 7

By 10 pm, they had made it more than a mile in. Adrian led them through the destruction that was unlike anywhere else they’d been. Not a single building stood. Most appeared as if the ground had been lifted up to spill them violently off their foundations. Mile after mile of heartbreaking sights littered their view in every direction, every dark intersection they came to. Those were only identifiable by the lack of concrete cinders.

Even with the medical salve under their noses, the stench was awful. The worst of it was around the corner from the grocery store they’d cleared. A truck full of Christmas fruitcakes was rotting. The sickly-sweet mildew gave many Eagles a flash of the carnage

at the rest stop.

They also had to drive over cracks, sometimes putting metal plates down to drive across. Adrian didn't hesitate, never asking her or the Eagles which way. He took them straight to the park.

The team stared in surprise at a clear, undamaged city block, at the businesses and homes on either side of the street that still had parking meters and telephone poles. It was dusty, neglected, intact. The convoy crossed into the area with expressions of surprise and longing.

The small city park had green trees around the edges, fading playground equipment, and weather-beaten picnic tables with little, ashy grills. Adrian's mind went to his childhood. He and his mother had spent a lot of time here, long afternoons spent waiting for a fancy black car to pick him up. He keyed his mike. "Team two has perimeter. Team one, take point."

Angela missed being with Kyle's crew, but that wasn't her job tonight. When Adrian lit a smoke and pulled his hood up before stepping out into the dank, chilly night air, she sent her mind back to the search. She had an idea of how many targets now, and she was getting their hatred clearly, but she didn't have the location yet. She pushed harder, forcing her mind through the levels of darkness, and was rewarded with a light in the shadowy distance as a door swung open. One of their enemies was dreaming. *That's my line in.*

She didn't see Adrian wave men over to guard each door of the truck she was in, but Angela felt it. Adrian was worried about her getting hurt. *He needs to worry about himself this time.*

## 8

Surrounded by molding trees that blocked the view of Little Rock's dark skyline, the pristine park gave off an unreliable feeling of seclusion and safety. Adrian's mind took him to one of the most vivid memories of his mother.

*“The car’s coming. Be good now, Adrian.”*

*“Yes, mother.”*

*Her arms were long and smooth, hard enough to hurt when she squeezed.*

*“Ouch, Mommy!”*

*Her chuckle floated down. “We’ll have to toughen you up, now that they’ve let you out.”*

*A long black car pulled up in front of them. The hated driver rushed to open the passenger door. “Mr. Milton sends his regards.”*

*His mother blushed furiously and guided him into the car.*

*“Mind your manners, now. They don’t take just any student into this school.”*

*“Yes, mother.” He slid into the cool car, noting the man on the opposite bench and the shining gun he wore.*

*Adrian politely acknowledged his father’s personal guard as his mother leaned down to buckle him in.*

*“You’re only five Adrian, but you’re not like other kids. You know that, don’t you?”*

*“Yes, mother.” He took it in with that intent, nothing-else-allowed mindset that the scientists had found so fascinating. He absorbed one thing at a time, fully, until his understanding of it was exhausted.*

*“And do you know why?”*

*Adrian glanced over at his father’s man, noticing the interest in not only the conversation, but also in his mother. “No.”*

*Satisfied, she kissed his cheek. Her silken blonde hair brushed his hand. “Keep it that way. Such information is not for the likes of you.”*

*“Yes, mother.”*

*I’ve been chasing it ever since, Adrian thought, coming back from the past in a quick snap. She’d intentionally triggered his need to challenge the destiny that had been set, to discover why he was odd. The classes and forms of training he’d received as a child had created the man, but the mind that drove him had been given*



by his mother. Once she'd gotten him back from the lab, nothing had come between them. She'd made certain he had everything he needed for this very place in time. Until her murder when he was eleven, they'd been inseparable.

"Will you tell me a bit more?" Angela yawned as she joined him, estimating it had to be around 2am. Even with the extra lights that Kevin's team had brought, it was shadowy. The full moon gave them a baleful glow, covered in layers of an unnatural orange fog that made Angela think of nuclear tests and stories where monsters came out of the mist.

"If you tell me something."

Adrian's answer was spoken lowly enough to make her come closer.

Angela stopped within a foot of him, rubbing her chilly shoulders. "What do you want to know?"

Adrian's hands slid into his pockets. "When she died, I was sent to a school in Arizona. I escaped."

"Escaped?"

Adrian thought of the high towered walls and the guards, and the hundreds of other children like him. "They were gathering us. It was killing me not to know why. If she hadn't triggered that, I would have stayed."

"Because you were with others like yourself?"

"Yes. It hurts to leave them behind."

Angela waited, hoping she wouldn't have to ask again, that he trusted her enough to share a few more of his own ghosts. He was good at healing others and bad at doing it for himself.

"I was given a clue during a visit from my father. He explained that he was a descendant of powerful old blood, that he and his line were destined to lead."

"What was it you were being brought together to do?"

"We were trained as weapons to keep his...my bloodline in power. They kept a stock of us."

"What did they have you do?"

Adrian's response revealed a layer of his personal torment. "Can't you guess? Children make perfect assassins. No one ever

suspects the eleven-year-old standing out in plain sight, or the twelve-year-old in the shade of a brick alleyway. Or the fifteen-year-old in the hotel kitchen.”

“I thought you escaped!” She was almost brought to tears at the images of the things he’d been forced to do.

“Which time?” Adrian spun into the darkness, clearly done.

He was almost out of view before she remembered their deal.

“What was it that you wanted me to tell you?”

Adrian stopped. He needed to know. “Would you trade my Eagles for another child?”

“Yes,” she gasped immediately, thrown back into her nightmare. The death of her baby was something she didn’t think she’d ever fully recover from.

“Marc will give that to you.”

“Yes.”

When she didn’t add more, just stood there staring back with that tempting blush, Adrian couldn’t stop himself. “Are you working on it? That’s a long time for your team to be without a leader.”

Angela was both embarrassed and angry at the personal question. “I haven’t asked for it.”

It was amazing how quickly he felt better knowing that. The noises and shadows were Marc slowly working his way up to the finale. Adrian applauded the brilliant strategy even as he loathed it.

Adrian went to his truck. Once inside the cold interior, he flipped on the CB. Marc knew better than to break radio silence, but Adrian could at least let them know everything was okay. He had no doubt some of the camp would be listening by now, worried and giving the wolfman shit because he wasn’t their true guardian. “This is Eagle. We’re still clearing. Everything is 5-by.”

Adrian adjusted the second set to a less used frequency. It was a shipping channel he’d taught a special boy to use a long time ago. “This is Eagle. We are in the city. Hang on. We’re coming.”

He didn’t hang up the mike, instinctively knowing there would be a response.

“You have to hurry!”

It was a low whisper.

Adrian keyed the mike, not recognizing the voice. “Be ready. It will happen fast.”

“But you don’t even know where we are!”

“Be ready,” Adrian insisted. “We’re close and we make a lot of noise.”

There was no reply.

He switched the radio off. Other people were likely monitoring the channels. If the hunters got to the kids first, there was no way it would end well.

## 9

The very thin boy stared at the large group with longing and fury. His dad was finally here.

Conner pulled his ragged clothes closer, ignoring the cold and the nasty muck soaking into his duct taped shoes. His intent stare never left the large group of people.

Even if Conner hadn’t recognized the man from pictures, he could have picked out the leader by the way he cared for his people and by the respect he was given. It was almost a dream for the teenager, seeing that walk and the blue eyes that perfectly matched his own.

Conner swayed lightly on his feet, almost unable to believe Adrian had come. The men with him convinced the boy he wasn’t hallucinating. There was no mistaking that style of protection.

Instead of the relief he could now allow himself to feel, or even anger at how long it had taken, there was only fear in Conner’s mind. He was terrified of making the wrong choice and getting his kids killed, but his heart was already yearning to be a protected member of his father’s herd instead of leading his own.

## 10

“Is it working?”

“Yes.”

Embry came to glance over his team leader’s shoulder, as if he didn’t believe him.

Hudson didn’t get offended. They were all wired that way. The Major’s men liked knowing things for themselves.

They watched the new people on the screen that was static layered but working. It was one of a dozen tracking devices they were using to monitor those living here. There wasn’t a lot of technology left that worked, but the Major was great at ferreting out what did.

They’d known where Conner and the kids were since almost the beginning of this run, but the Major didn’t need that gifted, marked child for anything but bait. The government reward was for his father.

The younger and dumber of the two bounty hunters stood. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Hudson sneered at Embry’s eagerness. “The Major said not to go without him.”

“But now is the perfect time!” Embry whined. “They’re settling down. We’ll catch them off guard.”

Hudson, so named because of his birth near the infamous waterway, offered one more warning. “The Major has a plan, Embry. I’d be careful about stepping on his toes.”

The younger guard scratched at his head. “I want to go in now.”

Like all of the Major’s crew, he and Embry were bald under the black bandanas; their skin tones were burnt to the same shade from the harsh environment they toiled in. They could have been brothers but for the hatred that existed between them.

Hudson gave him a curt glare. “Go on, then. I’ve wanted Lenore for a while. With you dead, I’m next for her.”

Embry’s expression darkened, mouth opening for a brief second before snapping shut.

Hudson laughed at him, but the sound was deep with loathing in place of amusement. “What you’ll do is report to the Major and see what he wants us to do.”

Embry paled. “Me?”

“Yes, you. You’re the one who wants to move in ahead of schedule. Get lost.”

Embry gave a stiff salute, hoping the Major wouldn’t kill him when he suggested attacking now. Embry turned back suddenly, wary. “You really want my woman?”

Hudson’s expression was cold, devoid of empathy. “Yes.”

Embry spun toward the hill.

Hudson went back to watching the green dots on the screen. He was already sure the Major wouldn’t kill Embry unless he got out of line. They needed all the men they could get for this hit. “We’re ready.”

As the world fell apart, Hudson and the rest of the Major’s team had been sent out to collect Adrian Mitchel. And the Major never went back without his man. They would have this bounty wrapped up in the next few days, maybe even in hours. From there, they were under orders to take the Mitchels to the big bunker.

But instead of going to the last government holdout, Hudson thought Garret would keep the gifted pair for a while. He might hand them over after he’d taken his pound of flesh if they survived. Hudson wasn’t sure the standing reward would be enough to keep either of them alive.

Adrian was at the top of the Major’s most hated list, and rightly so. When shit went down years ago, Mitchel had struck back twice as hard and taken the Major’s wife. He’d returned her, pregnant, six months later. That kind of hatred was impossible to ease with gold, promotions, or even extra food and water rations. It required blood.

Chapter Twenty-Two BK3  
**Those Late Nights**

1

“It’s FND.”

Kevin stared in shock, unable to believe the jealousy spiraling through him. He knew who this choice had come from and he even understood why. The how was choking him.

Sitting at a dim picnic table near the couples’ tents, Cynthia kept her head down. “I was offered a cruel deal. If that matters to you.”

Kevin didn’t think so upon first hearing, but after a few seconds of asking himself what he might have dumped *her* for. “What was it?”

Cynthia looked up with shame and defensive determination. “I get to be her XO for the next three runs. Among other things.”

Kevin blinked. *Yes*. He would have ditched her for that too. It was the equivalent of being handed second place on Kyle’s infamous team. It didn’t stop the want or the frustration, but it did lessen the sting.

“She said...” Cynthia slammed her mouth shut. *What if Angela was wrong?*

Kevin was slowly recovering. He’d only stopped by to confirm their date was still on before he left to catch up with the clearing crew. “What?”

Cynthia was now sure of a rejection either way; she didn’t answer. Was all the power really worth hurting him this way? Was it enough to quiet that new loneliness that came with dusk each night?

Kevin studied the reporter, seeing she wasn’t happy, but she planned to follow through. She was an Eagle—a real one now—and he had no right to stand in the way of that. Could he wait until

she'd served her duty with Matt? Could he stand watching a romance develop? Kevin wasn't blind to the changes taking place in Safe Haven. Many of the couples that were forming here were lasting pairs. Their sparks, their compatibility, was too rare to miss. "I'd like to know what she said."

Cynthia had expected him to tell her off and storm away. It gave her the courage to answer. "She said you'd wait for me."

Kevin stared at her teary, hopeful eyes, and was pulled into the drama of camp life against his will. If Angela said it, he could trust that, right? "I might."

Cynthia smiled in surprise. "Really?"

Kevin caught sight of Matt coming from the showers, his second today, and frowned. "I need guidelines, Cynthia. Soon."

He left without saying anything else.

She watched until he faded into the shadows around the parking area. The rest of the clearing crew was heading out again. She would miss him being around and that said it was going to be hard to honor her new duty.

Matt dropped heavily onto the seat next to her, sliding close.

Cynthia sighed at the frowns of those who saw. Then she put on her training face and turned to him with a welcoming smile. "You smell good."

Matt blushed and stared at her in worshipful happiness. He would sleep in Cynthia's tent tonight, instead of with the livestock.

The teenager's dreamy gaze went to the vehicles disappearing into the darkness. He dropped his head before anyone could see his other face. On that clear, furious facade was glee that Kevin was leaving and an endless hope that the man wouldn't return.

## 2

Late night fell over Arkansas like a cloud, smothering the dim light and replacing it with the unknown. For most of Safe Haven, that wasn't something to be feared, but for the Eagles, it meant limited visibility and depending on the dogs to do their job. Thanks to the wolf, their three dozen canine workers were

constantly roaming the perimeter, becoming more and more aware with each step.

Did these animals understand they would be the first to die? That they were the sacrificial lambs between the light and darkness?

Dog would have said no; their brains didn't equate fear to rebellion.

Dog was biased; he missed the signs. It was understandable. The grass didn't whisper when the wolf came by on rounds, nor did the wind have advice to give, showing no sympathy to his plight. When the wolf came by, there was silence. Since Dog believed the mutts to be inferior, he didn't consider the quiet meant they were hiding anything.

Until Adrian rolled away from Safe Haven.

Dog padded around the metal cleaners, tired but proud for his human. Marc was in charge of the herd. How far they had—

*Join us or die!*

Five of the working dogs, without their red collars, padded out of the shadows to surround him. Their eyes glowed with rage, the kind that always drew blood.

It only took the wolf a second to understand the grave error he'd made, but his reaction didn't change. *Traitors! I'll kill you!* Dog lunged for the throat that had given the ultimatum.

“Point man to the showers!”

“Copy.” Marc was already on his way there as fast as he could go without panicking the camp. Dog's yelps were awful.

Guards pointed the way, guns in hand.

Now out of sight of the herd, Marc ran through the trees.

His shadow followed.

Those guarding that area were trying to keep a tight circle around the snarling, rolling mass that had grown to include over half of their working animals.

“Get off him!”

Instead of ignoring or even flinching, their working animals lunged his way.



Marc fired, taking down two of the red-eyed dogs as three more attacked. Marc was sent back to Nebraska, to killing the wolves.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

The Eagles began firing, picking off dogs that slid from the fighting ball and ran at them.

Marc kicked his steel toed boot through the teeth of their biggest working dog and then shot it in the head.

*Grrr!*

Marc spun but wasn't fast enough to avoid the jaws that clamped down on his wrist.

"Uggg!" Marc brought his other hand up and blew a hole through the dog's throat.

"Betray us!" He slung the gore aside and stormed into the violently churning pack of enraged animals. He pulled the triggers on both Colts. "This is what you get!"

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Marc wasn't taking any prisoners. Two adrenaline-fueled reloads had the dog pile apart, and the few survivors running off with enraged howls.

Dog was curled into a tight, bloody ball that didn't crawl from under the corpses of those he had managed to kill. The other bodies were spread around the wolf in a beautiful, awful circle of skill.

Marc yanked and kicked them off, digging his way down to Dog. The wolf didn't move.

Marc picked him up. His shadows stayed close, watching for more animals as Marc took his friend toward the vet's tent.

The walk to Chris only took a minute, but Marc couldn't tell if Dog was alive. Blood from both of them dripped steadily down his arm as he walked; the smell of urine was overwhelming. The other dogs had pissed on him during the fight. *What the hell happened?*

Chris jerked as Marc slid into his tent, dropping the dart gun through shaking hands.

"He needs help. Now!"

Chris didn't bother answering; his knobby, hairy legs flew around the boxes.

Marc started to put Dog on the floor.

Chris jerked a hand toward the bed. "I'll get a new one. Make him comfortable if you can."

"I'm not sure if he's—"

"Don't say that!" Chris didn't like the wolf, but he loved animals. "Make yourself useful. Get out." Chris knelt by his bed, frowning deeply. "Don't move, Dog. This will stop the pain, and then I'll sew you up."

There was no response from the bloody wolf, but the vet didn't require one. He was sliding into the zone where words were just a part of the entry ritual.

Marc left, pulled back into protecting the camp. He was starting to get a small idea of why Adrian always seemed so stressed.

Marc joined the guards, aware of camp members streaming from tents. He keyed the mike. "A flock or herd of something going by triggered the dogs into a fight. It's all over. As you were."

Marc's leadership style was different than Adrian's, but still effective. If he had tried to act like the blond, it wouldn't have worked. There was only one Adrian, and everyone knew it.

John appeared at his side. "Hold that hand up."

Marc didn't argue. He needed both of them for this job.

The Eagles waited for Marc to tell them what to do now that they had a cover story.

"Get rid of the bodies. Make a fire pit, but don't light it yet. Use some of that dead brush." Marc grimaced as John stuck a needle into his arm.

He ran through the possible scenarios.

Adrian was quicker, but he had been in charge of the camp for months. Marc's next words eased any lingering doubt about him being in charge.

"I want balloons and the boric acid we found in Hutchinson." Marc waved more men to him with his good hand. "Fill the balloons and bring them in crates and buckets to the perimeter.

We'll pop those buckets and crates with shotguns if we have uninvited guests."

The image of a poison cloud greeting the surviving dogs was enough to make Eagles fall eagerly into the chore.

"Keep reminding the teams to sweep low and high and have someone check in with the clearing crew. Make sure they're alert." Marc handed out the final details with relief.

Samantha came to Marc's side with damp hair. She'd been in the shower and hadn't heard anything over the water. She also hadn't sensed it. Her mind had been full of the thoughts she only allowed free when she needed a quick release. That had been interrupted by Peggy bringing in one of the kids who'd soiled herself. "What can I do?"

Marc thought he had it covered, as much as he could, and forgot to soften his words. "Whatever you were before."

Stung, Samantha turned for the mess. *Maybe I'll have that drink now.*

Marc felt the error but didn't call her back. He would stop by her tent on rounds and explain that he hadn't meant it the way she'd clearly taken it. Right now, if there was nothing else... Marc ran through it all one more time and then let himself go to Chris.

The vet was standing outside the tent, eyeing the cages around him in concern.

Marc saw the glaze of hatred, the promises of blood in beady eyes, and understood the vet was trying to accept that the animals he loved so much loathed him.

"I sewed him up, but..." The vet stopped, turning away.

Marc ducked into the smelly tent and went to his friend. Covered in bandages, it was easier to see the wolf's big body rise and fall, confirming that he was alive.

Marc's hand was gentle as he stroked the wolf's fur. But he wouldn't be for long. Death hung thick in the air.

Dog whimpered, trying to nudge his fingers.

Marc's resolve broke. "I need you to wake up! Please!"

Dog stiffened, whimpering again.

Marc dug deeper. "Just this once. Please."

*And what will you give?*

Marc cringed at the voice he'd locked away before meeting Angie. He had expected it to take longer, to be harder. "Please help him."

*What will you give in return?* that bitter voice insisted.

"What do you want in return?"

*I'd be there when you take her, Marcus, the witch, cold and angry, revealed the price with glee. I'd feel her surrender too!*

The wolf's body went slack under his fingers. Marc broke. "Yes."

Blinding blue light filled the tent, shining through the cracks and shooting through the cloth like it wasn't there. A cloud of it settled over the wolf and slowly sank in.

"I'm sorry, Baby-cakes." Marc knew his secret would be discovered because of this.

*I can help, the witch stated. I know what she needs, and it is not a boy scout.*

Marc had been forced to deny who he really was. Mother had beaten him at first and then insisted that he didn't have the curse at all. To escape the misery, he'd told the witch to go away and it had. Once locked up, it had been easier to believe the lies than to face the truth and keep fighting his mother. That type of lifelong mentality wasn't going to change overnight. "No. Thank you, but go away now."

The witch faded back into his lonely cage.

Marc allowed himself a single ache of regret, then closed it all off behind that thick wall of denial his childhood had been built on. *I'm not like the rest of them. I don't hear voices. I have no power. I'm not cursed with a gift that marks me as a freak and prevents friendships. The vet saved Dog.*

He masked his emotions and threw himself into the next step of cleaning up the fight and handling the camp.

be doing. A drink was about the only thing that appealed, other than going back to the shower to finish what she'd started. The current line there discouraged that choice.

The light wind blew Samantha's hair back, revealing her frown to the man at the center mess table. His gaze was drawn to her, as always.

Wanting a few minutes, even if they were spent arguing or in silence, Neil spoke up when she would have disappeared inside the truck. "I've got a thermos."

Their eyes met with a sharp flare of need that made Samantha suck in air. It also sent enough lust through her body to break the final chain of morality that had been holding her back. Their petty games didn't matter anymore. She wanted him; she was done avoiding it.

Samantha sat down, sending out a thick spark. "Come here often?"

Neil blinked, not expecting it. He refused to let his gaze go anywhere but hers.

Samantha snickered. "Sorry. It seemed like the thing to say."

Neil felt his body wake at her inviting demeanor. "It is, if you're trying to pick me up."

"If I were, would it work?"

She got him again. Neil chuckled. "That depends on the expectations. I have to know them up front this time."

Samantha's body hummed with desire. "If I were picking you up, I'd say you could expect a couple hours of fun. And that's it."

Off duty until morning, Neil did a visible check on the settling camp. Marc had it under control... "What about them?"

She shrugged, not caring about that anymore either. "Let them get their own one night stand."

Neil leaned closer instead of chuckling. "What if one night isn't enough for me?"

"Then, I wouldn't mention that again, or you'll scare me off." Her profile darkened. "Take what I can give. I'm not wired for forever."

Neil sighed. How could he say no? He'd wanted her since that

day at the gun class, and it hadn't changed. "You're the boss."

Samantha ran a finger over the scar on her hand, marveling at how far she'd come from the broken, abused woman who'd been sent here on the heels of a witch. "Good." The feel of his hot gaze on her body wasn't nearly enough. "I think we should go to my tent, where we can be alone."

"They'll see me come."

Sam's breath caught at the image.

"You'll let me?"

*Oh, yeah!* She nodded with a red face and rocky chest.

Neil couldn't stop himself from staring as she stood up, mouth going dry.

"Give me an hour. If the lights are out, I've changed my mind." Samantha left quickly, not waiting for a response. She was sure she had embarrassed herself, but the excited liberation in her stomach was worth it. *I'm truly free now.*

Neil wasn't sure whether he would go or not. A gentleman wouldn't, but he wanted her in a way he'd never experienced before...and he wasn't a gentleman. He was an Eagle in Adrian's army, and they went after what they needed, even when the odds appeared insurmountable.

#### 4

"Marc to the center fire!"

"Copy."

No longer feeling his mauled wrist thanks to the shot John had given him, Marc's gaze went over the mess where the doctor and Anne were coaching the pregnant females while having a snack of leftover tuna casserole. Jennifer was there too, along with Charlie and Becky.

Angela had told him about the deal Peggy and Hilda made with Kyle. Marc wasn't surprised. It was politics and it went on everywhere. Jennifer was well protected, either way. On top of Angela's request for him to keep track of her, Kyle had assigned his own security to the teenager—Billy and Charlie. Charlie was

taking his first shift right now.

Marc refused to consider all the implications of that, studying their surroundings instead. The area was brown and dry, despite this being the first official week of summer. *But the damn flies are worse.* Marc waved one off his bandaged arm. If they got any more aggressive, the camp would need to carry swatters on them at all times. Was an insect swarm the next of nature's blows?

"Screw you!"

Roger Sawyer's words were brutally loud from across the camp, drawing people from tents and activities.

"You shouldn't even be here!"

Marc and his shadow, Zack, hurried that way.

## 5

"Let it go." The vet moved in front of Dale. He had come to the mess to forget about the animals for a while, but here they were again—in human form. "He didn't mean anything."

"Bullshit! He said I was staring at his ass! I've never done that!"

"He asked if you'd been looking," Chris refuted tiredly. "You're the one who twisted a joke into something else."

"Don't joke with me about anything—ever." Roger pointed a finger toward Dale. "Don't even talk to me!"

Chris could feel his temper wanting to take control—he'd had a rough night—but he was also aware of the growing audience. A lynching could happen in this atmosphere. "He won't, right, Dale?"

"I think he should say what he wants, to whomever he wants," another voice spoke up, one that swung attention her way because of how quiet she usually was.

Tracy took Dale's left, tired of the bickering when the bosses weren't around. "You sure shoot *your* mouth off enough, Roger."

"We want homosexuals banned from Safe Haven!"

"For what reason?" Tracy was on Angela's team, suddenly a respected member of the camp, but the angry men didn't bring that

up.

“They’re gay! That’s reason enough,” Tucker defended.

“No, it isn’t. What crime was committed?”

Tucker wouldn’t answer.

Roger gestured. “It’s a sin.”

“It’s wrong,” Anderson added.

Marc snorted from behind them, making the crowd part. “So said our old world, and we all know how morally correct they were.”

“Do you support it all starting up again?” Roger glowered at Marc.

“Unless they commit a crime, they’ll be judged individually, like everyone else in Adrian’s camp.” Marc ignored the protests and support, going to the training area instead of lingering for the action.

Behind him, Zack spoke up. “He told you how it is, now back off.”

“We don’t take orders from you!”

“You’re wrong, Sawyer. You always were. That’s why you’ve never been chosen for the Eagles.” Zack sneered. “We’ve known about you and the others who pick on people, but we’ve been waiting for Adrian to get tired of giving you chances to be human to each other. Now that he is, we won’t tolerate it anymore!”

Marc was aware of a physical fight starting now. The camp needed a release, but this had been coming anyway. The Eagles would handle things tonight and Adrian would reclaim a camp that no longer hated their gay population. There wouldn’t be acceptance yet, not so soon, but the vileness spewing from Roger’s mouth would be the last that anyone here let fly without grave consequences.

“Hey!” Camp radios crackled loudly. “I think we need some ssssongs!”

Mitch’s slurred declaration had Marc’s feet pointing toward the com truck before he was called. Adrian had been right to leave a plan for the drunkard.

Marc waved Kevin over. “Set it up, just like Adrian said, then



find Matt before you take over the radio. Mitch probably ordered him off it.”

“Been a fun night so far.” Kevin grinned. “You’re doin’ real well.”

Marc couldn’t help the pride that had him matching Kevin’s good cheer as he continued toward the com truck.

Those observing had no idea that under his pleased appearance was a Marine set to hand out a punishment. When they saw Marc greet the drunken radioman with a handshake and a smile a few minutes later, muttering started. Up until now, Marc had been doing well, but as he led Mitch toward a picnic table that was being brought to the center fire, there was unease.

Marc gestured at the table. “Have a seat, there, buddy. Let’s tie one on. Whadda ya say?”

Mitch stumbled onto the bench seat. “Soundsss glood to me.”

Marc joined him, twisting the top on a cold beer. He sucked down foam as Mitch grabbed the bottle that Li Sing set down, shunning the beer.

Marc gestured. “Bring another one and keep ‘em comin’.”

Li bowed as he backed away, expression alive with curiosity. The small group of witnesses parted to let the cook through. Their quiet alertness told Marc this lesson was also for the other drinkers here. That’s why Adrian had insisted it be done publicly.

Marc waited for Kevin to update the rookie about to take over his post. “We’re gonna be here a while. Get something flowing, will ya?”

“Calm and slow?”

*How about Highway to Hell*, Marc thought sarcastically, nodding. Damn, it would be good to hand this back to Adrian. *How does he keep from shooting them all?*

“Are we drinking or w-what?” Mitch was already loaded.

Marc raised his dripping beer and downed it.

waved him in, then closed the shade, he went, not caring that Jeremy might be one of those witnessing. At this moment, he also didn't care that tomorrow night it might be him waiting out there, alone in the dark.

"Thank you."

"For what?" He grunted bitterly. "Coming here to take advantage of you? No problem."

"I know what I need, Neil. Right now, that's you."

Her whisper went through him like fire. When she slid closer and curled her arms around his neck, Neil surrendered. "What...whatever you want."

Samantha smiled softly. "Hold me?"

Before the war, Neil had slept with less than a dozen women, all quick fumbles in the dark. He'd never held them; he had no need to make sure they enjoyed his touch, but this! Samantha was molten warmth against him. Neil struggled to control his hands when she placed a slow kiss to his jaw. His grip on her waist tightened as she did it again.

"Been a while?"

He nodded jerkily, almost flinching when her mouth neared his.

Samantha shuddered. *Hot! So hot!* Her lips pressed lightly to the corner of his mouth, absorbing his groan. Her need flared again, brighter this time.

"Samantha, I—"

"Don't." Samantha inhaled deeply, picking up smoke, sweat, heat. "It's okay. You can go if you don't want me enough to—"

Samantha moaned in satisfaction as his mouth descended over hers with a snarl of lust. *Neil!*

As if he'd heard the mental shout, Neil steered them toward her neatly made bed.

His hands roamed freely, tangling in her hair to bring her mouth up for another punishing kiss that had her pushing against him in desperation.

"Please!" she gasped this time when he allowed her to breathe.

"Don't stop, Neil, or leave now. I couldn't take it if you—"

“Shhh...” Neil slid his hands down to her waist, fingers lifting her shirt.

Samantha trembled at his hot hands against her bare skin. He unhooked the front of her bra and pushed it aside, dropping low to capture a rocky nipple.

“Oohh!” Samantha arched against his mouth, barely noticing his fingers working the buttons of her pants. His mouth rose to capture hers and she held on when he dipped her to the cot.

Neil paused, unable to help being distracted. “Uh, Sam? Why do you have a handcuff key taped under your breast?”

Samantha groaned in frustration and need. “Not now!”

Neil stored the question. “Okay, later.”

He gently stripped her, rubbing that beautiful body until he thought he’d go crazy with waiting. She twitched against his hands, mewling little moans coming from her mouth that had him shedding his own clothes.

Samantha helped him push off his shirt. Her nails found his shoulders, pulled him closer. “Neil...”

He bent down to kiss her again, using his free hand to remove the last of his clothes. His eyes burnt into her soul as he carefully lowered himself between her legs.

Neil brushed her soft curls, arms flexing, hips tilting.

She trembled as he slid against her, arching upward.

Neil thrust.

Samantha whimpered, nails digging into his wrists as he shoved into her.

Neil sank deeper, body tensing, tightening at the sensation of her wrapping around him. He shoved harder and slid all the way in.

His taut body strained against hers, a groan of guttural lust rising to spill from his lips. Neil pulled himself away from the edge with a groan of determination.

He jerked forward suddenly, hitting a sweet spot, and she arched against him in response.

“Neil!”

He rubbed them together instead of thrusting; using his

thickness to secure her pleasure the way his police pals had jokingly told him could be done. It slid him against her clit and sent her into a spasm of pleasure that tensed her whole body.

Her orgasm was unlike anything Neil had ever felt. It was his pleasure too, and he memorized her expressions as he rocked against her.

Samantha shuddered violently. *So good!*

Neil slid back, breathing roughly. She was slick and pulsing between them, no faking there. He thrust into her without any of his previous hesitation.

“Yeah...uuh!” Neil growled in stunned delight when she arched up to meet his violent move. He stiffened above her, too far gone to stop this time.

When he would have pulled out to finish, Samantha held him close. “I need that too, Neil.”

He stifled a shout against her shoulder, hips jerking forward as he exploded.

## 7

“Allan’s gonna take my place.” Marc stood. “Gotta do rounds.”

Mitch looked up in bleary happiness. “G’on then.”

Marc stood up without any signs that he’d just crushed three beers. But he could feel it. Drinking hard and quick wasn’t something he liked to do, but beer was usually okay. Demons came out when he drank, but beer didn’t usually do that to him.

Marc continued his rounds, seeing the fight at the mess was over. The brawlers were now sitting sullenly outside the medical tent to wait their turn. John and Anne would be busy for a while.

*So will I*, he thought, noticing more than a few inviting stares, including the current one from Tracy. They saw his thick body, remembered Angela’s smiles, and wanted him. Marc loved the feeling and hated it at the same time. It made him uncomfortable and lonely. It also sent his ego to new levels and made him grateful they’d come to Safe Haven. Even during his time in the Marines,

he'd never been as useful, as wanted, as he was here.

His mind went where he'd vowed not to let it go. Marc wondered if Angela missed him as much as he missed her. He pushed it aside. Right now, he had to smooth Samantha's ruffled feathers and make sure things were okay on the weather front. After that, he would check on Mitch. They were walking yet another fine line with this setup—they always were with Adrian's methods—but if it worked, Mitch would have the chance to become a different man.

As Marc reached the female side of the tents, he noticed a lone Eagle standing stiffly in the shadows. Jeremy looked as though he'd been gut-punched.

Marc followed his line of sight to the very tent he'd been on his way to, realizing there were shadows moving on the canvas wall.

Entwined on a cot, one shadow had a hand between her spread legs and long hair spilling over her shoulders. The other wore an all-too-familiar hat as he rocked against her.

*Looks like Neil's smoothing those feathers.* Marc hurried to intercept Jeremy when the Eagle moved toward the tent. "Damn, I wish Adrian was back."

Chapter Twenty-Three BK3  
**Deeper And Deeper**

1

“**T**here’s no damage here, ya know? Just can’t get over that.” Doug pushed away his half-eaten bowl. Even the dogs were fed better. “Why wouldn’t this be destroyed, too?”

The sky above them was roiling with pale gray through dingy black, but clouds were there as well. It appeared they were going to get wet, but none of them could bring themselves to dread the mud and mess involved. They needed the rain too much.

Doug’s was a general question, but everyone looked to Angela for the answer.

Catching Adrian’s subtle nod, she gave them the truth. “Fate spared it because no innocent blood has ever been spilled here. It was left alone after the war because people think it’s haunted.”

Some of them chuckled.

Adrian lifted a brow. “Is it?”

The amusement vanished at his question.

“Not any more than the rest of our world now.” Angela continued to roam through the mental fog...and found something.

Adrian instantly responded to her concern, keying his radio. “Full alert.” He looked at Angela. “What is it?”

“It’s okay. Marc’s calling.” She didn’t hide the satisfaction. “They had some trouble, but he’s covering... Damn it!”

When Angela drew her gun, so did everyone else who saw her.

She swiveled to a view of their back trail; those stunning blue eyes blazed into crimson as she brought the witch forward.

Adrian and the rest of them gaped at the enormous amount of small shadows streaming their way. Behind the rodents, running over the mounds of debris, were bounty hunters sent to capture them.

Kenn's mind added it up the quickest. "Too many! Into the vehicles!"

Their team fled toward the vehicles that lined the cleared street. Angela, no longer restrained by twitchy camp members, immediately brought a shield up around them—including their UPVs.

Adrian turned to stare at her in shock. She hadn't just been laying low about how recovered she was. Those basic gifts she had lived with all her life were now fully under her control. She'd mastered a new level without telling anyone. *On her own!*

Outside the small shield, the animals didn't leave. The Mother said humans were too alert for another direct attack in Safe Haven, but this small group was vulnerable despite the power in it. The attempts on Safe Haven had shown nature how best to attack.

"They're everywhere!"

Many of the rodents had made it through the shield as she brought it up.

Angela slung her foot and then stomped on the rat trying to chew through her boot, then another as she added her weight to keep the manhole cover on. Around her, the others were doing the same or shooting at the legions of sewer rats scurrying from storm drains.

"Get in the trucks!"

"No!" Adrian overruled Kenn. "Too many cracks and holes. We have to get off the ground."

*Hiss...*

Gas exploded inside their circle, thick white fumes that sent the rodents inside the shield fleeing back into the sewer.

Adrian motioned the Eagles to cover their mouths and noses as best they could.

Some of the rats fled from the fumes, stopping along the way to shudder in violent spasms.

*Hiss...*

Another canister came. The amount of gas inside the shield became smothering. Coughs and gasps for air made Angela bring it down.

*Hiss... Bamm!*

The release of gas as the shield vanished was like a small bomb, spreading out in a circle of lung-injuring confusion that slammed into the waiting predators.

Not expecting it, the rest of nature's army fled, coughing in agony. A lot were killed outright from the amount of chemical shoved into open, lunging mouths, giving the team a carcass perimeter.

The sound of coughing and spitting echoed loudly as the team recovered, tears streaming too heavily to see who had saved them.

Adrian was also hacking and crying, but he knew who to thank. He could feel the anger and energy being directed at him and recognized it. "Conner."

The boy didn't come any closer to the armed group. The mask he'd worn left him unfazed by the gas. He removed it now and secured it to his belt. "You still have company."

Shadows raced over the hills of debris, shifting garbage in their rush. Dressed in long, tan coats and goggles, the bounty hunters carried military kits and well-tended rifles.

The Eagles got into a defensive V as Adrian took point.

"Get them!" This voice was cold and hard, ordering the hunters down into the debris piles.

More shadows ran their way.

"Fire the nets!" Adrian did the same as he ordered.

Safe Haven's defenders had learned the bat lesson well. Their aim had also improved through practice. The two dozen attackers weren't expecting cargo nets that trapped them and prevented shooting. The bullets that followed were lethal, but there wasn't time to kill them all.

Major Garret led his men. "Move in!"

A second wave of bounty hunters ran by the entrapped men in the ropes. These hunters didn't wear hats, but black bandanas that instantly reminded the Eagles of Rick. It made the bounty hunters into walking targets that the team looked forward to shooting as soon as they'd rescued the kids.

"This way!" Conner gestured as he ran.



Adrian followed. Underground was where they needed to go, where Conner would have his charges stashed. “Eagles with me!”

*Slat! Ding!*

Five Eagles dropped into the hole that Conner knelt by. Angela vanished into it behind them.

“Switch!”

The cold order gave the team a brief second’s respite as the bounty men changed from darts to bullets.

Kenn shoved Adrian into the hole and then followed him. The last two men were Daryl and Doug. Both of them were wounded, but Conner already had the group moving through the dank darkness.

Adrian tried to keep track of everyone. “Count off!”

“Two!” Angela was trying to wrap Doug’s arm as they ran through the murky sewer. He and Daryl both had a trim.

The check in didn’t take long to complete. “Twenty-five!”

Adrian flipped on his light. He did a quick visual check of his crew, then took the place behind Conner’s pumping heels.

Behind them, there was no sound of pursuit yet. Conner hit the light on his belt. The double illumination allowed the team to view the filth and muck they were running through. Snakeskins, molding vines climbing dark, dripping walls and thick mushrooms greeted them. Then the smell hit; a few of the team gagged.

“Are we far enough?” Kenn’s finger was on the button.

“Leave it, let them gather.”

“But we’ll miss—”

“Leave it!”

Adrian’s annoyance earned Kenn frowns from those closest. Kenn had done a lot of training, but on runs like this, he was a rookie. Kenn was valuable in the office, but he was the tripping-over-himself Platoon commander that every team leader both scorned and used to their advantage. He hadn’t been that way before the war, but his time in Safe Haven, and Adrian’s choice to keep him off an official team, had changed everything for Kenn.

Angela tied a strap around Daryl’s leg next—it would have been funny if they weren’t in such danger—and moved back to

Adrian's left, where he wanted her.

"Gets low here!" Conner called from ahead, sounding like he was having a good time. There was no mistaking the cheer in that tone.

The adults ducked suddenly as the walls and floor sloped upward, but the ceiling didn't rise with them. *A drainage route*, Adrian thought.

Running through a dank sewer while hunched over allowed for only a limited view squinted against the splashes of so many feet. It kept them from seeing what they were about to hit.

"Hold your breath for ten seconds!" Conner ordered. "Don't stop!"

Adrian heard Angela's dismayed groan and quickly reached out to take an iron grip on her wrist.

Close by and aware of her fears, Kenn did the same. The two men took her into the stagnant water and then under it.

## 2

Angela didn't struggle, but she didn't try to help them either. She was totally disoriented, with no idea which way to propel herself. She spent the time fighting her fear of death by listening.

*Big ripple.* Daryl was now in the water with them.

*Smaller ripple.* Lee's wiry body.

*An enormous splash.* Doug, in the rear. It told her they'd all made it in.

Adrian yanked Angela above the surface and pulled her aside so Kenn could come up through the narrow opening. He slung her arm over his shoulders as she gasped in air and hefted her onto the concrete. He let go, then did the same for himself as quickly as he could. Only one person could come through at a time.

Adrian knelt at the hole, jerking men through. Twenty-five had gone in; the same had to come out.

Lee's thin frame bobbed to the surface and was grabbed, hauled up.

"One more!" Lee gasped for more air, face an alarming shade

of red.

“Where’s Doug?” Adrian saw the water start to settle and responded accordingly. He dove back through the narrow opening.

“No!” Kenn shouted. “Get him back!”

Angela grabbed Kenn before he could jump in. “He’s okay.”

Adrian’s head broke the surface.

Doug followed a few seconds later.

Adrian sucked in a quick breath and then dove back under to push.

Doug coughed heavily, clinging to the side. Eagle hands gripped him anywhere they could get a solid hold.

Adrian heaved from the bottom with Doug’s ass centered on his shoulder.

The big man shot out of the water and flopped onto the concrete.

Adrian joined him. “We’re not...going back...that way.”

Eagles chuckled.

Conner left them alone for a moment, but he never stopped watching the water. He wasn’t concerned about the dark tunnel behind him that they had to traverse next, but even standing water was dangerous. His group hadn’t been underground for an hour before learning that brutal lesson.

Eagles dried off, but they didn’t change clothes. Angela followed their lead, despite the way some of their eyes were going over her wet shirt and pants, and then darting away. They couldn’t view much through the front. The vest prevented it, but the sides of her clothes clung to damp swells that even in the dark, marked her different than the rest of Adrian’s army.

Conner frowned at them. “We should go.”

The scold in his tone was clear.

Angela was surprised when the Eagles responded. Apologetic looks were thrown; men took steps back.

Adrian swallowed his pride as he motioned to the tunnel. “You’re the guide.”

Conner took up a double-time run into the darkness.

“Shit!” Adrian darted after him, catching Angela’s wrist to be

certain she was next.

Kenn again provided the security sandwich, leaving the others to catch up.

### 3

“This way.”

Conner stopped suddenly, bending down to pull on a moldy piece of wood. A gaping black hole appeared.

The teenager disappeared into it without a word.

The Eagles frowned.

Adrian shined his light as Kyle and Kenn descended the ten feet to find Conner standing to the left of the ladder. They were at an intersection where dark, dripping tunnels branched out in four directions.

Conner waited until they were all down and ready, staring at Angela instead of the father he'd begun to doubt would come for him.

*Always take the farthest tunnel to the left, Angela delivered Conner's message silently as he got them moving again. Those to the right are mostly flooded.*

Angela stopped searching the floor and began looking down the other tunnels they were passing. The bones down here could fill two cemeteries.

“How many people are here? Are there a lot of you?”

“That depends on what you mean.” Conner answered Kenn's question as he wound them through stacks of supplies in crates and buckets.

Each of these had a large red X that the team assumed meant they were spoiled.

“There are thirty-one kids and at least twice that number of adults in our sector, but we're not part of their group. We don't help each other.”

Adrian was busy noting things. The boy hadn't been corrupted despite being abandoned. In fact, he was stronger. That protective tone was impossible to miss. “You'll take me to talk with them?”

“Yes.” Conner was still unable to deny that timbre anything. There was heavy bitterness in the one word.

The teenager wore jeans and a long sleeve black shirt under a dark hoodie layered in months of crud. It was like looking at Adrian from a long time ago. Conner was roughly a third of his dad’s weight and about even on Angela’s height. Pale, filthy skin covered hard muscles, and a hood hid the hair they all knew would be like rippling wheat when clean. Angela’s mind went to the child’s words on the tape.

*“The grownups left us.”*

How could they do that? Would Adrian still let them into Safe Haven?

*No, I won’t, but I can’t leave them as hunted animals either.*

Understanding and agreeing, Angela walked between Adrian and Conner so she could play mediator if it was needed.

*And because he makes you feel safe,* the witch stated.

Angela didn’t deny it. Adrian was the light.

“I have to make a stop,” Conner informed them.

Adrian slowed when Conner did.

Behind him, grunts and groans of relief echoed. They’d kept the fast pace for the better part of an hour now.

Conner scanned them. “You guys should be quiet.”

Angela stayed at Adrian’s side as Conner tapped three times on a huge stone door. Set into the wall, Angela was sure she would have missed it.

“Who iss it?” a female voice called.

“Conner, for trading.”

The door began to roll open.

The mission team stared in surprise at the underground market. Shelves, tables, crates, and boxes were what they picked out first; then the clerks running this bonanza caught and held their attention.

The women wore some sort of shiny decoration—their boots and long gloves were covered in them. The small sequins caught the light of homemade candles anchored to the damp walls and cast eerie forms along the tables. The shiny decorations were in

their hair and covering the packs worn on their backs. A few of them even had the decorations sewn over their gray trousers and shirts, giving a sensual, frightening impression of dangerously glinting women.

Angela classified them that way for many reasons, not the least of which was the blowguns and rows of needle darts on their belts. These females knew how to survive, clearly, but the way they had adapted was amazing.

Conner eased into the room; the adults followed slowly, staring. There was an assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables, and even producing plants for sale, but the gallon jugs of clear water drew Angela. Apparently, Conner needed the same because he went straight for them.

As the team came closer, they realized the shiny decorations were scales. Respect went up. The team hadn't seen the sewer snakes yet, but the size of the skins and the amount of scales the women were using implied the reptiles were large and numerous.

The clerk behind the low table stepped closer to her stock as she got a look at the hard asses lingering by the slowly closing door.

Conner waved. "Three gallons."

The clerk's eyes swung back to Conner.

Angela wasn't able to place exactly what it was about these merchants that she didn't like. They wore the same mismatched clothes covered in dirt; they even had the same abused auras, but there was something else.

"Let'sss see your cash."

Angela gaped. The clerk sounded like a snake!

Conner pulled a gun from his jacket pocket and slid it onto the plank. "Five bullets left. Use 'em in good health."

The clerk made the gun vanish before Angela could blink.

"Deal. Anything elsesss or change?"

Conner pointed toward a basket of dried apple slices. "Use the rest on those."

"No meatsss?"

Conner shook his head. "I don't like snake meat. I trap coons

and badgers, a rabbit or two when luck's with me."

The clerk nodded. "As do most since the mutations began showing up in reptiles." Cara grimaced miserably. "Until we broke free of the prisson, rodents and the like were all we had."

Angela sensed the lie but didn't remark on it.

Conner reached out, putting a hand on the woman's arm. "Thank you for the trade."

She smiled hotly at him, burning with a feverish light she knew he could see, if not sense. "You won't reconsider my previous offer?"

Conner blushed. "No."

Cara took a step back, making his arm fall. "Then stop touching me or the choice will no longer be yours to make!"

Eagles stepped closer at the threat, but Conner only laughed. "Pretend for them, but don't bullshit me, Cara. You're Garret's girl. You won't sacrifice that position."

Cara glared in defeat. "No, but it doesn't stop the want." She tried to get herself under control. "What about your friendsss? Are they buying?"

Conner raised a brow.

Adrian opened his hand, revealing a number of small gold and silver ingots. "Whatever you need."

Conner sneered, but didn't refuse the generosity. "They only want me, not supplies, so load them up. My *father's* buying."

The room went still, and then cold. The snake clerks glared. This man had left the gifted boy to rot here.

Adrian faced them without anger, but also without guilt. *The only one I have to answer to is my son.*

#### 4

"The Major's coming."

About to reach his favorite romance scene, Hudson marked his place in the book. It was one of three intact paperbacks he owned. He liked to make the other bounty men feel bad by reminding them that he could read. The Major didn't want a crew that acted smart

or thought for themselves. Hudson was the only one allowed to keep reading materials. The fact that Hudson had his books booby-trapped, and he was lethal with his knife, had probably helped that choice.

“Say it again.”

Despite the fact that he couldn't see much of Embry's face through the bandana he wore, Hudson disliked it immensely. If not for those sharp brown eyes that were so good at recognizing risky opportunities, Embry would have been placed lower in Garret's crew. Then, Lenore would already be in Hudson's cot at night. Those wide hips and thick legs would be perfect for passing the long nights of waiting for Mitchel to show.

“Major Garret is coming to talk to you.”

Hudson was instantly uneasy. *He must think the new people are a real threat.* Most groups that had come through Little Rock stayed low and quiet, but this newest one was the opposite. They had to know they were being followed, but they showed few signs of worry. They might be a harder caliber. Hudson was glad the Major was on top of things.

“He's here,” Embry whispered in awed admiration.

Hudson gestured rudely. “Get lost, Em, while the men talk.”

Embry spun, sputtering in protest.

Major Garret supported his XO. “Get lost.”

Embry flushed at the order and vanished into the lines of snickering, elbowing bounty hunters that made up Garret's personal guard.

The Major signaled for the lines of men behind him to keep going. He approached his top explosives operator. “Get up to the dam; set a surprise for dawn.”

“We floodin' this shit-hole?” Hudson had wanted to do that when they arrived.

Garret confirmed it. “Yes. We've been here for months. It's time to finish up and go.”

“But our men—” Hudson started to protest.

“Have served faithfully. Give them my honorable discharge. It's time to roll.”



Garret hated Hudson's way of rubbing his fat, crooked nose when he was deep in thought. The Major switched his attention to something more pleasant—the blood on Hudson's army boots.

Hudson finally understood. The Major never left before he got his man, not once in the 20 years they'd been together. "That's Mitchel down there! We're in the homestretch."

Garret was pleased, but also uneasy at the intelligence. "And that's why you have my right, Hud. Now, do as I say and do it right, like usual."

Hudson swelled at the praise. He left in a fast trot. *Life is good.*

The line of hunters taking up perimeter places around the Major didn't react to the order. Garret was as apt to kill as to sleep, but they were wired the same. Sympathy and empathy were things the Major's chosen guards didn't have.

## 5

It took a little while for the clerks to fill the order. Conner kept pointing to things and the clerks kept loading the team up. Only Kenn and Kyle weren't given a pack, at Adrian's orders. Those lethal hands needed to be free for protection.

Conner saw the clerk approach Adrian. Cara was glowering despite the nice chunk of profit she and her girls would get from this transaction.

"If you leave him here this time, he will die." The scales on her wrist glinted in bright warning.

Shorter than the rest, it was still clear that Cara was in charge. Her scales were brighter, almost golden, and her braids were woven around the top of her head in a coil. Her painted face (heavy blue around both eyes and black lipstick) glared out to mark her different from her girls. Her markings said *Pay attention, I'm the leader here.*

Adrian took the heavy bag without complaint or answer. He had no intentions of leaving the boy again.

Annoyed at the silence and worried for Conner, Cara lowered her voice. "The hunters are coming for him!"

She spun away before Adrian could ask when.

Kenn got a whiff of Cara as she moved away and couldn't stop the vague interest. *Nice ass. Too bad.*

Adrian picked out things the others missed. The females had baskets of dried and drying meat in the corners, telling Adrian they'd been allowed to operate down here for a while. He wondered what they'd used for bartering with Major Garret. They also had weapons, which meant the kids might too. Adrian narrowed in on the carpet-layered walls and wondered how many exits were hidden behind them.

He stared at the clerks next, picking up their resentment, but also concern for his son. Conner had his own army here. *Does he know it?*

"They won't fight. Not unless I agree to Cara's deal." Conner refused to look at his father as they waited for the stone door to open. "She wants a marriage. She'll merge the kids into their group. Without telling the Major, of course." Conner led them into the darkness without any change of tone. "I've considered it, but they kill all males, so I had to tell her no."

"How long until we get where we're going?" Kenn disliked the snake-like women now. There was no helping the anger, but it didn't stop his eyes from traveling their exotic bodies.

"I'll handle that." Adrian subtly flashed Kenn their hand code. "You give our newest friends a surprise."

Kenn eagerly pulled the black box from his pocket. He powered it on.

*Beep!*

Kenn held up a hand. "Five...four..."

He curled a finger down with each number he counted. They all braced when his hand was a fist.

Silence.

"They found it, maybe." Kyle listened again. *Or Kenn counted too fast.*

*Booomm!*

The explosion echoed for miles in the apocalyptic stillness, rattling the ground.

Kenn laughed. “Boo-ya!”

The concussion hit the tunnels an instant later.

“Come on!” Conner took up that fast pace again.

The team followed, hoping the dust would be the only thing to fall as the sewer walls groaned around them.

## 6

“What are those?” Kevin asked when Conner’s pace allowed breathing. “They smell funny.”

The floors were clear of debris and the dead as Conner led them deeper, but it had gained a few inches of murky, reeking water that none of them wanted against their skin. The boy had slowed down when he was sure the tunnel wasn’t coming down, but none of the team were relaxed as they followed a teenager through the nasty gloom.

“Those are Kudzu vines. The city used to spray to keep them from taking over. They grow super-fast anyway, but with all the water and no service crews to cut them, they’ve taken over most of these tunnels.” Conner pointed as he jogged.

The thick plants were twined throughout the sewer tunnel, running along the walls and ceiling like webs.

“Not just underground though, and not only here.” Adrian forced his body to obey, finally getting winded despite the slower pace. “A lot of cities were fighting Kudzu before the war.”

“It’s mutating?” Angela peered closer as they came to another intersection. This one was choked with the twining vines. “Don’t they usually need sun?”

“I think they have a new energy source.” Conner stepped high over the vines in a goofy way that made the Eagles snicker. He had no idea how funny it looked.

“We’ve found bones down here that aren’t people. It could be from the snakes, I guess, but I haven’t seen one in about three months. I believe the vines are carnivorous,” Conner stated matter-of-factly. “I won’t let the kids touch them.”

Adrian and Angela exchanged a horrified glance.

Eagles immediately began to take those higher, funny steps over the vines.

“Are there rats down here?” Angela was being flashed to her trip under Max and Lenore’s den.

“Yes.” Conner walked faster. “Also, spiders—big ones.”

“Are they mutated?”

“Some, but most are on the eastern side, where the water built up and went stagnant. Those tunnels would require a canoe. The water is halfway to the ceiling.”

“What keeps these tunnels from flooding?” Kyle already hated being underground. *Is this what the mountain will be like?*

“They slope upward, toward the dam.” Adrian adjusted so he was walking next to Conner.

His answer implied he knew this city. When Adrian began asking questions, the rest of his group stayed quiet, searching the damp darkness for trouble as they stored more details about their infamous leader—none of it was good.

“Has anyone been up to the dam?”

Conner unconsciously adjusted his stride to match. “The adults talked about it at first, but I don’t think anyone actually went to check. I’m sure it’s leaking. The place we swam through filled up after the war.”

“How many ways in to where your kids are?”

Stoking Conner’s ego, Adrian listened with a trained ear to the son he was overjoyed to have found, and an instinctive ear to Angela as she searched.

“A lot. These sewers run all under the city.”

“Is there a cleared way out?”

Conner turned confidently at the intersection. “Not that we know of. If there had been even a rumor of a way out, the adults would have forced us to test it. At least then we would have had a purpose to them, a reason to be fed.”

Adrian employed a facade of indifference instead of fury, carrying enough parental rage to easily obliterate this destroyed city with fire. “What about the enemy? Do they come down here?”

“Not much, but when they do, it’s in big numbers. They say

they're a new world militia, but we call them bounty hunters. Or assholes."

Adrian could feel Angela wanting to smile and didn't interrupt her lighter mood. He knew how deadly bounty men could be. He would carry that heavy knowledge.

"Is there something I should know?" Angela asked sharply.

Adrian's lips curled as he shook his head. Apparently, concrete didn't put a damper on her gifts. "Where are they based?"

"They took over Mansion Hill." Conner gave the information he knew his dad needed. "Garret stays there, unless there's a problem that his crew can't handle."

"Does anyone fight them?"

Conner's face darkened. "Most of our parents fought and lost. There was a rumor the Junction Bridge had held after the quake, but it was a trap. The parents pushed us into the sewers when the bounty hunters came, hoping at least a few of us would survive."

Adrian's throat stopped working, realizing where the boy's mother likely was. He had been hoping she'd survived, too. He hadn't been in love with Shannon, but he had cared enough about her happiness to give her the son she'd longed for.

"So, the adults down here now are not the parents?" Kyle clarified.

"No. The bastards down here came after the war, when the Major started clearing out survivors." Conner's shoulders stiffened in anger. "They pushed us in deeper, after taking what little we had."

"What injuries do your people have?" Adrian's manipulative words were chosen to reinforce Conner's leadership so the boy would get the others to come willingly.

"If I tell you that, you might not take them."

There was no answer to Conner's hopeful tone.

The group behind them exchanged concerned glances in the gloom.

Conner spun toward Adrian, stopping their convoy. "Say you'll take them all! Even the three we think will die. Say it!"

"We'll take them all," Adrian repeated tonelessly.

“You’re probably lying, but I don’t have another option.” Conner’s shoulders sagged. “What do you need me to do?”

“Ensure cooperation. Are they willing?”

“They are; I’m not.” Conner hadn’t expected his father to have his own mind reader. *I have to be careful.* “They made me come out and save you from that trap. They can’t wait to flee this underground hell.”

“*You* don’t want to go?” Angela was surprised. “We offer safety.”

“There is no safe place or safe people.” Conner swiped a wide cobweb and adeptly deposited the sticky mess onto a damp wall. “Most of the kids voted for me because I’m the oldest; they don’t know who you are. We’re keeping it that way.” Conner propelled himself into the darkness with angry steps. “If you had taken her a month later, someone else would have been picked and I would be dead.”

Silence came as the team began to understand what that meant. Not all of them had realized who Conner was until now.

“How much farther?” Kenn tried a distraction. He didn’t like Adrian’s pain.

“Twenty minutes,” Conner tossed back.

“Wait. We’ve been underground for an hour?”

The males snickered.

Angela frowned at herself as she pulled damp clothes away from irritated skin. *I still have a long way to go to be a real soldier.*

*Not the goal.* Adrian was keeping a sharp ear on her thoughts for things her inexperienced mind might miss.

“When we get there, I’ll have to leave you alone for a few minutes, but I won’t be far.” Conner slowed.

“You’ll meet and tell them what you think?”

“No.” Conner finally looked over at his father, feeling old. “I’ll tell them you’ve promised to take them all, no matter how sick or flawed.”

Adrian understood if he went back on that, Conner would convince his kids to run from them.

“This is it.”

They came to a dead-end and helped Conner shove a large chunk of the wall to one side, exposing a narrow passage.

“This was an escape route some convicts dug from the prison. Now, it’s our backdoor.”

As they went through, the Eagles verified the crumbling bricks had indeed been gouged in millions of desperately taken swipes that appeared to have been made with forks, knives, sticks, and fingernails.

The passage was damp, making the floor a slick trail of thick concrete-like mud that filled in their footprints almost as soon as they lifted their feet.

Most of the letters on the door they came to were faded or gone, but there were enough left to warn them they’d better have their identification ready.

“When the guards found the bodies of the men who’d been snake bit before they could dig through, they convinced the city council it would make a good stop on a Halloween tour.”

Conner pushed the door open to reveal a small, dingy holding cell that hadn’t been touched by a scrub or a prisoner in years. The toilet was red with rust, the bunk rotted through, and here, the floor was covered with a thicker layer of reeking sludge.

Conner swiped at the spider webs over the hall door before opening it, and they were all impressed as they realized the boy had brought them in a different way than he’d come out.

*Another lesson he remembered.* Adrian was grateful to fate. *Thank you for letting him live!*

“Wait here until I call. They’re jumpy.” The rusty door closed behind the boy, taking away some of their light.

Adrian and the team took up positions around the room.

Angela stayed close to the boss, frowning deeply. *Something doesn’t feel right.*

“You can come in now,” Conner called from the other side of the door.

Angela frowned, wishing she knew the boy better. As soon as he'd left her sight, her line into his mind had closed.

Adrian went first, using his hands to tell Kenn and Kevin to stay out here and alert.

Kenn was instantly uneasy at Adrian being out of sight. He watched the team go through the door, straining to pick up any bits of conversation from the room.

Beside him, Kevin did the same. Both men thought it odd to hear nothing from a room full of kids.

“Good job, son,” a deep voice praised Conner triumphantly. “He had no idea you were lying the entire time. Excellent.”

*Thud!*

“Rookie lesson R!”

Adrian's roar meant trouble. The two Eagles waiting outside followed their training. They spun into the darkness to avoid capture.



# A Major Pain

1

“Shoot him.”

Conner hesitated to complete his betrayal.

Garret growled, pointing. “Finish it!”

Conner’s thin shoulders slumped. He’d taken a risk, but there hadn’t been a better choice. It was up to his dad now. He fired the dart and hit Adrian in the neck.

Garret laughed in delight. He hadn’t been sure Conner would do it. Garret gestured to his guard. “Now, dart the son.”

Conner turned to run.

The dart caught him in the back and took him to the ground almost instantly.

“And now, a bit of fun for me!”

*Thud! Thud! Thud!*

*Thud! Whap!*

Garret paused long enough to throw an order now that Adrian’s team had seen him being beaten. “Dart them all.”

The drugs forced Adrian to endure the beating as his men fell around them.

*Thud!* “That’s enough, for now.” Garret panted, slinging blood onto the walls. “I want to save the rest for later.”

Adrian sagged, sliding to his knees as the bounty hunters let go of his arms.

Around him, all but Kyle and Angela were down. Only Kyle holding her back was delaying their turn. Around them, three dozen bounty hunters dressed in long coats and hatred watched them alertly.

“Nice to see you again, Mitchel.”

The bitter man standing before Adrian was the same one

Angela had seen in his mind, but with years of cruelty layered on. The green eyes and brown spiky hair were still sexy, and the body was incredibly defined under the dusty coat, but the demeanor was schizophrenic and unstable. Angela hated him on sight. Unlike Cesar's vendetta, which could almost be understood, these were Americans. She was once again sickened by her fellow man.

Before the war, Angela had been one of the few who had believed things would be so ugly. Her time with Kenn had shown her the hard side of human nature, but she'd still never expected the aftermath to be this bad. She had hoped for groups of traveling aid convoys back in the beginning, but there was only this setup, time after time. Evil reared its head; she and Adrian destroyed it. That would be their life's work.

"And what do we have here?" Garret cheerfully turned his attention to the remaining Eagles. "A female. Not smart, Mitchel."

"If you don't let me go, I'll hurt you." Angela was furious.

Kyle gave her a rough nudge, keeping her behind his body. "Be careful! Rape is the least of your worries with someone like that."

Angela closed her eyes as tears of rage welled. *I'm going to kill them all, Kyle, but I'll need energy after the first wave.*

*On your mark,* Kyle approved.

Angela began to draw her power together for a spell.

Kyle jerked, distracted by the powerful sensation.

Flames spun onto her wrist. Angela drew back...

Garret sighed. "Shoot her."

No panic in it, the icy voice told her where to aim. Angela threw just as a bounty hunter fired.

Flames exploded over the area where the Major had been standing, hitting two of his personal guards. Garret had sensed it coming and stepped aside, but he hadn't warned his men.

Kyle spun around, but the man firing had counted on that. He knelt as he hit the trigger.

The dart plunged into her thigh.

Angela gasped as the drugs hit her like the blast of the fire she'd sent.

Kyle scrambled to catch her, flashed to the rest stop. Except this time, there was no blood and no smell of burning flesh.

Angela's mouth opened, panicking.

Kyle held her closer. "I've got ya, rookie."

She managed to smile, and then her lashes fluttered closed and her face smoothed into a beautiful void.

Garret caught all of it. "Can you carry her?"

Kyle gently positioned Angela along one thick arm and shoulder, freeing his other hand. It went to rest on an empty case. His Glock was riding in the Major's extra holster.

Garret laughed. "He trains them so well!" The Major stepped in front of Adrian, not caring about the loose ends that had fled. They would be blind down here, trained or not, and help wouldn't come from any source, including those they'd already had contact with. The snake women had bartered Conner for their own escape from these tunnels and then taken it.

"You want him hit again, with the knockouts?"

Garret shook his head at Hudson's query. "Adrian and I have catching up to do. We'll have a talk now, while he's unable to lie."

Adrian was still alert enough to understand what drug he'd been given. Garret couldn't find out about Safe Haven. Adrian forced the moment. "Shannon tasted like the best pudding I ever ate. Did she swallow with you—"

*Thud! Thud! Thud!*

Hudson watched the beating with uneasy eyes. When their drugged prisoner dropped, and Garret still kept swinging, Hudson reluctantly interfered. "Hey!"

Garret spun around, swinging and slinging blood.

None of his men were hit. They knew how to get his attention without the bruises now.

Hudson waved a hand. "No reward if you kill him. And no revenge later if you have it all now."

The Major slowly froze. His face hardened into a mix of hatred and confused anger.

His men waited patiently. This was just Garret getting that dangerous rage back under control.

Hudson didn't move, not even to scratch or switch feet. The Major was unstable. Everyone knew it, but if you were careful, there wasn't a more rewarding place than on his crew. He had a hundred semi-loyal men fighting for every run he handed out.

"Gather up the ones we want and take them to the cells. Leave the rest." The Major slowly began to regain life. "Do it now."

## 2

Kyle followed on the heels of the men supporting Adrian's mostly limp body, mind racing as he subtly searched the dank tunnels they passed. If Kenn and Kevin followed the lesson, there was a chance for the unconscious Eagles behind them to be rescued. Kyle's duty was to the leaders that had been captured by the enemy with just a few shots from a powerful dart gun and one giant betrayal by a teenager.

Kyle stiffened as Garret moved back to place a crushing hand on his free shoulder.

"You're his killer. I can smell it on you."

Kyle knew better than to ignore him. Crazy people didn't like that. "I do what I'm told."

"So did we." Garret's hand dropped. "Until he started seducing our wives and giving us his sons to raise."

The man fell back to talk with someone else.

Kyle didn't let the words bother him. He already knew Adrian had a weakness when it came to women. He also knew Angela would be the last. Kyle shifted her limp body to his other shoulder. *Adrian has great taste.*

Angela's shot had missed the Major but nailed the two men standing behind him. They were hissing and groaning lowly as they did triage from kits around their waists. After three months at Adrian's side, she was already dangerous. Kyle hoped to see her at lethal. He was determined that she would have the chance, and the boss would be there to see it.

Kyle studied the enemy, picking out details, as Garret was no doubt still doing with him. The hunters carried extra ammunition

in wide straps across their shoulders instead of hips, and their holsters rode high. It was designed for fighting while moving through these sewers, Kyle realized. It kept the most important tools above the water. These men were fighters and survivors, but they weren't like Safe Haven's defenders. Garret's crew took what they wanted and left destruction in their wake. Adrian's army did just the opposite.

Unlike the tunnels they'd come in through, the Major's route went through his bunker of supplies. Near to where Conner had taken them, it told Kyle the kids hadn't been down here in a long time. The man leading these hunters wouldn't have left any food, water, ammo, or buckets of other goods to be stolen.

The underground bunker that had obviously once been a utility room and bomb shelter was stacked floor-to-ceiling around the walls, leaving narrow paths for the passing men to traverse. With a burden over his shoulder, Kyle did the best he could not to disturb the stash, but he marked where it was. If possible, they'd be back for it when this was over.

*Thunk!*

As they moved out of the bunker, Kyle caught sight of the shelter door, and recognized recent modification marks. That heavy steel barrier would probably lock upon closing and trigger an alarm topside. *Clever.*

*Thump!*

Two mean laughs hit Kyle's ears. He shifted to be ready. "How much farther?"

"Why?" Garret sneered scornfully. "Tired already? I thought you were his killer."

Kyle grinned back as if they were having high tea. "Oh, I am. If they mishandle his son one more time, you're gonna have proof of it. Sooner than you've planned for, I'd guess."

Garret glanced at the two suddenly nervous men and the bloody boy, then back to Kyle. "You understand he lied, right? Betrayed you all?"

Kyle didn't answer because it didn't matter.

Garret frowned. "Carry them both."

Kyle immediately turned around to do that.

Surprised by the boldness, the two bounty hunters carefully loaded Conner's body over his other shoulder and didn't meet the mobster's eye.

Kyle began breathing in and out in steady breaths and resumed matching the pace of the marching convoy.

Garret laughed. "Once we wash Adrian's stink off you, there might be a job offer." The Major stopped laughing. All friendliness vanished from his tone. "Or a set of slugs, just to be sure you can't follow. That choice will be yours to make."

Kyle didn't respond to the prompt. When Adrian woke, there would be hell to pay, and the Major would pay the bill. If Garret knew Adrian, then he already had that information.

Garret came back up the long line.

Kyle eyed the shotgun on his back, and then the full belt of knives, clubs, guns. "Jumpy?"

Garret nodded without offense. "Yes, and you know why, don't you?"

Kyle kept quiet. Of course, he knew. Garret was scared of dying at Adrian's hand.

*You should be, Kyle thought, breathing deeper. But it's the witch over my left shoulder that you won't see coming. Angela will kill you for this.*

### 3

"Come on!" Kevin waved. "We'll lose them!"

"That's not everyone." Kenn didn't say the others probably weren't alive. The fact that they hadn't heard any gunshots was good.

Adrian's bloody form had angered them, as had Angela's unconscious body, but the careless handling of Conner by those in the rear was enraging to Kenn and Kevin. They tossed him over shoulders, bumped his arms and legs into the walls, and snickered. They clearly hated the boy. It filled Eagles with determination to see that they paid for it. Kenn and Kevin didn't understand Conner

had betrayed them, but it wouldn't have mattered to them either. He was Adrian's son. Like Kyle, that made him valuable in their hearts.

Kenn and Kevin eased back into the area, glad to find their men alive, but confused as to why they were. Whatever the team had been hit with was strong. None of the men responded to wakeup attempts.

Kenn was sure Adrian didn't have long to live. The man in charge here had already beaten him and left his men for the predators. The fate planned for Adrian couldn't be any better.

"If you leave them here, the vines will come. They're quite bloodthirsty."

Both men spun around, guns coming out.

Cara didn't move, but her snakelike demeanor was enough to startle them both, even after they recognized her under the new fighter's clothes.

Cara stuck her tongue out and sniffed. "Smells like good meat in here."

Kenn blinked in confusion. *Sniffed?*

Cara closed her mouth, still yearning for what she couldn't have. She saw Kenn's eyes on the golden scales in her hair. "We are waterproof this way."

"We could use some help."

Cara snorted at Kenn's request, pupils reddening. "You need a miracle."

Kevin followed his instincts. He had a good idea why she'd come prepared for battle. "So does Conner."

Cara stiffened, paling in near panic. "Can you save him?"

Kenn silently thanked fate. "Yes."

"You'll owe me. I will be saving many lives."

Kenn wasn't about to argue that point. "Name your price."

Cara looked at the bodies and then back to Kenn. This time, greed and lust warred for room. "We'll take them to the park and cover them with netting. After that, we're leaving this city."

"The Major probably thinks you're already gone." Kenn wasn't immune to the way she was admiring his body. "Since

you're the one who betrayed Conner and his kids, right?"

"Yesss, well, the Major is on a need-to-know basis with us now."

Kenn chuckled. "Fair enough."

Cara's face lit up with raw hunger. "Again!"

Kenn didn't have time for the games. "Now or after...Cara, was it?"

She shuddered at the sound of her name on his lips and forced herself to breathe. "Now. If you die during, I'm already paid."

"How do I know you'll keep your word?"

Cara whistled.

The sound of footsteps came. Women in shiny snakeskins began to fill the room.

Cara indicated the fallen Eagles. "Take them to the park and hide. They are valuable cargo, not for eating."

The women muttered and grunted, but dutifully began picking up burdens and taking them out.

Kenn and Kevin both frowned.

Cara saw their worry and shook her head. "We are not starving because we'll eat what others won't. It just means they can't sell them to the other residents for food."

Kenn wasn't amused. "And when your food source runs out? What will the snake women eat then?"

Cara stared back with a dark, unblinking gaze that was almost hypnotic. "Each other, of course."

Kenn's stomach flipped. He forced it back to watch their men be taken out.

The trousers and gray shirts covered strong, lean arms that didn't strain under the weight of the men they were carrying. Kenn wondered if the snake meat might be doing more than causing physical mutations. Was it giving them strength as it merged with their DNA? Even their hair was thicker, longer, than on Safe Haven's women. Thigh-length brown and black braids swung on most of the females. Kenn made a note to talk to Adrian about it when this was all over.

Cara took a step closer, ignoring Kevin and her busy girls.



“Satisfied?”

Kenn sent his mind to the last time he'd stolen a moment with Tonya. They'd been interrupted. “No, I'm not.” He lowered his voice, trying to emulate Adrian's magic and get himself in the mood. “But you will be.”

Cara smiled, keeping her tongue in her mouth.

Kenn saw the woman she had been before. Not much compared to Tonya, the snake leader still held an appeal with her sinewy body and determination to get what she wanted.

She motioned toward a smaller, narrow doorway that led into a closet of some kind.

“Go with them.” Kenn waved at Kevin. “If she doesn't burn me up, she'll drop me off.”

Kevin moved away from them in relieved revulsion. He didn't think he could have made that choice. She'd actually sniffed, with her tongue. *Yuck!*

Kenn waited until they were alone, forcing his mind and body to work together. This wouldn't be hard compared to some of the things he'd done before the war.

*Hell*, Kenn thought, watching her drop the dusty coat to reveal soft curves and flawless skin. *I might even like it.* He was always up for something new and exotic.

“Are you for rent, as well?”

Kevin flinched back out of reach, shaking his head at the tall woman with snake tattoos along her exposed legs. “He's not for rent like some item you could lease from a store! He's paying a debt.”

The woman smiled knowingly, showing beautiful teeth and a long tongue. “He's bartering our servicess. I'd like to have yours.”

Before Kevin could say no, the woman held out a small pouch. “Be sure.”

Kevin stared at her. “Why don't you guys have men? Not all of them were taken in the draft, right?”

Nuna jerked at the alert observation, but she didn't lie. “They involuntarily joined the Major's army. And never came back.”

The woman's demeanor grew cold. "Now, we allow no males to live among us." She went toward the front of their walking convoy. "Think about my offer."

That type of confidence said they needed whatever she had given him. Kevin tried hard not to peer into the pouch. He didn't want to have to pay for it.

He caved quickly.

Kevin gently pulled the object out, mind flying along a hundred paths. It was a key. The one to wherever the Major would put their other team members?

Nuna glanced back, eyes glittering. "It opens the back door of Garret's compound."

"Holy hell!" Kevin blew out an unhappy breath, looking down at his groin. "Get ready, dude. We've just been called up for special duty."

Ahead of him, the tall woman laughed.

#### 4

"Adrian?" Angela leaned closer, willing him to wake. She'd already healed his wounds, unmindful of the audience of cameras and guards, but he still wasn't responding. "Adrian!"

Sharper, it didn't pull him up from the drug and fist-induced sleep. She did what she knew would work. *I need you!*

The call rang through the cell and then the compound, drawing attention and the urge to come running.

But from Adrian, there was only silence.

The intercom crackled. "He won't wake for another hour. Stop disturbing the others."

Angela started to ask what others, then realized she knew. "I need to pee."

Laughter rolled over the radio. "So go on."

Angela flipped a finger toward the voice box.

More amusement greeted her. Under it, was hatred and fear. Their guards didn't like this duty. Why?

Angela worked on it as she studied the cell for weaknesses and

tried not to think of the team that had been left behind. Garret had darted Kyle upon arrival. Now that Adrian was in custody, the rest of them were expendable. Angela was sure Garret had considered killing them right then, but it would torture Adrian to see it happen.

Angela turned to find Kyle awake, watching her in concern. She'd let him sleep and tended Adrian when she came to. Conner, she hadn't seen. "I was trying to wake him."

Kyle pushed up against the wall. He had been darted as soon as he put the bodies down. He peered around groggily. The cell held four bunks, with both tops empty as Angela paced the damp stone floor.

*I'm not sure if they have our thoughts covered. I'm going to send another call and find out.*

Kyle trusted her judgment. He'd seen the pleasure on Garret's face as Adrian dropped to his knees. Kyle had recognized the ability to cause chaos. Like Adrian, the Major was a leader, but his casually wrinkled trench coat and long fingernails exposed a crucial difference. Adrian led by example, while Garret controlled his men with fear. That meant he was flawed and beatable, despite the odds.

"You can only do it one more time, and then Major Garret will have you darted again," the voice on the intercom warned. "Use it wisely."

Angela snapped her mouth shut and resumed pacing. The cell had been a basement room at one time. The welds on the bars looked too solid to waste time on. Two bunk beds made a holding area for four people, one that had only a heavy cage door that appeared to be electronic. She would have to blow it open when the fighting started.

Kyle assumed Angela was busy building a wall so they would be able to communicate and kept quiet.

Angela paced faster, mentally pushing.

*Bang!*

Angela and Kyle both jumped at the nearby gunshot.

The intercom crackled. "I killed him for trying to help you. I'll

do the same to the next one.”

Angela pushed aside the guilt. “Line ‘em up, baby. I hate you and they mean nothing to me.”

Another chuckle rolled over the intercom, but now, it was laced with respect. “The Major wants you watched.”

Angela shrugged, sending out another mental wave of obedience. “Don’t really like the Major either, Harold, is it? What if you and I blow this place, together?”

Now there was a low growl, and a tense chuckle. “He said you’d be dangerous, but I think he’s underestimating. The next shift is female. Good luck.”

Angela sighed in resignation and resumed her furious pacing. She hated being caged. *You’re up, stripper. Win us a friend or two for the fight.*

Kyle burst out laughing. He couldn’t help it. They were in an ugly situation, and she wanted him to strip for their guards. It was better than priceless. It was one for the Eagle table. “Should I hum or something?”

“Maybe.”

Kyle stopped laughing slowly, thinking he hadn’t felt this good in a long time. It was a bit worrisome. *Shouldn’t I be upset?*

“It’s from being so close to all of us for so long. Things rub off.” She gave him a quick hand gesture. *I can’t get another reader killed. Will you carry it for me?*

“Yes.”

*I’m going to connect us, show you what I did. And then step...* Angela stiffened, moaning. “Damn it!”

Kyle already knew. “They brought Conner in, right?”

Angela no longer bothered to talk silently. “Kill them, boy! Leave us!”

No chuckle came over the radio this time, but light scorn hid the relief. “He knows his place. Conner’s been extremely useful.”

“Deals made to save those kids are not his guilt to carry! You hear me, Conner? There are no rules in war!” Angela slung herself onto the bunk and hid her satisfaction when Conner’s startled mental presence began asking her what he should do. He’d

expected hatred because he had aided the enemy, and the enemy had counted on that to keep them apart. She'd flipped it around on them and given him absolution. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for her now.

## 5

"I'll do that again, for information."

Cara, who'd gotten what she came for and was only glad it was over, snorted. "Your questions are paid."

Kenn grunted in relief. It would be a long time before he didn't shudder at the sound of a snake. Instead of moans or groans, or even screams, she'd hissed as she climaxed.

"What do you know about the Major?"

Cara leaned against the damp wall lovingly, stealing the sensation to take with her as their people fled into the arid wastelands of the west. "Everything. He likes my noises."

Kenn flushed at the bluntness. "I'm sorry if I offended—"

"Sssave it!" Cara glowered. "I needed the seed, not the man."

"Why?"

Her face slowly lost the anger. "Our people are mutating too quickly. We need babies who are half breeds, or we will die out."

Kenn took that in with a grimace, but he didn't protest. He'd suspected it; he just hadn't wanted to deal with it himself. He didn't like kids, so it wasn't a terribly hard choice, but if he thought about it too much...

Cara sensed he might decide against letting her leave here alive if he dwelled on it. She shoved them into another direction. "Garret was Adrian's best friend."

Kenn gaped. And then began placing pieces. *That's how the Major was able to capture Adrian so easily.* He knew him, knew his ways. "They served together, right?" Kenn's sense of doom grew.

"For years. Until Adrian met Shannon."

Kenn waited for more, watching Cara slide back and forth along the rock as if she wanted to crawl up it.

“She didn’t have power, but she was a pure soul, which is rarer. The Major drugged her. Her parents forced a marriage.”

“She and Adrian were dating?”

“No. Adrian and Garret were her security detail. The Major said Adrian was obeying the rules and waiting for the job to be finished.”

“But Garret didn’t.”

“No. After it came out, Adrian split their team up and disappeared. For three years.” Cara’s voice lowered. “When he came back, he kidnapped Shannon, seduced her, and sent her back six months later—pregnant.”

Kenn fit another set of pieces into place. “That’s step daddy. Conner’s been working with the enemy the whole time.”

Cara exhibited the first sympathy Kenn had seen from her.

“Yes. Conner loves those damn kids. He’d betray his father to save them.”

That sent Kenn’s mind into another possible outcome he didn’t want to face. “We gotta go.”

Cara pointed the way toward the park.

“Kevin! Let’s go!” Kenn had heard the rookie laboring not long after finishing his own revolting chore.

“Comin’!” Kevin replied, wincing.

Kenn barked out nauseated amusement and stepped up his pace. “Do all of your women feel the way you do about having babies?”

“Yes. We’ve been allowing the soldiers access to us in exchange for safety, but only a few of them can have children, due to the wars they’ve been mired in.” Cara glanced over. “You’d ask for our help in exchange?”

Kenn wasn’t sure the others would go for it. “Can you wake them up when we get there?”

“Yes. We have herbs and such.”

Kenn caught the tone. “You have an antidote, you mean.”

Cara was pleased. “If our child has your intelligence, I will mold her into a leader.”

Kenn didn’t say anything, torn with pride and an unfamiliar

ache deep in his gut. *I don't care. I don't want kids...right?*

## 6

“Damn, I enjoyed that! I always hated those kids.”

Garret frowned at Hudson and his new defensive wounds. The kids had obviously tried to fight back.

“Emotional bonds make the perfect collateral. Don't ever forget that.”

“I never fought with them. Never touched one of Conner's kids until today,” Hudson stated, happiness fading a bit.

Garret turned from the reminder. No, Hudson knew better than to disobey orders. “You're my one true man.”

Hudson stood up straighter, feeling orders about to flow. He loved these moments.

“The snake clerks had a lot to say about their meeting.” Garret couldn't wait for Adrian to wake up and see what waited. “Adrian's men weren't afraid to talk in front of the snakes and compare living situations. I want his Safe Haven.”

Hudson felt the thrill of battle looming and welcomed it. Maybe Mitchel's camp guards would be a challenge. He certainly hadn't been. “I'll set it up with the squad.”

“Two-side attack formation, five teams per. Use the automatics, but remember to have them check for those on our list *first*. Then, kill everything he loves.”

“What about the loose ends?” They'd observed movements on the tracker and assumed Adrian's men were more immune to the drugs than most of their prey.

Garret sank down into the comfy army chair that went everywhere he did. “What's the best way to get an ant colony out of your yard?”

Hudson, whose father had been an exterminator, smiled. “Water, over and over. It drowns the larvae and ruins the walls. They collapse. If you keep doing it, the pests move.”

“And we already have that coming, don't we?”

“Yes.” Hudson's grin widened. “We do.”

“Good. Dismissed.”

Hudson slipped from the luxurious control room in time to see Embry and Lenore gliding down the dark hallway in oblivious joy. His unease over the orders to kill their men was instantly pushed aside. They didn't know the dam would blow at dawn, and what was left of this city would be washed away or submerged. It would be him, the Major's personal squad, and the captives.

*Which means all bets are off.* Hudson looked at his watch. *I can take a twenty-minute break.*

Hudson followed the happy couple toward the garden, seeing Embry's dirty hand tangle in that pale hair and tug Lenore closer. As soon as they were in the green grass, Embry took her to the dusty ground.

They made love fast, with a passion that had their observer hard and determined to be next.

As Embry stiffened, groaning in pleasure, Hudson stepped from the shadows. “I'm up!”

“What the hell are—”

Hudson put his gun to Embry's head and pulled the trigger.

“No!” Lenore screamed.

Embry fell heavily, blood running.

“Guess that makes me next in line for you.” Hudson dropped to one knee.

“Help!”

“Lenore, Lenore!” Hudson chanted over the screaming, jerking his belt loose. “Let me in, Lenore.”

Lenore felt her mind blur into a gray area where only fear and hatred existed. It had been this way since the war. Only hoping to survive long enough to kill him, the captive woman held in her tears of grief and rage and opened her legs.

“Very good!”

As he fell on her, Lenore's bloody hands began searching Embry's body for his gun.



“Message, sir.”

Garret moved away from the window where he liked to spend his waiting hours. The sight of the decay that surrounded them never failed to inspire. Unlike his men, he loved it here. The deeply overcast skies were perfectly suited to his moods.

“Let’s hear it.”

*“We are under evacuation. Radiation levels are critical in the east. The reserve bunker has been activated. Take Mitchel Jr and Angela to Utah. Mitchel Sr. is to be terminated.”*

“Tell them I’m happy to comply, as always.” The Major switched his attention to the modified cells on the screen. Adrian had just woken.

Garret waved to the sullen teenager in the chair next to him. “Go say goodbye.”

Conner shot from the chair, almost running.

Garret grabbed his arm. He jerked the boy to a halt and gave him a hard shake. “Don’t forget our deal, *son*.”

Conner twisted free, expression ugly. “And don’t you forget it, either, *dad*. If those kids get hurt, you’re the first one I’ll kill!”

Conner stomped from the room.

The Major grinned cruelly. This was going to be fun. *I get to break the father and the son, at the same time. Moments like this only come around once in a lifetime.*

Garret and his guards followed Conner to the basement cells they’d built. The control room was in the basement, separated by storage areas that were full. He wasn’t one to leave behind supplies.

The wide room held a bank of computer screens and heavy-duty cords that brought in the power and allowed these men to control the complex. Positioned directly under the main home, it would be hard to take over unless the hunters didn’t suspect anything, but his men always did. He’d trained them that way. *Just like Adrian trained me.*

# The Right Bait

1

“**O**ur time’s up.” Angela tensed as the basement door swung open.

Adrian sensed it too. Garret had come for his finale scene, but Adrian only had eyes for the son under Garret’s control. *I came back for you both. She sent me away.*

Conner didn’t doubt it. *She was scared of him. She always was.*

*She needed me.*

Conner shrugged. *He left and we thought we were free to come find you. He was always watching us.*

Adrian stood up, going to the bars. He spoke openly. “I’m sorry for everything you’ve gone through.”

Conner didn’t have any rage left. Adrian wasn’t his enemy. “I know.”

“I’m also sorry for everything you still have to face.” Adrian tried to prepare him for the ugliness lurking in Garret’s scornful expression.

The Major delivered his sword tip. “You should be sorry, since it’s your fault the kids are dead. Hudson handled them upon our return.”

Conner screamed, realizing the betrayal.

Garret swung, punching him in the mouth. “Dart him.”

Conner dropped to his knees.

The closest guard shot Conner in the arm.

The teenager groaned, slumping to the floor.

Garret pointed at Angela. “Come out.”

The cell door buzzed open.

Angela’s laugh was brittle. “So you can hurt me in front of

Adrian for your victory? Yeah, that'll happen." She slid off the bunk and backed up against the wall as Kyle and Adrian stepped shoulder-to-shoulder in front of her. "Come in and get me, Major."

Garret pointed his gun at Conner. "If you don't come out, I'll kill him."

"Your orders say he has to be alive. Nice tr—"

*Bang!*

"No!"

Conner's leg began pouring blood.

Angela screamed again, in rage this time. "You'll die for that!"

"Dart her!" a young voice insisted over the intercom. "She still has her power!"

"We have a breach!" One of the Major's personal guards appeared in the doorway. The scanner in his hand was flashing.

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

"Major! We need you! Now!"

Gunfire outside reluctantly drew the Major and his guards. Garret threw an angry order over his shoulder as they rushed from the room. "Lock that cell!"

## 2

"He says he's Mitchel's XO." Their gate guard met the Major as he came to the com room.

There was only one man standing outside the gates, but the monitors revealed nearly forty green dots in the area. Despite their deals, it would seem that Adrian's loose ends had found some help after all.

Garret hesitantly stopped the guards from opening fire like they wanted to. "Stand down."

The hunters frowned, but obediently stepped back.

The Major waved his personal guards along and strode confidently outside. He didn't need Mitchel's right hand as leverage. However, he was always on the lookout for useful men to add to his collection—like the Italian killer in Adrian's cell. Garret occasionally made exceptions in race when the man was

useful, but Kyle would be gelded. Continuing that line, in this country, was now illegal.

Garret waited for the guards to open the iron gate they'd installed in their first days here, then stepped out to meet the lone Marine standing in the middle of his street. The Major would have known what Kenn was without picking out the dog tag and tattoos. It was in those steel blue eyes and firmly planted boots.

*He's set to kill me.* Garret was starting to think he might need to scour all of Adrian's top people for new hands. Adrian knew how to pick hard men. "If you kill me, he dies."

Kenn could feel Adrian somewhere inside that well-fortified building. The silent order was clear. Adrian wanted this man dead, but Kenn already knew he wouldn't be the one to do it. "I'm surrendering."

Garret frowned slightly. "With your gun in hand?"

"Surrender, not suicide." Kenn scanned how many targets, where to hit them, and accepted that his hopes of rushing inside were unrealistic.

Garret chuckled. "Just you? Where are the rest of his men?"

Kenn scowled. "You don't have them in there?"

The Major gloated. "Guess they didn't survive the snakes and vines." *The green dots are snake women.*

Kenn took a step forward in mock rage.

Garret raised his own weapon. "Stop."

Kenn did, playing the role. "I go where he goes."

Garret frowned at the sense of danger. The Italian might be a well-heeled killer, but this man was lethal. "I think not." The Major pointed toward his tower guard. "He'll kill you in three seconds."

Kenn was loose and ready. "I only need one."

Garret hesitated to give the order. His death was in that 9mm, even if the Marine died too. The Major tried to calm things, recognizing a kindred soul. "You can't save him. He's been marked for termination."

Kenn growled. "By who? You?"

"He's been on my list for almost two decades." Garret subtly

motioned his hunters to kill, not capture, when it started. “The official order came down today. The government has declared him a threat to national recovery.”

Kenn took that in with no change of expression, but inside, worry boiled. The government was finally rearing its ugly head. “I can pay a bounty.”

Garret played along. “You can’t afford the pound of flesh he owes, let alone the final reward.”

“Will you trade something for him? I have access to a lot of the old world.”

Garret laughed, scornfully taunting. “I take what I want!”

Kenn had expected that, but he’d had to try. It was what Adrian had taught him. “Then, take this!” Kenn pushed the button in his pocket.

*Booommm!*

The front of the shopping complex across from them exploded, sending shrapnel flying over the street. Flames and acrid smoke rolled their way.

Kenn hit the button a second time and the small house next to the compound gushed outward in a violent eruption of flames and wooden slugs.

Garret ran, given cover by his guards.

Kenn unslung his rifle, ducking behind the edge of the alley wall from the firing tower guards. The Major was quickly out of sight, but his men weren’t.

Hunters began falling, screaming in agony from well-chosen shots. *Garret should have at least listened to my deal.* He’d insulted Kenn and there was a price to pay for that.

*Pop-pop-pop!*

### 3

“Step aside!” Angela was sweating furiously. The second Adrian and Kyle were clear, she released the ball of fire and blew the door off their cell.

Before the guards recovered from the blast, she was at

Conner's side.

"Help! The prisoners are...Ahh!"

Kyle and Adrian were hoping that sound over the intercom meant their lost men had found them. They weren't prepared to see the snake clerk from the tunnels come through the door.

Cara rushed to Conner and began helping Angela as she searched for the slug with her fingers.

"I am your guide." Cara held the cloth where Angela pointed.

Adrian looked around. "I think we're ready."

Conner stirred, surprising those who knew he'd been darted.

Angela motioned. "Grab him. I've got your six."

Kyle didn't hesitate.

Cara led the way to the door. She liked working with people who were as organized as her group.

Kyle left the Major's control center the same way he'd entered it—walking single file, carrying an unconscious loved one. For Kyle, Adrian's son was like Adrian himself. It was also a flashback to the rest stop, but this time, Kyle was glad to find it held little power over him. He'd survived it. That was a ghost he might finally be able to let rest.

"This way." Cara led them through the debris-laden alley behind the brick building that only Kyle had viewed upon entering. His first thought, *Now, that's a fortified place*, still held. From bars over windows with unmanned guns, to the razor wire and dark spotlights, the Major knew how to shelter-in-place while he got a job done.

Kyle was impressed with everything about Garret's setup and plan, except for the man himself. The solar setup for their lighting was efficient, as were the solar dehydrators and small farms on each rooftop. The only thing that kept this from being a perfect compound, despite the evil running it, seemed to be Garret's lack of consistent correction. After his own background, and then being with Adrian so long, Kyle recognized the dooming flaw. If Garret let one man kill or steal from him, but beat another just for backtalk, it sent out mixed vibes that caused dissension. Leaders had to remain constant. Now, if Garret had killed Adrian as soon

as he'd had him in custody, it would have been over. Adrian had also made mistakes, but Garret hadn't caught them.

*Bang!*

The gunshot echoed from directly behind them.

Cara took off running.

It quickly became *keep up if you can*.

The trio was careful not to lose sight of each other, though they had to guess on Cara's direction more than once.

Cara took them toward their waiting men, and then away. She scaled the broken walls and mounds of filth as if they weren't there, increasing speed.

"Wait!"

They tried to keep up with her, but unlike Conner, who'd been leading, Cara was now evading.

After only minutes, they were lost, and Cara was gone.

"But we're free." Adrian waved it off when Angela would have complained. "Just be grateful and go back to caring for yourself. That's rookie lesson X. We haven't covered it yet."

Angela took it in humbly. He was right. Cara had risked her life to help them, though they didn't know why. There hadn't been time to ask.

"Where to?" Kyle knelt to conserve his strength.

"We hunker down and watch for a signal." Adrian eyed the lengthening shadows. "We can't be out here when night falls, unless there's no other choice."

Angela and Kyle began searching for a shelter in their surroundings.

Adrian gently took Conner's weight into his arms. Heavy and awkward, it was the first time he'd held his son in years. He cherished it now in case there wasn't a later.

"Rooftop or trees?" Kyle was missing his Glock right about now.

"Rooftop." Adrian adjusted Conner's weight so he could elevate the leg a little.

Kyle pointed. "I suggest that transmitter tower. It has a small utility stair you can only see from one side. Just need to scavenge

cover along the way.”

Adrian nodded to Angela. “Give him that pissy little thing Marc insisted you carry on your thigh. He might be able to put someone’s eye out with it.”

Angela grinned. She’d said about the same thing. She handed it over and gave a slight frown when she saw Kyle take a quick sniff of it. *What the hell was that?*

“Let’s go.” Kyle took point.

Angela fell in between them, hands resting on empty holsters. Around them, the silence was nerve-wracking.

They moved steadily south, feet crunching through layers of debris while even more began to hide them from view. They stepped lightly around and through horror, wood, death; it didn’t take long to realize there was a path.

Angela picked out barely visible trails in each direction as they wound through collapsed houses, burned businesses, upended, reshaped cars. Their feet squelched, sometimes sinking alarmingly.

They went west, and then south again as the piles grew larger, sharper. *Almost like they’ve been stacked.* Kyle realized they probably had been to create the maze they were now inside. It would be hard to spot them from anywhere; the debris was too high.

Angela broke off from the formation and veered toward a line of partially collapsed stores.

Kyle frowned but didn’t order her to come back. “Where are you going?”

“Getting something that we need.”

The Premium Pet Products store was half-crushed and half-collapsed against the neighboring convenience store. The smell of dead fish was strong as they neared it. Piles of bones in window cages gave the whole block a sense of doom.

Adrian indicated Kyle to follow her. He gently set Conner’s body on a mostly clear patch of concrete.

When Angela disappeared into the pet store, moving carefully over charred rubble and sharp metal, Kyle was on her heels.



Angela stepped carefully, penlight glaring off bodies and gore as the reek of aquatic decay permeated the disturbed air.

She walked down the two aisles that were still intact, noticing the store didn't seem looted, only damaged. She was counting on that. No one thought of going to a pet store when the end of the world came, but it held a vital item. In their case, it was now as valuable as water.

Angela blew the dust and layer of webs back to read the small bottles, then grabbed the edge of her shirt. She swept them all into the makeshift carrier and went outside.

"Fish medicine?" Kyle watched as Angela began opening the bottle and dumping the tablets into her pocket.

"Surprised to find out it's the exact same ingredients as human antibiotics and legally bought? The strength is the difference."

Kyle scowled. "That was the old world. \$150 bucks for a ten-day supply for a child with Strep throat, and yet the same medicine for a fish ailment was..." He picked up an empty bottle. "\$33.89." Kyle tossed it away angrily. "And people wonder why it all fell."

Adrian helped Angela force one of the small pills down Conner's throat, getting him to swallow as he began to wake.

"We need to be under cover soon." Adrian picked Conner up. "Night's coming."

Kyle took point again. They headed for the tower as thick clouds roiled above them.

Faint drops sizzled on their skin as they hurried to get under cover. Rain was coming.

Except it didn't. The sky looked ready to burst, but they stayed dry.

The radio tower base was nearly covered in the rotting wood of a lumber company across the street. It took them a long bit of climbing to reach the narrow platform, taking turns helping Conner. Once on it, they settled down and tended the issues they were able to handle. From their new vantage point, they could see the movement of both Garret's hunters and survivors fleeing the city ahead of them.

There was no sign of their own men.

“Where did they go?”

Kenn didn't bother to answer, since he didn't know. Cara was supposed to lead Adrian away from Mansion Row and then circle back so they could grab one of Garret's loaded vehicles for a ride out of this hellhole. It had been an hour now, and there was nothing. No Adrian, no Cara, not even any noise. The chill in the wind wasn't comforting.

“She set us up.”

“Maybe.” Kenn shrugged. “Either way, Adrian's free. We saw him exit.”

Training surfaced in Kevin's tired mind. “We need a signal!”

Kenn nodded. “But not just anything will work. Asshole knows Adrian's methods too well. This has to be something Angela will recognize, or we'll all be prisoners this time.”

“Like what?” Kevin hated the isolation, but he was enjoying the rush from it. If they all survived, he would gain another jump in rank and have more respect for himself.

“They'll watch hardest as it gets dark, when they have a clear view...” Kenn grunted. “We'll settle in somewhere until then. Pick it, rookie.”

“Unless we want to swim with the fish, I'd say up high.” Kevin pointed. “The billboard would be a good vantage point.”

Kenn motioned him to take the lead, thinking he would be glad when Adrian was back with them. *I'd even take Marc.* He winced at his own loud steps. The debris was impossible to avoid.

Kevin squinted upward for a moment and then did the same on the other side. “Hey, we're in luck! One of the panels over here is hanging down. We'll be out of sight.”

Kenn followed Kevin up the rusty ladder, straining a bit under the weight of his kit. He'd been scavenging as they traveled. Kevin didn't have his kit anymore, but Kenn's would allow them both a comfortable night. Being prepared had advantages.

From their perch, Kenn could see the top of the Major's

compound and a small group of his guards on the roof. In the opposite direction, Kenn picked out the street that would take them back to Safe Haven. He turned from it. *We can't go home yet. I have a boss to find and an ex to rescue.* Kenn studied the site again.

Garret's compound was just a fancy house in the middle of two others. He'd knocked out doors and windows to create an adjoined base of three brick buildings under constant patrol by his personal guards. The bounty hunters didn't do shifts on stationary guard duty. They were above that chore. Kenn recognized the type. They hadn't lasted long in the Marines, where everyone was required to work. They'd become hired guns instead, skipping half the labor and all the valuable lessons that came with it.

The center building housed basement cells and Garret's personal residence, according to Cara. Kenn believed that was where Adrian would be stashed. He eyed the stores across the street and the small refrigeration company on the corner. Neither had been damaged in his first explosions. *Maybe I can do something with those...*

"Damn. You've got some great stuff in here." Kevin was eating and digging in Kenn's kit—without permission. "My kit was light in comparison."

Kenn leaned back, soaking up the praise. "Years of missions taught me the manual never has it all covered."

Kevin scraped the last of the applesauce from the packet and muffled a belch that could have echoed for a while. He began to clean up the mess.

Kenn shook his head. "Leave it. If someone catches a movement, we can send a piece of debris flying on the wind for cover."

"Good idea!" Kevin was absorbing information. Most of the Eagles loathed Kenn, and while Kevin didn't want to be best friends, he did want to learn whatever the Marine wanted to teach.

The billboard, asking those in Little Rock to visit the children's museum often, swayed in the wind, creaking and groaning. Kevin didn't care for heights, but the view was great.

Among the rubble, they'd discovered paths. Kevin was still trying to figure out where they all led even though it was too dark for that now. Many of those routes through the decay weren't random. "What are we using for a signal?"

Kenn pointed to the kit. "You tell me. Remember your lessons."

Kevin began digging again, paying attention this time. He came up with a firestick, glow sticks, a flashlight, and a mirror. "The flashlight?"

"Too noticeable. Try again but rule out using light to communicate."

"Can't you...uh, I mean... You know."

"I've been trying." Kenn shrugged. "If she could hear my calls, she would have responded."

Kevin frowned. "Do you think they're okay?"

Kenn snorted. "This is Angela. She crossed the country with only one man for backup. Adrian's been doing this his whole life. Not to mention his trained Italian assassin and the clever teenager who's been surviving here for six months. If you want to worry over someone dying, consider how the rest of the team's going to feel when they find out Cara betrayed us."

Kevin hadn't considered that. "They'll kill them all."

Kenn, in full training mode now, corrected the rookie again. "They'll strike a deal, try to avoid honoring it, get us out of here, and then we'll help kill them all. Make sure you have the order correct, because Adrian won't leave any of them alive after what they've done and forced his son to do."

"Good." Kevin patted his rifle. "I didn't bring it because it matches my eyes."

## 5

Cara lowered the binoculars. Now that she knew where both groups were, she could go to the Major and bargain. He'd forbidden the snake women from staying here, but he didn't hold all the power anymore. She would use his vendetta to regain her

home.

*And Conner?* her inner voice asked.

Cara winced. That one she might die for once her people had the permit to stay. Conner wouldn't be the Major's prisoner for long.

"You ready?"

"No." Cara wasn't about to let her XO see weakness, but she had to let her in enough to be certain Gina would do as instructed. "Each of those men are pure stock. If we keep them with us when it's over..."

Gina's scaly body tensed. "Yesss, our women will agree for that reward."

"Even if I want to break into the compound and kill Garret, so that Conner will stay with us?"

Gina was impressed with her leader's level of greed. "Guilt will work on that one. Smart."

"Will it work?"

Gina shrugged, thinking of the one she wanted for herself. "After the samples they've given out, it iss a safe bet the girls would agree to whatever you want for the chance."

Cara had been hoping for that, but she had to hear it from her XO to be sure. Gina never lied, never softened things. It had made them an inseparable force to be reckoned with. They expected to be together forever, which was perfect since they'd been lovers long before the war. If not for reproduction, they wouldn't have anything to do with men again, not even for trading. That part of the human race was to be shot first and used second.

"Let'sss go make a trade. Garret can have Adrian and his witch. We get Conner and Adrian's men."

The two women turned toward the compound.

*Hiss!*

The large snake lunged forward.

The tall woman didn't react fast enough. Fangs struck her in the chest, sending poison into her heart.

"No!" Cara charged the python with her knife, slicing and gouging.

*Hiss!* The python spun and slammed into her with its full weight.

Cara slid into the side of a crumbling house. Part of the roof fell, hiding her.

Angry and wounded, the snake flinched back from the dust. When nothing moved, it slithered toward the paralyzed prey, jaws distending to consume the meal.

Cara gained alertness just in time to watch it happen.

## 6

“Where are they?!”

“I don’t know, sir.”

*Bang!*

The mercenary fell to the ground.

Garret aimed his gun at the next guard. “Where are they?”

The man thought fast. “I, uh...I’ll find out.”

“Make it so.”

The man ran.

Garret couldn’t believe he’d made such a mistake. Leaving the prisoners alone was a rookie move. It had been a long time since he’d done such a stupid thing, and he was blaming it on Adrian. He hadn’t been the same since receiving the video of his wife willingly conceiving Conner.

Hudson came down the walk looking satisfied.

The Major’s control snapped a bit. “Shouldn’t you be invading his camp?!”

Hudson motioned at the parking area. “We’re all set to roll, Boss. Just waiting on nightfall.”

Garret paused. What if Adrian got out of the city? “Hudson.”

“Yeah?”

Garret grunted in affection. “My most trustworthy man. Would you keep me alive, Hud?”

Hudson nodded. He would have anyway, but he was glad to be able to mean it. “Yes.”

“Good. Mitchel is trouble, Hud. From his graying hair, to his

weakening fists. Because he's a hard-ass."

Hudson took the hint and offered assurances. "Some of the crew can hang for a while, out of sight. If he survives, we'll grab him and make him watch us conquer his Safe Haven."

Garret began to feel better. "Yes. That's a good idea. He'll come in tonight, one way or the other."

Hudson gestured toward the team leaders. "We'll be ready, sir. We won't let him through to you."

The Major went toward his office without sneering like he wanted to. He wasn't worried about being killed, just missing the opportunity to snare his prey.

"I have an ace." Garret locked the door. "One juicy piece of bait to bring you back, buddy. And our son will insist, even if it costs your life."

## 7

"Something went wrong."

Daryl had already been thinking it, but the words brought a sense of doom over the entire team. Waking to the snake women and their slurring explanations hadn't been much of a comfort.

They were inside an above ground storm drain that ran alongside the park, huddled together for warmth and comfort while they ate. The Major had taken their kits, but the snake women had fed them.

The five women grouped in the tunnel entrance were covered in shiny scales. The men kept stealing glances as the females stood watch. The team was intrigued and nervous.

"She wouldn't do that!"

An argument among the females caught attention.

"Then where iss she?"

"Maybe she got caught. She wouldn't betray us."

"Not even for Conner?"

Silence.

Daryl and Billy exchanged looks. If Cara had betrayed her women, then their deal was broken. The snake females had been

counting on Cara to bring back Adrian and Conner for trading with the Major. Kenn had promised Adrian would send the women on their way with trucks of supplies, but Cara wanted Conner and the Major wanted Adrian.

“We have to get out of here.”

Billy glanced toward the tunnel, where three more snake women had just appeared. “Easier said than done. No wheels, no weapons, no idea where to search.”

The new women walked in with tongues out, sniffing. The expressions on those faces, the longing in them, made Daryl’s stomach turn. “We could do what Kenn and Kevin did. If we give these females hope for their future, they’ll help us.”

Billy moaned lowly. “I knew you were gonna say that.”

Their voices were carrying, telling the women they were aware of the dangerous situation and trying to figure out how to solve it.

“Adrian will still reward them for helping.” Alex was furious with himself. “We don’t have to be...donors.”

Next to Alex, Ray kept his eyes down, feeling the heat of needy stares. Dale did the same thing when it had been too long between physical moments, but Ray wasn’t sure he could handle this.

“What if we offer them a place in Safe Haven?” Alex loathed his body for jumping at the revolting thoughts of something forbidden.

“Will you provide an escort when we decide to leave?” Nuna had been listening.

Daryl nodded. “To anywhere you want to go.”

The middle woman knelt down in front of Ray, finger going out. *His skin is so soft!* Their child wouldn’t have a layer of scales like many of the births now did.

Ray held still, realizing this woman would make the choice.

Nuna’s face was the only other one they’d seen painted, though her eyes were lined in brilliant green instead of blue. Her weapons were also different, in that she had no blowgun or darts. She had the real thing on her hip and twice as many ammo belts



over her shoulders. Ray saw the scales in her blonde braids and swallowed the first thought so that he didn't say it. *How do you keep the scales on—glue or sew?*

Ray picked out the tattoo of female lovers on the woman's skin and realized it wasn't so much lust as a need for offspring that weren't damaged. She didn't want him because she would enjoy it; for the gay man, it somehow made the thought bearable. She was doing it to save her people. *So am I.* Ray drew in a breath. "Where and when?"

The woman blinked. And then made the deal. "The very second Mitchel is returned to you, wherever we are at that moment."

Ray cringed inwardly but did his duty. He smiled at her. "I'll be ready."

Nuna backed away. "Don't die during the fight. If you do, the deal is off; we'll kill you all."

Ray swallowed. If he couldn't give her what she wanted, things would get ugly.

The other two women followed Nuna out of the tunnel, but she came right back with a large pack over each shoulder.

"Pick a weapon and come stand watch. The Major doesn't fear things in the night. They fear him."

"How long has the Major been here, waiting?" Alex felt somehow smaller because Ray, the gay man, had volunteered to take one for the team.

The shortest of the females tossed a small packet to Ray. "The month after the war. He knew Adrian would show up for his son. He's had all of us watching."

The team took that in, accepting a dusty weapon and a single extra magazine each.

"We'll hit his convoy as they roll out of the compound."

Daryl decided to let the women know a few things. "First, Adrian isn't inside there anymore. We're sure of it. Second, if the Major's like Adrian, he'll expect a convoy hit and be ready. We need to get him right before they load up to leave. And third, what is Ray putting in his pocket?"

Ray flushed, head dropping.

The woman didn't laugh. "A pharmaceutical hand, one that may keep us all alive. Now that Cara's gone, Nuna's in charge. If he can't satisfy her, she will kill you all."

Daryl didn't tell her the females would be the ones to die. He hoped it wouldn't come to that. Daryl motioned to the team.

They fell into a single line of determination. They wouldn't rest until their people were freed.

Alex frowned. "What about Kenn and Kevin?"

Billy had already covered it in his mind. "They're with Adrian, or on the way to him." He was sure of it.

The others found that easy to believe and didn't ask more questions. Kenn was always close to the boss, and when he wasn't, he was trying to get there. If anyone could find Adrian, it was his XO.

## 8

"Ready?"

"You know it."

Kenn was waiting for the last rays to fade from the sky, sure Adrian was already watching for their signal.

"You're sure this will work?"

"Oh, yeah. We all have...fond memories of it."

Kevin got ready to swing the object Kenn had made from hollowing out a bone with his knife. It had taken an hour of careful work, but they'd had time to kill. Kevin had been fascinated as the graying animal leg became a caller like Neil had used at the rest stop.

"Go."

Kevin drew back to swing.

*"Adriaaaaaannnnn!"*

Kevin and Kenn both flinched. The caller fell to the ground without echoing a single howl.

*"Pllllease stop!"*

The pain-filled cry echoed over the deserted streets and

tunnels in bright, glaring sound fed through various radios and speakers. The result was a city that screamed.

“Damn.” Kenn sat up and began gathering their things.

Kevin frowned. “Where are you going?”

“We, rookie. That’s bait. We have to get to the compound before Adrian does.”

“*Cooonnnneerrr! Help meee!*”

## 9

“That’s my mother.”

Conner didn’t scream or demand Adrian go save her. He just cried. Deep, heaving sobs of guilt and misery, they were the sounds of a little boy who wanted his mom more than anything else in the world.

Angela couldn’t take much of it; she knew her limits, but apparently, Adrian’s were lower than her own.

“You two stay with him and follow.” Adrian met Kyle’s eye with an intense look of trust and fear. “I’ll see you there, Eagle.”

Kyle nodded. “Yes, you will.”

Adrian knelt down in front of Conner and gently pulled the sobbing child into his arms. “I forgive you everything and so does she.”

Conner cried harder.

Adrian hugged him tight for a brief moment before pushing him back. “I need you to lead them around the guards and be ready to take a ride. Can you do that?”

Conner wiped at his face, but he didn’t dare to hope. “Yes.”

“Good. Get them there quickly or none of us will make it out.” Adrian vanished into the debris piles.

Angela waved at Kyle. “I’ll take a few minutes with him. It’ll be short, but I want to pull my weight.”

Kyle didn’t argue, suddenly feeling better. Adrian would meet up with their team. Kyle was sure those Eagles were already sheltered around Garret’s compound. He wouldn’t have to go in alone, but even if he did, Kyle wasn’t worried. Watching his son

cry like that had hurt Adrian. Someone would pay for that feeling. It was a reaction Kyle knew well.

Angela loaded the wounded teenager onto her back, glad to feel no actual pain in her shoulder. There was a sensation of pressure, but it didn't hurt. That meant she really was recovered.

"Take the alley to your right." Conner pointed, eyes damp and red. "I know a shortcut so we can be close enough to hear, even if we can't see what's happening."

Angela did as he said. That was almost enough for her. She wanted to be at Adrian's side for the fight, but like Kyle, she understood she wasn't needed.

## 10

"Who is that?" Daryl winced each time the scream sounded.

The snake women didn't answer. They were grabbing things and fleeing.

Daryl shook his head when Billy would have stopped them. "It isn't their fight anymore."

That drew frowns and understanding. The snake women knew a good moment to run when they heard it.

"Just us, boys." Billy got set to roll as if nothing had gone wrong. "Everyone ready to kick ass?"

A loud cheer echoed, drawing female attention. Now that they were no longer being held by the women or the effects of the drugs, the Eagles had returned. Men stood straight, faces determined, hearts and minds meeting in one goal—to get their people and their leader back, and then to get the hell out of here.

A few of the snake women hesitated, realizing they'd discounted the men but shouldn't have. Between the two groups, they now outnumbered the Major's men, if only by a small margin.

Nuna saw the looks of her girls and shrugged. "If you wish to die this way, I find no dishonor in it."

That sent them back to packing.

Nuna threw the men a satisfied glower. They weren't stealing her women, and if she couldn't have the soft male avoiding her

stare, she didn't want to help any of them, for any reason.

“Move out, Eagles.”

The team vanished into the darkness, each man following the single reflective light on the back of the jacket ahead of them. It was the flag. All of them glowed faintly for this purpose.

Behind them, the snake women also disappeared into the darkness, but they went west, out of the city. *Let the men keep fighting. We women only want to survive.*

Chapter Twenty-Six BK3  
**Just Keep Moving**

1

“It’s not working.” Hudson was bored and tired of making the drugged woman hurt enough to rise through the fog for a long scream. He didn’t mind torture, but this wasn’t fun. It was baby cuts and twisting points when he wanted to stab.

“Once more and we’ll break for a few minutes,” Garret conceded. *I was so sure.*

Hudson obligingly twisted the blade.

“Nnnoooooooooooo!”

This hoarse shout of agony was enough to make even Hudson cringe. *Hit a vein with that one. Oops.*

Hudson quickly compressed it and began tying a lace around her wrist so she wouldn’t bleed out yet.

Garret picked up the mike. “In ten minutes, we’ll start again. Bring my son and we’ll trade. Ten minutes, Mitchel. If she doesn’t bleed out before then.”

Silence came in answer.

Garret shook off the shadow of fate. *I make my own!* He sneered at Hudson. “Go rape something. I’ll call when I need you.” Garret wasn’t happy about Lenore’s treatment, but they had all disliked Embry, so there hadn’t been a true punishment, only words—which were sometimes enough.

In this case, Hudson’s spirits were renewed instead of crushed. He’d told Lenore to be waiting for him after the battle, and if she wasn’t, he would get the fun of hunting her down.

Garret’s office was another storage room filled with boxes and crates. There was a wide desk in the far corner, near a door that led to his personal residence. In that luxuriously decked out room was a single window and door. Garret liked having multiple

escape routes. Hudson opened the door to find someone standing there. He stumbled backward, barely stopping himself from swinging.

Cara shoved her way into the room. "He's coming! I saw him."

Cara looked like she'd been running, maybe from the very men who'd supplied the distraction for Adrian's escape. Garret didn't question her presence.

Cara didn't look at the woman in the chair, though she knew who Shannon was. Still mourning the loss of her mate, Cara held no sympathy. If Shannon had been a fighter, it might have made a difference, but she was only a corpse waiting to be buried.

Garret waved Hudson toward the other door. "Be ready."

"Do you feel death here, darling?"

Garret jerked, startled. He turned to find the once stunning blonde staring at him with cold hatred.

Shannon leaned her head back, taking shallow breaths to control her flipping stomach. "When he gets here, I won't be the only one to bleed out."

Garret saw that her tie had come undone and blood was running freely down her arm. He moved to replace it, not wanting Adrian to find her dead. *He has to see it happen.*

Even battered, Shannon was still beautiful. Garret ran a rough finger down her cheek. "Why couldn't you just be loyal to me?"

She slowly opened her sunken eyes, bracing. "Why couldn't you let me go to the man I love?"

Instead of a blow, the Major chuckled. "Because he wanted you too, of course. I couldn't allow him happiness. You never mattered, except as a way to get to him."

Shannon already knew. She'd come to terms with it a long time ago. "Conner's with his father now. That's all I ever wanted."

"Conner is dying in an alley somewhere from my bullet!"

Shannon screamed, this one carrying an inner pain that Hudson hadn't been able to draw from her.

Hudson checked the scanner. "Motion sensors are going off, Major."

Garret went to the screen and saw multiple alarms flashing in

silent warning. Three in the rear, one in the front, and six more on their weakest side.

“Back together, are we?” Garret muttered. “Good.”

Cara lingered by the window, tensed for battle. She’d come to salvage what she could for her women, but the Major wasn’t in a giving mood right now. She needed leverage.

*Bang! Bang!*

The gunfire was followed by footsteps thudding up the stairs.

“We’ve lost the outer perimeter.”

The guard that informed them of that placed himself between the Major and the door, but not until he was directed to do so.

*Bang!*

This shot was louder, deeper, and came from the rear of the building.

*“They’re in the compound!”*

*“All men to full alert!”*

Radios blared with panic.

The Major didn’t calm anyone. If they followed their training, they were still likely to die. Mitchel wasn’t one to take prisoners.

More feet stomped hurriedly up the stairs. Garret braced for Adrian’s entry. He’d never hated anyone as much.

The door flew open.

Garret saw the person’s desperate face an instant before Hudson fired.

*Bang!*

*Bang!*

Only one body thumped to the floor.

The Major chuckled as Hudson screamed in denial and fell to the floor by Lenore’s corpse. “Talk about irony.”

## 2

Kenn grinned at the sight of Adrian marching through the alley. The smile grew when the rest of the mission team appeared behind him, pointing and laughing in relief.

Adrian didn’t slow.



His men fell in, ready to help express his displeasure.

As he neared the now unguarded, unlocked back door, Kenn paused. “How do you want to do this?”

Adrian took the extra gun from Kenn’s holster and stepped inside. “Kill them all.”

“Yeah!” Kenn laughed as the battle shield descended over his mind. “That works.”

They ran up the stairs together, over bodies that gave confusion, but there wasn’t time to stop as Garret’s hunters rounded the corner and began firing at them.

“We have a group in the west hall!” one of the hunters shouted into his mike.

Adrian shot him in the head.

Kenn hit the man next to him.

The remaining group of hunters fled down a different hall.

“What the hell...?” Daryl shrugged it off and moved up the lantern-lit stairs on Kenn’s heels, wondering where Kyle was.

They moved through wooden halls that were stripped of carpets, paintings, curtains, and anything else that could have been used to start a fire. In the top corners were dark cameras they’d expected to have to shoot out. Why wasn’t Garret watching for them?

Adrian didn’t pause when they reached the only closed door. One kick sent it banging against the wall for a short glimpse before it slammed closed.

He slid to the side, images burning into his mind. Three men lined up, with Shannon tied to a chair in front of them. Garret, standing at his desk, gun in hand, behind all of them like the coward he was. Adrian concentrated. *What else did I see?*

“Come on in, Mitchel! It’s time we settled this.”

Adrian motioned the Eagles to stay clear of the door, not sure if Garret remembered how he used to set the enemy up by shooting through the walls on each side of a door. It was more effective than wasting harmless shots through a peephole.

Adrian slid in front of the door, still working the scene. *What else was in the room?*

Chairs...stacks of books...gun on the floor...a dark puddle *under* the desk. Garret was wounded.

“Looks like you had an accident,” Adrian called cheerfully.

“There was a domestic issue as you arrived. It’s over now.” Garret’s answering tone was strained. “Trimmed by a ricochet.”

Adrian used his boot to slowly push the door open, spotting the body of a woman he didn’t know, and a hunter crouched over her in grief.

Garret kept talking, waiting for Adrian to come into the room. “Lenore wasn’t happy about her rapist not being punished. She chose to give herself justice.”

Adrian thought of the dozen bodies they’d passed on the way up here. “She got her money’s worth. You’re short two full teams, thanks to her aim.”

“Really?” The Major frowned. “I’m sorry we killed her then. That type of shooting is worth an effort.” Garret sighed regretfully. “Much too late now. I only need you, anyway.”

“And Conner,” Adrian reminded.

Garret glanced toward the door, expecting the boy to limp in. When there was no movement, he frowned. “Where is he?”

“Dead.” Adrian glowered bitterly. “Because of the drugs, I couldn’t save him!”

Garret snarled in denial, but it was lost under Shannon’s scream. She lunged from the chair, grabbing the gun Lenore had dropped when Garret shot her. “I hate you!”

Garret ducked as she fired, but the battered woman had counted on his reaction. Her shot went too low, however, hitting the edge of the desk. It took his hat from his head with the ricochet.

Barely able to see, Shannon raised the barrel and fired again.

*Bang!*

Hudson took the opportunity to back out of the room through the Major’s private door as more gunshots echoed.

Hudson ran through their fleeing, chaotic compound. *I’m on the wrong side.* Mitchel’s men were loyal to him because he cared about their lives. Garret’s men stayed from fear or greed, and Hudson recognized the moment. *I’ve had enough.*

Hudson was dry, devoid of humor and imagination, the Major would have said. Just a crew girl, Lenore had inspired strange feelings in Hudson, ones he'd been careful to hide. And he had been extremely patient waiting for his turn.

Unable to love, Garret had underestimated Hudson's emotional stability, continuing to laugh as Lenore bled out. In that moment, his bond with the Major had snapped.

"Hudson!"

He ignored the call for help. The days of coming when summoned were over.

Hudson stepped over the bodies he was certain had come from Lenore—she'd certainly tried to wipe Garret out—and continued toward the dam. He would set things off early and go out with a bang.

The furious explosives man headed back to the place he'd been happiest, before Lenore was shot and the future went grim. Let the Major and his prey fight it out. What did he care? There was only one thing that would comfort him now. Hudson moved that way with freedom ringing in his heart.

He wasn't bound to the Major anymore! It was a dangerous, powerful feeling that he was almost sorry he wouldn't get a chance to grow bored of it.

### 3

Daryl fired at the pair of bounty hunters coming up the stairs and ducked behind the wall as they responded in kind.

Another group of men had them pinned down across the hall from Adrian. They were keeping the Major's guards from reaching him, but they couldn't help their leader, either.

"I hate you!"

The voice came from a dim hall that was alive with gunfire.

*It's almost over.* Daryl fired again as an unlucky hunter popped his head around the corner. *We're almost finished.*

"Look out!"

Daryl threw himself to the floor at Billy's shout; the wall

exploded.

*Grenade*, he thought dizzily, ears ringing.

“Come on!” Billy grabbed his arm.

Daryl helped push himself along, everything distorted and painful to his burning ears.

Billy pushed him down. “Stay down until it wears off!”

Daryl crouched at Billy’s feet, clumsily reloading as blood trickled down his neck.

The room they were in was stacked with metal barrels of ammunition the Eagles dug into without grins at the find. There wasn’t time for it.

*Ping! Pop!*

*Boomm!*

The wall across from them exploded, sending shrapnel through the air.

Daryl grunted as Billy shoved him down again. Something slammed into the brick above him.

“*Die, damn you! Die!*” a woman screamed from somewhere nearby.

Kenn directed the Eagles toward the door. “Let’s clean house while Adrian does the same.”

Savage agreement came as the team reloaded, getting into formation. They would roll through the Major’s compound as if they owned it. When it was over, they would.

Kenn raised a hand, waiting for Daryl to give a shaky nod. “Go! Go! Go!”

#### 4

“*Die, damn you! Die!*” Shannon screamed at the coward who’d hurt her so much.

Adrian let her pull the trigger. He’d already counted and knew what would happen.

*Click!*

Shannon flung the empty gun at Garret. “Ahh!”

The Major stood up, remembering to breathe. “You’ll be

hunted animals as soon as I call the bunker!”

“You won’t be alive to see it!” Shannon sneered.

Adrian placed a light hand on her arm. “Would you like me to carry the load?”

Shannon’s face tightened. “I’ve got the new sickness, the one they let out during the war. Knowing I killed him will make my last weeks tolerable.”

Adrian’s heart broke as he slid his knife into her hand.

Trapped, Garret once again became dangerous. “Don’t count on that long, Shan!”

“Just as long as you die!” Shannon threw the knife as Garret tossed his hidden weapon.

The knife went into Garret’s throat.

“No!” Adrian lunged, but it was too late.

The homemade disc Garret had tossed sent a dozen bullets plunging through the room.

Three of them hit Shannon in the chest and knocked her against the wall.

Adrian ran to her. This time, there were no bugs or flesh charring into lighters. There was only blood pouring from the first woman he’d tried to love.

“Conner!” Shannon shouted.

Adrian leaned close. “He’s alive.”

Shannon’s face relaxed into the semblance of a smile. “Stay with you?”

Adrian clasped her hand. “Always.”

Shannon’s body arched, death hovering... It ruthlessly snatched what Adrian couldn’t replace.

He clutched her close, a part of his soul smoldering in his chest. Three of his females in as many months!

*Angela will be next.*

“You okay in there, Boss?”

Adrian motioned to the Eagles when Kenn slowly opened the door. “Find out where his personal guard and perimeter patrols are. Then set up a welcoming party.”

The Eagles took in the scene and the grief on Adrian’s face,

then went to do as he'd bidden.

## 5

Cara followed Hudson from a distance. She had slid into Garret's residence to observe through the open door when Lenore was shot. The Major had obviously underestimated his targets.

Cara wasn't sure why she was following Hudson, only that if Garret's main man thought it a good idea to leave, then she should too. Cara had lost her leadership over the snake women. The Major would provide no protection, even if he was lucky enough to survive, which she doubted the new people would allow. Cara didn't know what to do. She had also underestimated them and lost it all.

Ahead of her, Hudson stopped, stiffening in the unmistakable stance of discovery.

Cara hurriedly moved closer, feet silent as she ran and slithered over the debris. What had Garret's XO found?

Hudson stared in hatred. *He lied!*

Hudson narrowed in on Conner's injury, hoping it hurt.

Adrian had goaded Shannon into attacking the Major. She never would have done it without that final push and Mitchel had known it. He'd forced her to betray her husband. Adrian was just as much an evil genius as Garret.

Hudson slid behind a falling down greenhouse and waited for the trio to go by, plans spitting themselves out rapidly. Maybe this run didn't have to be a complete failure.

Hudson felt that heavy sense of the end lift from his shoulders. The bunker would be perfectly happy to accept the bodies from him instead of the Major. They would rather have them all dead than roaming free anyway, and there would still be a reward.

Hudson spun suddenly, raising his gun. "Come out."

Cara revealed herself reluctantly, eyeing the man with dislike, but no real hatred. Hudson had tolerated her while she was Garret's woman and she'd done the same for him. There was no

reason they couldn't work together.

Hudson slowly lowered the gun, aware of Cara staring toward the trio who had missed them in their hurry to reach the compound. Hudson, like Garret, thought the snake mutations were an improvement over females of the past. In this new world, snakes were all that existed in both male and female populations. That was easier to remember with Cara's girls.

"What do you want?"

"Conner," Cara replied promptly.

Hudson stared at her, thinking it would be easier with two sets of hands. "Only until we reach the bunker. Then he goes inside for the reward."

"Agreed."

If she couldn't kill Hudson by then, she would do what she had with the Major—become the bunker commander's woman so she could wait nearby for an opportunity to grab the gifted teenager. With Conner at her side, she would survive.

Hudson motioned toward the trio that was almost out of sight. "The drugs should keep them from using their power for at least another twelve hours. Go be friendly; take them to the Major's sealed room, huh?"

Cara went without a word, liking the bravado of Hudson's plan. Hopefully, the new people would make the mistake this time.

Watching her slither along the debris, Hudson pulled the radio from his belt and began clicking the mike.

When he finished, there was an immediate set of clicks in answer. Without knowing Garret's code or having their mental gifts to rely on, Mitchel and his men would be blind.

## 6

"They've taken over the compound."

Nuna stopped their march, wanting to see for herself.

The binoculars revealed it to be true. The snake leader battled with herself over the choice she'd made. *I could have had him!*

"We missed out on a good moment there," one of the other

women stated. “We might have gotten the supplies and escorts.”

Nuna wasn't listening to the mutters and complaints. She was making a new plan. “It's not over, iss it?” Nuna drew their attention even though it was clear she was talking to herself “We saw the other group. We know there's more fighting to come.” The leader waved her girls back into line. “Get uss to a better vantage point and we'll make a group choice on where we go from here.”

That satisfied the others. The line of snake women began sliding through the moldy trees, hating the way nature felt. They would miss those dank sewers and brutally cold nights underground. Topside was hell.

## 7

“Let's go. We have loose hunters to round up before burials.”

The team of Eagles left the room behind Adrian; the others in the hall followed. Shannon had taken the Major's life and sacrificed her own.

Shannon had suffered from night sweats. They'd gotten to know each other while he calmed her. Adrian had planned to marry her. At that point, he hadn't been a hunted animal, but a valued tool to be rewarded.

Adrian stood, not letting himself dwell on the signs of abuse. Her trials were over now. She could rest in triumph.

Adrian moved outside and through the alley with a bleeding heart. He had to tell Conner he'd failed.

The Eagles couldn't have been happier. They were back with Adrian. Being away caused a sense of desolation that each man hated, but also depended on. If the time ever came that they didn't feel this way, it would be time to get out of his army.

Adrian expected to see Conner, on Kyle's back, with Angela leading them. They should be stumbling over debris... Adrian stiffened. *I made a mistake.*

“Which way, Boss?” Kenn didn't like the hesitation or panic he was picking up.



“They should have already been here.” Adrian was running through all the places they’d been, the people they’d had contact with.

Kenn was only a step behind Adrian, but unlike the leader, he skipped the things he didn’t think mattered and managed to arrive at the same conclusion, at the same time. “Another trap.”

Adrian didn’t answer, instead waving tired Eagles into a tight perimeter.

“Should we start searching?”

Adrian shook his head, cursing Garret. The sound of Shannon screaming had upset Conner so much that there had been no choice but to come quickly and try to save her life. His mistake had been doing it alone.

“Boss?”

“No. The drugs didn’t stop Angela’s gifts in the cell. She’ll contact us.”

## 8

Hudson hurried through the dank sewer, mentally counting as his alarm did the same. They had to be on the way out of here when it went off just in case he’d miscalculated the fuse. For the first time in his career, Hudson couldn’t be sure.

He hurried by the stacks of water and food barrels the Major had been storing down here as they were found, knocking over a small tub of rice. Various forms of life immediately flew toward the unexpected food.

Noises echoed through the tunnel; he jogged quicker. *I hate Under Land!* When he handed over the bodies, he planned to ask for an assignment in the west, where underground was so toxic it was forbidden to go there.

Hudson shoved the next creaking door open and moved into the dankness with a grimace. Thanks to the snakes, it always smelled like heavy decay and copper.

“Fresher today,” he muttered, finally reaching the main intersection of the Major’s storage bunker.

“Cara?” Hudson pushed the automatic open button on the heavy steel door with an uneasy feeling. Maybe she hadn’t been able to get them to come down.

He pushed the thick door open with both hands, peering uneasily into the black room.

*Thwap!*

Hudson clutched at the knife hilt, gasping for air that couldn’t get through. He slid to his knees, suffocating and drowning in his own blood.

“Catch the door!”

Conner tossed his hurting body into the closing gap before the door could lock them in darkness again.

Angela shoved Cara’s heavy body off her and gave Kyle an approving grin. “Nice throw.”

“You did the dirty work.” Kyle meant it. “Best catfight I’ve ever heard.”

Angela chuckled, glad of the eyes that had let her find Cara in the chaos. They’d been expecting trouble when she tried to close them inside. Conner had been the one to pull her in. The snake clerk had immediately started fighting.

Angela took the blowgun and a few darts from Cara’s belt, then jerked the knife from the woman’s chest. She did it without a wave of nausea, showing another level of progress.

Kyle slid an arm around Conner’s waist. “Let’s get the—”

*Beep! Beep! Beep!*

The alarm was incredibly loud in the dank sewer. The trio turned, staring at it. The face of the watch on Hudson’s bloody wrist flashed in brilliant red warning.

*Beep! Beep!*

Angela and Kyle tried to decide if it mattered, but Conner knew.

“It’s an alarm. He runs that damn thing on every explosive he sets.”

“Let’s go!” Kyle led the way.

The trio fled, going as quickly as Conner’s injury would allow. Angela grabbed Kyle’s belt and let herself be hauled along as

she concentrated. It had been an effort to use her gifts in the cells. The drugs made everything blurry, hard to find the edges. She grunted, straining. *Get outside! Be ready!*

Angela sagged, temples throbbing with sharp pains that made her moan when they only very slowly eased. The dim light from above them was almost too little to see by, making the trio stay close. Their feet crunched through unseen debris the entire time.

Pain sank into Angela's head, causing her to trip.

Kyle slung her up onto his tired shoulder. "Go faster if you can, Conner. We have to get to your dad—now!"

"Stop right there!"

The trio froze as a hunter stepped into view, gun trained on Kyle.

"The Major only needs one of you," the lucky mercenary stated. "No job for you, killer!"

Kyle recognized him as one of the men he'd embarrassed in the tunnels for hurting Conner. He shifted Angela's weight onto her own feet.

Conner was barely conscious. He slid to the ground as Kyle let go of his waist.

"He wants all of us," Angela protested weakly, moving a little closer. Once again, she got to be bait.

"I'd never make it back alive," the hunter correctly assumed. "You can tie each other up or I'll shoot you both."

Kyle motioned Angela to do what the man wanted.

Starving, the witch inside lunged forward before either of them could react.

Blinding red light shot out, striking the hunter in the chest. His gun went flying into the mucky debris. Angela stepped closer as he staggered back.

*How much do you want?* the witch asked.

*All of it,* Angela answered greedily.

Kyle watched in horror as Angela attacked—with magic.

"No! Stop!"

Angela drew harder.

The hunter sagged, groaning.

Angela stepped back, color rising in her skin.

The man slid to his knees.

Angela lunged forward again, jerking brutally at his lifeforce.

Kyle stepped forward.

Conner grabbed his arm. "You don't want to do that."

Angela inhaled, swallowed, absorbed; the hunter's body faded to a bluish color that Kyle looked away from.

*Snap!*

Angela felt the last of his life give and arched in ecstasy as it impaled her.

"Don't move," Conner warned lowly. "That's our bloodlust. It's hard to fight."

Kyle saw the red eyes, the pulsing body, and stored it. He and Adrian had a lot to talk about.

Angela came down slowly from the pleasure, terrified to feel no guilt. *What am I becoming?*

Angela pulled the man's backup weapon from his holster and slowly turned to her people, hair blown back, face sated. She spoke with the erotic double timbre of woman and witch. "*We'll take point.*"

Neither of them moved as she stepped by.

Angela was glad Conner had known to warn Kyle. One touch was all it would take for her to let the witch do it again. She'd never felt anything like that. All she could compare it to was Adrian's light and both were completely forbidden.

## 9

Adrian and the Eagles were already outside the overtaken compound. It gave all of them comfort to see Kyle carrying Conner. When he swung the boy to his feet, there was relief. Men ran to help.

Angela didn't look at Adrian. She stayed alert, watching for trouble.

Adrian knew instantly what she'd done. The power radiating from her was unmistakable, but it wasn't a disappointment to

Adrian. Once she learned to store and ration the energy that he planned to insist she draw daily, she would be strong enough to resist the temptation of doing it again.

Adrian had never known of anyone who could access their power for at least a full day after being drugged. That took Angela from a powerful defensive tool and placed her directly at the top of their protection. The lifeforce would make her even stronger. Fire had been her last evolution. Based on that, Adrian thought the next would be just as volatile. His own power had peaked during lab tests, but Angela wasn't being given drugs for control or being used up before the witch inside could evolve naturally. Her gifts would grow unchecked.

"Something's wired." Kyle gratefully took his Glock from Adrian as the team reached him. "A bomb of some kind."

"What about the other kids inside the complex?" Kyle asked. "The ones like Conner?"

Adrian looked to Angela.

She shook her head. "Any survivors took off the second we escaped."

Neither of them said that would be how the government bunker found out what happened. They didn't need to.

Angela motioned toward the Major's parking area, where bodies were already being consumed by nature's tiniest armies. "Can we go home now?"

Adrian was still staring at her. "Yes, we—"

***Bam! Pop! Boom!***

The ground pulsed under them. Everyone ducked, expecting to be blasted into the afterlife. Instead, wind howled through the city, blowing the deserted streets and decaying bodies with an eerie chill.

"Look!"

A twister of smoke rose into the sky east of them.

"It's the dam." Conner gawked in shock. "That's miles from here. Why would—"

*Crraacckkk! Wooosshhhh!*

Adrian grabbed Angela's arm and propelled her toward the

fence. “Cut the lock. Let’s go!”

The gates swung open to reveal the Major’s personal protection vehicles.

*Wooosshhh Crunch!*

Adrian took the first UPV, putting Angela into the passenger side. Conner instinctively went toward the rear with the Eagles as Kyle stayed with his boss.

Unlike their falsely modified vehicles, Garret’s vehicles were the real deal and fully stocked. Adrian had assumed they would lose their ride. He’d only let Marc and Kenn change them enough to keep up appearances. They’d also added explosives to take out Garret’s compound if they were parked close enough.

Keys weren’t needed with the automatic start buttons. Adrian rolled them through the gate.

The Major’s transportation even had a working radio that hummed constantly as Kyle flipped through the channels, trying to reach their camp.

*Crunch! Crack! Bam!*

“What is that?” Kyle demanded, but really, he knew. He’d been there the night the tank was washed away. He knew that sound.

“Hey! Who is that?” Angela pointed wearily.

“Damn it!” Adrian had spotted the line of shadows running into formation outside the gate. “Garret’s personal guard was on a long patrol. We were waiting out here to greet them when you called.”

*Snap! Woosh!*

Water came flying down the streets and alleys, crushing its own path through the months of debris. Angela wasn’t sure a shield would hold as she stared at the water lunging for them. It was the spirit of death, made visible.

Adrian pushed the pedal harder, resenting the bulky handling UPV. “Down!”

Angela and Kyle ducked as he came in range of the line of firing bounty hunters.

*Bang! Pop!*

Slugs pinged off the reinforced steel body but came straight through the thin glass windows.

Adrian yanked the wheel hard, manhandling the UPV toward a narrow alley. He didn't slow, just rammed into the side of the crumbling brick as he struggled to make the turn.

Parts of the wall fell on top of the UPV...then it was back under control.

Kenn did the same with the UPV on their heels. The team barreled deeper into the alley.

The hunters followed on foot, firing at the tires with a tunnel vision focus that missed the danger. They had their prey trapped. It was time to kill. In that instant, nothing else mattered.

# Your Ship

1

“**H**ere it comes!” Angela rolled up her window, but not all the way.

The ground under them changed; a hum vibrated through the floorboard as the whole alley began to shake.

Piles of debris rattled, slid, fell, and crashed into the ground and each other, creating new piles and dust plumes. Standing structures collapsed; loud thuds and bangs came from all parts of the city around them. Thick clouds of dust began to rise, carried on the wind. Then the rumbling stopped.

An unnatural silence fell.

Angela started to ask if maybe the water had missed them... The pounding resumed. It was dull, hollow, and thick as it rose up the walls, their legs, and then their bodies, pounding through bones.

A horrendous crack split the air, drowning out everything else. Another noise echoed, this one more dangerous.

The walls of liquid plunged through the broken underground, washing away unsuspecting hunters and survivors alike. It crashed mercilessly through their hiding places, doing its own cleaning.

Drawn by the sounds of the water behind them, the men Hudson had sent out of the city halted their steady march along the convoy’s back trail. From where they stood, they had a perfect view of the Major’s UPVs and the very man they’d been sent to destroy. The neat roads they’d made in their months here were gone. A debris minefield now lay before them if they wanted to go back.

They didn’t. If by some miracle the Major or Hudson had survived, they were on their own now.



Behind this group, another large team of men also kept to their path. The reward for Mitchel was exorbitant, and it would increase when the bunker found out about this defeat. These mercenaries watched the flood in fascination as they left.

Water roared into the city from both sides. Fleeing survivors were washed up against the walls and trucks. Two waves crashed together over the top of the team and filled the alley, submerging both vehicles.

The pressure shoved the trucks together with a muffled bang and then backwards as the stronger wave overpowered the weaker. All that kept the UPVs from washing out into the chaos was two fully cocked steering wheels that encouraged the vehicles to hit walls and be jammed. For the two men holding both their breath and the wheel, it seemed to take months for the force to ease.

For the rest of the team, it was less than a minute.

Water slowly drained from the vehicles. Injured people were lowered in relief.

Unlocking his arm, Adrian pushed on the pedal and was pleasantly surprised to get a response. He hadn't expected the modifications to extend to the engine, since they hadn't to the windows.

Adrian watched Kenn pull forward to hover on his bumper, then swept the area. The hunters that had survived were on the ground, coughing or already stumbling away. Adrian let them go. *We have other problems.*

The debris and barely visible paths were gone, along with bodies and bones. Everything light had been swept to a new location, covering the old layers of rubble with new. These fossils were entrenched in mud that would eventually harden and encase the city in perfect preservation.

Adrian grimaced as he reached out and adjusted the radio. "Eagle to base."

Silence came.

Pain, thick and moist, slid into his side. Adrian's hands clenched. *Not yet! I have to make it back. I have to...*

His foot eased off the gas, mind going fuzzy.

“Adrian?”

Angela’s words came down a loud, distorted tunnel. He pulled himself together enough to bring the UPV to an ungainly stop. He closed his eyes, slumping.

“Where were you hit?”

Adrian jerked as she pried away his jacket, revealing a damp red stain that ran thick and wide into his waistband.

“Oh, Adrian.”

Kyle came to the window. “What’s the... Oh, shit.”

“Drive.” Adrian began to force himself over.

Angela helped him.

“Shouldn’t we let her—”

“Drive.”

“Drive.”

Kyle did as they both ordered.

Angela went to work, heart a fast tremor of fear. They’d rescued his son. What would they sacrifice for it?

“I was trimmed, that’s it!”

“Okay.” Angela frowned. Adrian was assuming they had a camp to return to, and an experienced doctor there to help. What if he was wrong?

*He’s in no position to choose, the witch spoke up reluctantly. Maybe you should think of something.*

*I don’t want his job!*

*Who says you do? If you’re wrong, it’s a plan that can go into a file and never be used.*

Angela swallowed. *But what if I’m right?*

*Then it’s up to you to keep everyone alive! The witch stared back fearfully. That’s what he’s been training you for. Not to make female teams or further camp goals. He chose you for moments like this. If you can’t do it, tell him now while he can give that chore to someone else.*

Angela’s heart protested every word, but her mind fell into planning their salvation against the unknown threat. Angela forced her mental doors to open wide as she considered all the options. This was indeed what he’d chosen her for. She would do it.

Adrian's hand went out to Kyle's arm. "Code Raven is a go."  
"You got it, Boss."

Angela looked over with bloodshot blue eyes. "You've honored me."

Adrian waited, holding onto consciousness to be sent out with her coming remark in his thoughts instead of fear.

"And *fuck you* very much for it!"

Adrian chuckled, cramping up. He slowly fell over against her arm.

Angela adjusted him as she talked to Kyle in short, urgent tones that questioned, schemed, planned, and prayed to be wrong.

## 2

"Here they come! Where's Hudson?!"

Teddy thought fast. Hudson and the Major had to be dead. That's the only way Mitchel had gotten by them. Which meant...

"I claim leadership!" one of the rear men called. None of the Major's crew was stupid.

Teddy waved at the two UPVs they hadn't finished modifying. "The windows are weak, so are the gas tanks."

"And leadership?" another man asked.

"The man who captures or kills Mitchel will lead us," Teddy answered.

"What about the Major's son?" another man asked.

Teddy lifted the launcher as the vehicles started up the small hill toward them. "Whoever darts Conner gets to be XO—mine if I make this shot. Mitchel Sr. is in the front of the first UPV."

Satisfied, the twenty-nine other men also raised their weapons. It was how things worked now. Men needed a leader. That had to be covered before the slugs flew.

"Fire!"

Angela and Kyle spotted the distant outline of the road they needed to take. An instant later, they saw trouble standing between them and home.

“Look out!”

Kyle swerved to miss the incoming missile.

It flew by and hit the UPV behind them. The front end of Kenn’s vehicle rose into the air and then slammed down. It rolled onto its side, flames shooting out.

Kyle began to circle back. *My team is in that truck!*

“Men down! We have men down!” Kenn’s dazed voice blared through the radio.

“Incoming!” Angela pointed.

Armed men in full battle gear rushed toward the flaming vehicle, preparing to open fire.

Angela shoved at Adrian, getting him low enough to be protected by the steel plated doors.

Kyle brought them to a dust billowing stop by the rear of Kenn’s UPV.

Kenn climbed from the mangled cab and took shelter under Kyle’s truck as bullets flew. He began scrambling toward the rear.

*Booommmmm!*

A second missile rattled the UPV as it went by, missing. Kenn’s knees and hands went into high speed.

Eagles poured out of the destroyed vehicle, helping the wounded as they went.

Angela heard their door go up, but she didn’t get out to help. She wasn’t leaving Adrian. She and Kyle opened fire on the men close enough to interfere with the transfer of passengers, leaning over the blond man as bullets slammed into the cab.

“Shit!” Kyle hit the gas, hoping he got there first. The man with the missile launcher had reloaded.

Everyone held on as the UPV lurched forward, leaving Kenn’s vehicle exposed to another shot. It exploded in their mirrors and their hearts.

“Eat this!” Kyle hit the gas, leaning into the ride.

He plowed into the man who’d been about to fire again, then swung wide to chase two others.

Angela leaned out the window, shooting the mercs down as they fled.

Kyle turned the UPV again as more gunfire echoed from the rear. He charged the biggest part of the group, making sure he and Angela had plenty of targets. He continued circling their fallen truck, keeping the enemy away while Eagles jumped into the back on his wild passes and threw others inside.

The rear door slammed down.

Kyle rolled by the burning wreckage.

Bullets slammed into the side as he brought the UPV around for another sweep of gunfire and crushing wheels. He saw the second missile launcher.

“Shoot him!” Kyle ordered.

Angela paled. “He’s too—”

“Your rifle!”

Angela grabbed it from behind the seat and tried to remember how to breathe and think as terror settled onto her shoulders.

“Push it back. Lock it down.” Adrian’s bleary voice from the floorboard gave comfort and added more pressure.

When Angela fired, she made sure it was good.

*Bang! Thump.*

Kyle ran over the body, taking bitter satisfaction.

Kyle looked at Angela. “Straight to camp?”

“Might be more of them there already. We’ll finish these first.” Angela reloaded.

Kyle slowed down a bit, now that they were out of range of the enemy. “You have a plan.”

Angela reloaded Kyle’s gun for him. She also made sure Adrian’s weapons were loaded, then put one in his chilly grip.

She motioned toward a thick grove of trees. “Pull us in there and find a place to hide. We’re going to treat them the way we did the wolves in Nebraska. These animals deserve no less.” As he stopped, Angela keyed her radio. “If you can fight, we need you.” Angela looked at Kyle. “I’m not leaving the vehicle.” Meaning Adrian.

Kyle reached over and locked his door, indicating he wasn’t either. “What’s the plan?”

Angela gestured toward the wounded, furious Eagles coming

up to surround the front of the truck. “We give the job to his army.”

### 3

Garret’s men had taken a hit. Only twenty of them walked into the woods, following the tracks of the truck.

The sight of the UPV wedged behind a thick cluster of trees caused the hunters to rush closer, all eager to claim leadership. They surrounded the vehicle, not picking out movement. Edging closer, many of them started searching for tracks to determine which way their prey had fled.

The Major’s men reached the trees...

“Now!”

The female shout was unexpected. It drew them to the cab, where Angela sat up and began pulling the trigger.

The Eagles opened fire from the trees above them.

Angela and Kyle hunkered down, covering Adrian. With their vests now covering the windshield and sharp-eyed guards determined to take out those closest, it was still a rough place to ride out the attack, guaranteed to take the most gunfire.

Angela hit the mike. “Kill them all! No mercy!”

### 4

“Do we help them?”

“Do you think it’s wise?”

“I’m not sure.”

The conversation came from a different group of men lurking nearby.

The top bounty hunter among the group shrugged. “Show of hands. Challenge them now or stick to the Major’s plan?”

Boyd offered a third choice. “What if we fell back to make a new one? Maybe the Major missed a few things.”

Vince didn’t need to count to know what his men wanted. “Agreed. Fall back.”

The two dozen men slid quietly into the woods and resumed their march toward Mitchel's base. Behind them, mercenaries screamed for mercy that wasn't coming.

## 5

When the gunfire stopped, Angela started to sit up.

Kyle put a hand on her arm. "Not until the call comes."

*Bang!*

"All clear."

Kyle let go of her wrist, staring at his idol's slumped body. "It's your ship now. Make him proud."

Angela lowered the vest, glad to find Eagles standing outside her door. She and Kyle had both run out of bullets. "We will."

"All accounted for," Lee reported tiredly through Kyle's shattered window. "We got twenty-eight."

Kyle's displeasure was already on his face. "Garret had them running 6-man teams. That doesn't add up."

Angela looked at Lee.

"Still not answering," Lee stated before she could ask. "We'll keep trying."

Just making it up to the front, Kenn saw Adrian.

Angela locked him down. "Not dead. Doesn't want them to know. We need to go ASAP."

"Not so fassst."

Angela looked through the shattered window, staring in the cracked mirror as Nuna stepped from the rear of their UPV. Ray was in her merciless grip.

Kyle was also watching in her mirror.

Angela spent exactly three seconds considering a different option. She didn't find one. "What is it you want?" Angela motioned to Kenn. *She's not alone.*

Nuna pulled Ray closer, arm around his neck, knife to his throat. "You."

That one word had the Eagles moving closer.

"Stay back!" Nuna was prepared to kill Ray. Her eyes were

full of it.

Kenn glanced to where Adrian should have been and found Angela's cold blue eyes giving the expected order. *Do it.*

"Company," Kyle muttered lowly.

Dozens of snake women moved into view, surrounding the entire team with guns, knives, and hatred.

"We will be paid for our servicesss." Nuna dragged Ray into the protection of her girls. "We helped you and lost our leader. You will take her place!"

Kyle started to motion the Eagles to open fire, not sure if they would, and heard Kenn give the same order.

Kenn unslung his rifle, grabbing a bare aim and popped off the shot before there was time to think.

*Bang!*

Nuna teetered unsteadily in astonishment, letting go of Ray, who slumped to the ground. "You shot him!"

The snake woman sank to her knees, bleeding through her scale covered chest. "You shot..."

As Nuna's body fell over, the small army of snake women fled.

"Let them go." Angela didn't look away from the Marine she had finally made peace with. Kenn was now hers to command.

Kenn lowered the rifle reluctantly. He wasn't sure letting them go was the best idea, but the other Eagles weren't going to open fire on females. Not after all their time in Safe Haven. Every one of them had hesitated.

Kyle stared at Kenn with a horrible, peace-delivering realization. He now understood why Adrian had chosen, and then kept, the abusive man. None of them would have been able to do that unless the women had fired first.

*And that's why Angela chose Jennifer for her XO, Kyle realized. She would have fired. That's why we need female Eagles!*

The Eagles had rushed to Ray as soon as they knew the women weren't going to continue the fight. Two of them tried to stem the flow of blood from his arm as the others helped load him into the UPV.



“It went straight through!” Lee gestured. “He’ll live.”

“What’s up with the camp?”

Angela couldn’t get a clear read on anything. She was too tired. She ignored Kenn’s question. “You have to convince the men that the bunker was a lie, that it was personal.”

Kenn started to argue, but he saw the V in her chin. “That won’t be easy.”

Angela locked eyes with him. For this to work, he had to get onboard—right now. “Adrian wants his herd to stay together. If they find out the government is coming for him, they’ll split. You have to make this happen.”

Kenn didn’t need to look at those around them to know their expressions were demanding he give what she was asking for. “I’ll do my best to cover it.”

Satisfied, she bent down to check on Adrian. “Let’s roll.”

The bullet ridden UPV was moving toward the silent camp less than two minutes later.

# Mergers And Mayhem

5 Miles Southwest of Little Rock

## 1

The sight of Eagles standing in that familiar formation in front of Safe Haven was enough to make Angela smile despite her fear for Adrian. “They’re okay.” She was close enough to read them through the exhaustion. “Marc and Charlie were releasing some tension last night and blew the radios.”

Kyle flipped the headlights.

Their men rushed to greet them. Lack of contact had worried everyone.

“Marc stays in charge.” Adrian’s weak words came as camp members rushed toward the caution tape.

“You’ll have to deflect as many of them as you can.”

“We’ll handle it.” Angela shoved against the dented door as alertness came into Adrian’s face. Pain would show up next. “Once I’m out, put your arm around my shoulders and stay still for a minute, give yourself time to get your legs.”

“I will.” Adrian carefully pulled into a sitting position and slid out of the UPV with a low grunt, doing as she instructed.

“What is it?”

“Are you okay?”

Neil and Zack were instantly concerned and full of questions as they neared the UPV.

Adrian raised his hand, struggling to appear normal as he leaned against the truck. “I’m shot. Marc stays in charge over there. Code Raven over here.”

“How bad is it?”

“Won’t Marc need help?”

Only Kyle didn’t question. Adrian stepped stiffly toward him,

face a wall of stone. “We are Code Raven. *You* see to it, no matter what.”

“You know it, Boss.”

Doug paralleled Adrian’s determined stride as he headed for the nearest QZ tent.

Kenn kept quiet, hoping to hear that as soon as he was cleared, he would be in charge of the herd.

“You have to go back,” Adrian ordered.

“What?”

“What?”

Adrian grunted lowly at Kenn and Angela’s simultaneous question.

When it became a grimace of pain, they both glanced away in respect.

Adrian kept moving, concentrating on moving his feet and not the fire in his side and gut. He stopped outside the tent. “Do a perimeter setup, wait for survivors. Handle them as they deserve.” Adrian ducked into the comforting privacy of the dark tent.

Out of sight, his legs folded up to his knees. He slumped forward, thumping against the canvas floor. A tear slipped from the corner of his eye as he fell over. He’d rescued Conner and brought Angela home alive. *I did my duty.*

## 2

Still recovering from Mitch’s alcohol lesson, Marc took in the situation slower than he normally would have, but he still came to the correct conclusion. Adrian was down, Angela was in charge, and the returning men were too jumpy for it to be over.

Marc had known when to expect the team, thanks to Angie and he’d prepared things for it. The QZ, with far too many tents, was fully stocked. There was a shift of guards and gophers standing by, and Li Sing was about to start hot food. That was something most mission teams went without on these runs. Marc had also tried to clear the schedules of those who would greet their returning men. After all the noises Safe Haven had listened to in

concern, Marc was sure each member of the team could use extra care.

Marc didn't join them or even wave as Angela stood outside Adrian's tent for a sitrep from the guards. He could see that she was okay, but in this moment, he had a choice to make.

Angela didn't know what he was going to do, so she couldn't protest. From the look of her and the team, he wasn't positive she would anyway, but Marc wasn't taking the chance. They would never have another Dean and Dillan situation, not while he was here.

Marc caught Neil's eye and gestured for the trooper to come quietly.

The two men met behind the mess trucks. Marc was nervous about bringing in someone so loyal to following the chain of command, but he filled Neil in on his plan.

Neil, who was delighted to be useful to Marc for anything, listened with admiration.

When Marc finished talking, they spent another minute on the details and then went to put the few pieces in place. It only required a schedule switch that would be expected anyway, considering the circumstances. They would be the only ones involved.

### 3

"Welcome back." Jennifer smiled a bit when Kyle's eyes widened at her official Eagle gear. Marc had personally delivered it this morning.

"You look nice." Kyle smiled in return. *And happier.* He hadn't had time to gather stories and details yet.

"You look beat."

Kyle didn't lie. "I could use some rest."

Jennifer leaned her head against his arm in contentment. "Me, too."

Kyle immediately began making plans.

Jennifer allowed herself to curl an arm through his. "When

you're able, I'm there."

Kyle's heart pounded heavily. "You can have my back."

Jennifer nodded, relaxing the rest of the way. "Deal."

Kyle shoved away the tempting images and returned to his duty. The QZ was alive with activity.

Near the medical tent, Doug and Peggy were talking. Kyle thought that might become a regular ritual after a run. Those two had made their choice as well.

*So has Kenn.* The mobster was aware of how happy Tonya appeared as she walked into the QZ to meet her man. In another time, they would have had to wait for a secret reunion, but the guards didn't blink an eye at having the redhead in here now. Things had certainly changed.

Kenn slowed down as he and Tonya neared Kyle, grinning cheerfully. "Nice job, Reece."

Kyle surprised them all. "Not bad yourself, Mr. Harrison."

Kenn laughed, voice lowering. "Guess we know who the real hero was though, don't we?"

"Yes." Kyle scanned the tents where the mission team was getting settled. "We all do. Without Conner's games and runarounds, we would have been killed in the first few hours. Garret had a great trap laid out."

"Yep." Kenn directed Tonya out of the path of vehicles being re-parked but lingered to chat.

Kyle allowed it. Grievances were on hold.

#### 4

"I hear you're settling in."

Candy and Hilda found Lee in the flap. Tension sparked.

He'd told her there had to be a separation, that until she proved her worth to the camp, she would be an outcast because of his big mouth telling people she'd cheated. It had now been long enough that Candy wasn't sure he even wanted her anymore.

Lee stared. During the fire, she'd been one of the last vehicles into the water and he'd hated that. She needed to be protected.

After some thought, Lee had realized he held the power to provide it. He had all along.

Hilda quietly took the little boy from the tent, clucking over the hairy lollipop he was trying to put into his mouth.

Candy brushed at herself nervously. Her newly striped hair glared out as a mistake—the chartreuse curls were hanging over her face. She let out a tired sigh. “Hi, Lee.”

He caught the note of fear in those two words, and all the female worries that went along with it.

“Hi, baby.” Lee limped into the tent, thinking she was the prettiest thing he’d ever seen. *I still love her*, he thought, a bit surprised. He’d believed her affair had killed that rare emotion.

Candy waited for him to speak, not certain of his mood. She wasn’t scared of him, but he held the power to hurt her.

“I’ve missed you.”

His words made her lips curve. “Really?”

Lee moved close enough to slide a hand behind her neck. “Yeah, baby.”

Candy let him pull her close, surprised and grateful. He didn’t kiss her, but she had the sense that he wanted to.

Candy ran her hands through his shaggy black hair as they hugged. “I’ve got time to trim it before we leave. If you like?”

Lee nodded, surprised again. She’d refused to handle male clients before, and that had included him.

Candy directed him to the barber chair that Adrian had provided and tried not to scold him for all the new injuries she saw on his lean body. She would patch those up and everything would be fine. He would understand that she’d changed.

Lee held his wife’s hand for a minute, not speaking, just glad to have made it back. There had been a couple times on this run that he hadn’t been sure any of them would.

Candy sighed in pleasure. “Welcome home.”

still standing outside the medical tent. “At some point, get yourself drunk.”

Kyle grinned, but he didn’t stop searching the darkness. It didn’t feel over. “Thanks. I need it.”

Marc stepped into the tent, full of unease at so many wounded. A couple of the men were awake, but most were still unconscious, including Adrian.

A few tents over, Dog was stable, but by no means out of the woods. Marc’s witch had been just strong enough to pull the wolf back from death’s hands, but not strong enough to heal him. Marc was hoping Angie would spend a few minutes with the wolf after she’d gotten some rest.

Angela’s eyes popped open, hand dropping to her gun despite knowing they were all safe now. That told Marc exactly how bad off Adrian really was.

Angela forced herself to stand and stretch. She was sore all over. “How was being in charge?” She hoped to stall the questions.

“A challenge.”

“It’s certainly not what we pictured when we were alone in that bedroom in Nebraska.”

His expression darkened at the memory. Until recently, it had been his favorite. “No, it’s not even close.”

“But is that all bad, because it didn’t work out the way we hoped it would?”

“No, mostly because it did work out,” Marc answered carefully. “If you’d asked me that two months ago, I may have given a different answer.”

Angela’s tone hardened. “But not now, right? I have your complete support?”

Marc didn’t like the feeling he was getting. “Yes.”

“Good. I may need it.” She tried to find a smile for him. “What did you come in for, other than wanting to actually check for yourself that I’m okay?”

Marc didn’t blink. “Most of the camp is gathered around the tape, waiting for word on Adrian. I’m afraid to try to budge them without some kind of answer.”

Angela considered. "...tell them he was awake when you came in. I rushed you out, but he didn't seem that bad to you."

Marc frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's what he wants. They'll see him sometime tomorrow, but he'll still be quarantined."

"You got it." Marc left with a curious glance.

Angela swept the men who were awake and listening.

Before she could say anything, Doug held up the arm that wasn't broken. "We'll hold these things for you, the same way we have for him, so long as you're worthy."

Doug's timbre sounded odd to her tired ears, but in her exhaustion, Angela didn't catch the hint. "I'll make sure he knows you were with him and what he wants."

"And we *will* stand with him on it, until he's back or dead."

Angela returned to her chair, not telling Doug she was prepared to use her last forbidden door to save him. "So will I. He'll be back in charge, where he belongs as soon as I can get him there."

Her eyes closed.

The men around her exchanged satisfied nods. She didn't want what was already hers. He'd been right to pick her over the uneasy senior men now roaming the camp and QZ in a selfish daze. Each of them was considering what it would be like to own the mantle of command. They didn't realize it had already been gifted to someone else.

## 6

"Why her? She's only been here for a few months. Nearly every one of us deserves it more based on that!" Tucker was furious.

"Clearly, he didn't base it on seniority. Would you? 'Cause that would mean Kenn in charge and right now, Tonya as his XO." Zack wasn't about to let that happen.

Jax was stunned. "I thought Marc..."

Zack gave the shift of guards the answer they needed. "Adrian



chose the one person few Eagles or camp members will cross, the one most like him.”

“The one with the same goals.” Lee stepped from the shadows. “We will *all* support her, gentlemen. And crush anyone who gets in the way.”

The message was clear.

Lee checked his watch. “She’ll stay with him until she drops, sleep for a few hours, and then she’ll come searching for help. Be ready.”

Kyle came from behind them. “From this moment forward, there’s an Eagle running things and we don’t take shit from anyone. Let’s make sure she knows it.”

## 7

“Does that look like a change of command meeting to you?”

“Yup,” Boyd agreed. “They gave leadership to a slit.”

Vince frowned at his go-to guy. “They put a witch in charge. Always classify them that way. It’ll keep you from making the mistakes Hudson and the Major did.”

“We saw the Italian carrying her into the cells,” Boyd reminded. “She won’t have power until dawn at the earliest.”

Vince wasn’t sure Boyd understood her kind was dangerous with or without power, but he didn’t argue the point. “Set up a perimeter and get their patrol schedule down. We’ll also have to plan for her guards. The Italian was Mitchel’s killer. She’ll probably have her own.”

Boyd went to the front of the room in the power plant outbuilding where they were sheltering. Their team was waiting patiently to make the Safe Haven people pay for Garret’s defeat.

Vince was also reluctantly considering a fourth option. *I could leave*. That’s what he had done in the past when this feeling of doom came; the nagging whisper he’d listened to before was screaming at him. He might not survive this one. Instinct said to go on a patrol and not come back.

From down the hall, Boyd met that worried gaze. “If you don’t

think we can do this, say so.”

Vince sighed silently. If he said yes, they’d flee but not follow his leadership. If he said no, then he had to stand by it and attack. Vince chose to be honest. “I have doubts. We should be careful on this run.”

That was how all of them were feeling. It brought them back together, easing the tension.

“Give us a plan that will work.” Boyd gave his support. “That’s why the Major chose you over the rest of us.”

Vince recognized the manipulation, but it didn’t stop the pride. “They’re prepared for a lot of bad situations. We’ll keep it simple and brief. Study the shifts for a bit, dart the new leader between patrols, bring her back for...negotiations.”

“That’s good.” Boyd thought the new plan would give them an edge. “They think it’s over, that they’ve won. They’ll be off-guard.”

“We say when it’s over.” Vince scowled, hatred showing. “And it ain’t over until someone pays.”

## 8

When the soft glow faded and there was calm silence instead of that humming static, John softly called to the man guarding the flap.

Angela wanted to know who was next in line to be healed or dealt with, but she didn’t have the strength to lift her head. She pushed herself to her feet, but her knees tried to fold. She started to sit back down until she’d woken a bit, but strong arms slid under her and lifted gently.

Cradling her close, the thick, musky scent filled her nose in familiar comfort. Angela sighed, letting the darkness claim her. “My Marc...”

Marc tightened his grip, going toward the closest empty tent.

When Kyle pointed him toward the one in the center of the QZ instead, Marc frowned as he obeyed. This was a confirmation he’d known would come, but it wasn’t something he wanted to think

about yet.

When Marc ducked back outside, it was to give a short nod to her two rookie guards as he slipped into the shadows.

## 9

“Fire.”

Two hunters obeyed.

Vince watched through his binoculars. “...and the sentries are down! Take the shot when it comes.”

Boyd was already trained on the shadow, fully in the zone. He fired casually at the body on its side, confident of the hit.

“Direct contact! Nice. And we have effect. Subject is down. Go! Go!”

Five black clad hunters rushed into Safe Haven’s perimeter without making noise.

The two end men slit the deluxe sleeper up the sides as the middle man did the same to the bottom.

The inner men ducked inside the canvas and quickly jerked a sleeping bag over their prey. They hefted their mark up and over the stockier of their men and ran back out in a hurry, sharing wild grins as they disappeared into the landscape.

Boyd and his commander followed the team to their hole up and observed as their captive was laid gently on the cot in a back room.

The stocky hunter who had done the carrying wore a light frown, panting. “That’s a heavy bitch!”

Vince’s thick brows came together in disapproval. “Assign a watch.” He went to the front of the basement, joining Boyd. “All still and quiet?”

“No.” Boyd extended the night glasses. “The first guard we hit is already stirring.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Which means our girl in there won’t be out much longer either.”

Vince looked down the hall at the three guards, confident those outside were doing their duty. Still, the feeling was there, the one that said to be careful.

Boyd noticed it too. “If you call it, we’ll adapt—kill her and roll out.”

Vince hesitated. He didn’t want to make the same mistakes that the Major had. “Yes, do it now and we’ll split. I don’t like the way this tastes. On the way, we’ll set a few surprises and take out half their camp as they load up tomorrow. That’ll be our vengeance.”

A few minutes later, Boyd met Vince at the door with a syringe that would make it quick and quiet. They went in together, as they had for years.

Boyd moved toward the body while Vince waved his best men around them, those who had demonstrated a tolerance to the special cargo they were used to hauling. Vince didn’t expect the woman’s mental abilities to be an issue for hours yet, but he wasn’t taking the chance.

“Hey, Vince?”

“Yeah?”

“That hot little brunette’s the one we wanted, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“This isn’t a chick.”

Vince felt the cool hand of fate slide along his neck. *I should have said no.* He turned to see Boyd pull the sleeping bag off a body that was clearly male. A furious pair of blue eyes marked Vince first.

Marc raised two cold Colts. “That hot little brunette is mine!”

## 10

“We can’t find Marc.”

Angela heard Allan’s comment as she walked by and began searching mentally. He’d woken her, told her to sneak out of the tent and leave the area—that he wanted to test something. She’d

assumed it was the rookie guards, but she'd been too tired to ask.

"You searched?"

Allan frowned. "Twice. It's like he took off."

Kyle scoffed. "You know he wouldn't do that."

The two men glanced at Angela and found her staring east.

"You got a fix on him?"

"Yes." Angela sighed. "So will you, in just a second."

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

"Let's go help." Kyle moved that way.

*Bang-Bang!*

"That was Neil's gun. He doesn't need backup." Angela didn't draw her weapon. "Come on. We'll give them an honor escort back to camp."

## 11

"How many?"

Neil's expression was split between respect and excited comedown. He'd provided the outer defense, picking off the men who'd tried to get inside and help. "Twenty-eight."

Marc scowled. "That's the same as Angie's group. We're four light."

"From the stories of the mission team, these guys won't ever stop." Neil's excitement was changing into concern.

"There wasn't supposed to be survivors in my old job."

Neil heard the need. "I can be ready with a fresh hunting team in half an hour."

Marc was about to say yes, but they'd run it by Angela first this time. He didn't get the chance.

"We won't follow."

"Don't shoot."

Marc picked out three shadows hiding in the nearby brush.

The hunter who'd spoken slowly stood.

The other two did the same, keeping their hands away from their holsters.

"We don't want any more bloodshed," the hunter promised,

misreading the situation. “We’re done, if you are.”

“I’m not.” Marc’s hands dropped.

*Bang-Bang-Bang!*

“We’re still short one...there!” Neil pointed to the fleeing hunter.

Marc holstered the Colts and unslung his rifle.

He didn’t miss.

Neil slapped him on the shoulder as they turned toward camp.

“Sweet shot.”

“Yes, he does make a fine killer, doesn’t he?” Angela’s cool voice stopped them.

Marc met her glare, fully braced to pay for the choice he’d made. *And I’ll do it again, so be warned.*

Angela sighed. Right after the war, she’d been foolish enough to believe in second chances for everyone. Now, she understood those had to be earned. “If you’re finished here, we’d like to escort your stubborn ass back to where you belong. Under full honors for this and for the animal attack that happened while we were in Little Rock.”

Marc grinned happily as the men with Angela congratulated him and Neil.

Angela was pleased and uneasy at the same time. She would never like killing—not by her hand or someone else’s—but it was a necessary evil in this world. Like Adrian, she was grateful to have men around her who could do the chore.

Deep weariness settled onto Angela’s shoulders. She leaned against Marc’s strength as he led them back into the quiet QZ. Their escorts scattered to do work or rest, leaving them alone.

Marc tugged her closer, flying high on the victories. When Angela’s matted hair brushed his cheek, that inner Marine lunged forward. *She needs a hot shower.*

Marc steered them that way.

Angela was barely awake, but she didn’t protest when he led them toward the campers. Going to bed clean sounded great.

Marc guided her inside and turned back, waving Lee over.

“This shower is off limits.”

Lee caught the vibe and grinned. “About an hour?”

Marc didn’t answer. Need, hot and heavy, was controlling things now. He closed the door. The sound of the lock clicking echoed loudly to his ears.

Angela didn’t notice, busy adjusting the water in the center stall. Her mind was mostly shut down, running on reserve power. Helping Adrian and their wounded men had drained her.

Marc turned on the water in the stall next to her too. He wanted steam.

Angela got a towel and cloth from the shelf and draped them over the door. She stripped her jacket, guns, and boots eagerly.

Behind her, Marc did the same.

*Clink!*

Dog tag...

*Thud!*

Heavy boots hitting the camper floor...

Angela turned in surprise.

Marc pulled his shirt over his head and let it fall to the floor. His eyes smoldered as his hands went to the buckle of his jeans.

Angela didn’t look away from Marc’s body. All those years ago, there had been clothes between them, but he was beautiful to look at.

*Try touching, the witch seduced.*

Angela blinked and remembered to breathe, struggling to think.

Marc took the few steps that brought her in reach.

Angela held still when his hands went to the edge of her shirt.

Marc removed her grimy top, not looking at her skin.

Angela relaxed a bit more, not flinching when he unbuttoned her jeans and gently tugged them down.

Marc faltered when she pulled her leg out, female odors and silken skin brushing his knuckles and nose to trigger a rush of need. Her fingers tangling in his hair was perfect torture. Marc rested his cheek against her leg.

Angela was almost naked before him. “I love you.”

Marc kissed her thigh, lingering to shoot sparks through them both. “You’re the air I breathe.”

It was a powerful moment.

Marc rose to his feet and stepped back as she reached around to unsnap her bra. He held himself under tight control as she lowered the straps and revealed the beautiful breasts he’d dreamed about for years.

Angela pulled her socks off using her feet, jiggling enough to make Marc’s hands clench into fists.

Angela flushed, smiling a bit.

Marc knew his limit. He gently guided her into the steaming stall.

Angela slid under the water with a groan. “Mmm. That feels good.”

Marc leered while she wasn’t watching, memorizing the sight of her bare body. *Sexy! Mine.*

Marc stepped into the stall with her and leaned over to tilt the other running showerhead at himself. Aware that she’d wiped her face enough to stare at him the same way he had her, Marc spent a moment enjoying the heat beating on his shoulders.

Angela watched the water run over his hard body with growing desire. She wanted him; she wanted to feel his hands on her.

*Victory, the witch gloated. Finish it!*

Marc wiped the water from his face and took two rags from the shelf. He wetted and soaped them both before handing one to her. *I’m going to.*

Marc’s wash was quick and routine, while Angela’s was a detailed scrub that took off the grime she had accumulated in Little Rock. The sight of those soapy breasts gave him a deep ache. When she began washing those long legs, Marc swallowed a groan. *I want her so much!*

Angela twitched lightly when Marc began unbraiding her filthy hair. She smiled tolerantly at herself. *Maybe jumpiness is simply a part of who I am now.*

Marc washed the blood and filth from her hair, keeping her



shoulders under the water to prevent her from getting a chill. He used his long fingers to scrub and rub until she was putty in his hands.

Angela groaned. “Nice, Marc.”

Marc smirked eagerly as he rinsed her. *You ain't felt nothing yet, Baby-cakes.*

Angela wasn't picking up thoughts, only the thick, sensual vibes of his naked body standing behind her. It was all so different from anything she'd envisioned.

Marc's hands slid around her as he finished, turning her so they were both under the water.

Angela waited for more. When it didn't come, she allowed herself to relax. Her arms came up to hold him as she rested her cheek against his warm chest.

Marc stood with her patiently, letting the steam do some of the work for him.

Angela snuggled closer, skin perfectly warmed between him and the water. She was pressed along his hip, where the feel of his hardness on her thigh was sensual. Without society's required faces and covers, Angela didn't think she'd ever been so drowsy or comfortable.

*And horny*, she realized. Her nipples were hard rocks against him, the flesh between her legs becoming slick. Did he know?

Marc nodded against the top of her head; he pressed a soft kiss to her damp curls. “I smell it.”

Angela flushed, tensing self-consciously.

“I'm supposed to. It's how I know your body's ready for mine.” Marc took her hand and placed it on that part of him. He immediately sent his hand to do the same for her.

Angela jumped at the quick movement, but Marc gripped her thigh firmly as he slid his thumb over her soft folds in wide circles. With each pass, he narrowed the area until he was gliding through her slickness and brushing the sides of her clit.

Angela closed her eyes, unable to fight the sensations. He wanted to please her. She would let him.

Her hand hadn't moved on him. Marc bucked in her grip.

“Help me here, baby. Let’s make some magic.”

Angela moaned willingly, stroking softly, the way he’d responded to during the moments that had led to this one. The feel of his fingers stuttering on her flesh was incredible. She tightened her grip as lust flared hotter.

Marc shifted them and nudged her back against the wall with her towel draped over it. His thumb flipped the tip of her clit as he stepped between her legs.

Angela arched. “Ooohh…”

Marc kept flipping, gently, hand growing sticky, mind sliding into a sensual daze where only they existed. A quick movement smeared that moisture onto her hand. Marc leaned his head back as she used it to stroke him. *More!*

Lust flowed unblocked; pleasure bonded the couple. Searing waves of light soaked them each time the other groaned or tightened their grip in ecstasy. For this moment, Safe Haven and all its worries were out there. In here, there was only steam and flames.

Marc moved closer, feeling her body tense as she neared the edge. Keeping his fingers in the same rhythm, he positioned himself to be ready for it, then sent his free hand to her rocky nipple.

Angela arched again. “Oh, Marc!”

Marc’s control almost broke.

Angela felt the mood change, but his fingers didn’t stop. She stroked faster, straining. “Marc…I…”

Marc felt the spasm as her orgasm exploded; her legs start to close. He thrust a hand between them, dislodging hers from his stiff flesh. He grabbed her thigh, holding it in place as his other hand continued to extend her waves of pleasure.

Marc eased forward, pushing through her cum to bump against that pulsing heat. He cupped her hips, tilting for the angle as she gasped in surprise. Her small entrance clenched against him and then opened in welcome.

Marc shuddered. No stopping now. He shoved forward.

Angela tried to pull away as he pushed inside. Marc’s hard

hands slid around her wet body, holding her in place. He wanted to stop, to comfort, but the feel of her!

He pulled out and thrust in again, grunting as he slid deeper. *So tight!*

Angela's hands on his shoulders were grips that raked those jagged nails across his skin with each movement. He trembled as he pushed in farther. *Angie!*

Angela caught his ecstasy and faced her fear the same way she had every other challenge since the war. She spread her legs and tried to relax.

Heat like Marc had never felt rushed through him. He lowered his mouth to hers, gasping.

Angela grinned as his pleasure began lighting up her nerve endings again, coming to the final understanding that some discomfort was involved in sex, but the good outweighed the bad. Angela wasn't about to deny him the same pleasure he'd given her. "That was amazing." She was still pulsing. "Your turn."

Marc growled, shoving forward to sink himself all the way in. When she shifted uncomfortably, he used his hands to hold her thighs open so he could get that deep once more.

*Not yet!* the witch protested feverishly. *Not yet!*

Marc couldn't wait; it had been too long. He thrust once more and then jerked out.

Angela watched him, nipples tightening, heat flaring. She'd expected to sleep for a while, but... Marc shuddered, head against her unscarred shoulder as he gasped for air and coated her thighs.

Almost panting from the lack of oxygen, Marc leaned back to look at Angela and found the red eyes of the witch waiting impatiently.

He laughed gruffly. "Whatever...you want."

She pressed a soft kiss to his jaw, loving his rough breathing and twitches. "Just you."

Angela ran a hand along his hip and got a jump from softening flesh. "Does two minutes still apply here?"

"No, but I know how to keep us busy until then." Marc covered her mouth with his and slid back between her long legs.

## Close

### 1

**D**uty pulled Marc from Angela's hot arms just after a pale dawn that still promised rain. No one came to get him up. He'd crashed in the tent with her, but the alarm in his mind brought him to alertness, saying the camp was stirring.

Marc eased off the air mattress and pulled the blanket up to her shoulders as she snuggled into the warm spot he'd left. He stole a minute, watching her sleep, then pulled on his jacket and boots, and quietly zipped up the tent behind him. He hoped everyone would give her a few more hours, but he knew it was unlikely as he spotted Kyle and Daryl nearby.

They didn't speak to him.

Marc went to the mess, understanding those two were her protection now.

Marc spun to verify it and found both guards standing right outside the flap, backs to it and hands on holsters.

He turned around, not slowing as he went by the noisy medical tent. He gathered himself as best he could, forcing his brain to act like nothing was wrong. It was a chore to conduct normal camp business, but there were lists, schedules, instructions, and conversations waiting. Marc's head started thumping long before it was finished.

It was almost an hour before he made it to the QZ. He went to Kenn first, avoiding Adrian's bedside. *His deathbed*, Marc's mind whispered.

Marc knew Adrian wasn't better when John met him at the flap. After quick eye contact with the men, a nod to Anne, and a fast glance at the curtains shielding Adrian, they stepped outside.

“The infection set in and his fever started rising. Around dawn, I put up a partition because he was ranting and tossing.” John dried his hands on his smock. “I also sedated him.”

“Good. Adrian wouldn’t want everyone to see him that way.”

“No.” John sniffed sadly. “I’m hoping the antibiotics will smother the infection, but if not, there’s little else I can do for him.”

Marc’s heart was heavy as he nodded, then headed toward Angela’s center tent. *What will we do without Adrian?*

Marc realized he’d finally caught what was going around. Adrian was the reason they’d all come together. Nothing would be the same if he were taken.

He ignored the part of his heart hoping for the man to die.

His radio crackled. “Mitch is waking up.”

“Copy.” Marc was nearby.

After three full days of drinking at the table from dawn to pass out, Mitch was looking and smelling rough. Every time he’d tried to get up, he had been told to keep drinking, that it was his party.

Marc slid onto the damp bench as their radioman opened bloodshot eyes. “Morning!”

Mitch flinched from the loud word. “Whass?”

Marc motioned Li Sing forward. “How about something to drink? That always helps, right?”

Mitch stared in baleful confusion. He barely remembered passing out here, but Marc’s friendliness was bright in his mind.

Marc tilted the cool beer up and let half of it roll down, controlling his gut.

Mitch again chose the whiskey instead of beer.

The two men spent a quiet moment of silence—one drinking, one thinking. Around them, the camp was already going about morning rituals, while in the QZ, there was almost no movement.

Marc waited for Mitch to become alert and then glassy, for the bloom of roses to come into his cheeks. When he saw those signs, Marc switched from friend to teacher. “Adrian wants you gone. On your own.”

Marc didn’t react to the immediate panic and denials. He told

only the truth. “Kevin has your job now, Mitch. You have no value to the boss anymore.”

The radioman’s head dropped, telling Marc he’d already figured that out for himself. *Good. That makes things easier.* “Matt will stay here.”

Mitch began to cry. “Thank you for giving him another chance!”

Marc blinked. There *was* a real person inside there. It was another insight Marc hadn’t agreed with, but Adrian was able to see inside his people and find what would reach them.

*That’s why he’s the leader. It’s also why he’s damned. You can’t recognize so deep a secret unless you’ve had the same issues. Adrian has been through this before—all of it.*

Marc shook off the eerie thought that followed, *We all have*, and got back to helping Mitch. “He thinks you’ll die out there alone. That’s why no order has come down on you yet. Is that true, Hopkins?”

The whiskey opened Mitch’s mouth. “I survived before. I will now.”

“That’s what I told him.”

Mitch stared in sudden suspicion. “You don’t like me.”

“Like? No. Believe in? That’s different.” Marc leaned forward. “I have a fondness for Matt. I’m going to help Cynthia and Angie straighten him out. I can do the same for you.” Marc sat back. “Or you’re leaving. Today.”

Mitch wanted to take the offer, but he was certain it would be hard. The man inside was shouting, but the alcohol was burning, calling.

“Take your time.” Marc swallowed another long drink of his sweaty beer. “Mmm. I have one or two on average a week, but I always want more.”

Mitch stared, trying to process what that meant.

Marc sighed, aware that he had attention now. He dumped the remaining beer onto the ground near the table. “But I’m a man and *I* make the choices.”

Mitch got the point, but it wasn’t enough.

Marc tossed out one of his own secrets with a sense of relief. “I used to be a drinker, too—a heavy one. It got me in trouble.”

Mitch gaped in surprised. “You’re a alcoholic!”

Marc gave him an embarrassed shrug. “I hate that word, Mitch.”

It made Mitch believe. No one else but a fellow addict would know how dirty that word made them feel. “Me, too.”

Marc stood up, stomach rolling. “Finish that bottle, enjoy it. When it’s gone, either go get a shower and a lot of coffee or say goodbye to your son and get out of this camp. It’s your choice but make it today or I’ll do it for you.”

Marc quickly got out of sight and hearing distance and allowed himself a minute to vomit. His CO had given him a much harsher lesson than the one Mitch was receiving, making him drink from dawn to dawn for three days straight. As a result, he loathed any type of alcohol in the morning. He hadn’t been drunk before dark since right after becoming a Marine.

## 2

Angela ducked through the flap, nodding to Kyle, who looked as bleary as she felt.

“Got a minute?” Marc called from nearby.

“Not really.” Angela kept going. “Walk with me.” They had five men in the medical tent with gunshot wounds, one with a high fever of unknown origin, and three with minor bone breaks. It had been a rough mission. Twenty-four confident, well-armed men had gone into that city with her. The same number had come out, but none of them were confident anymore.

Marc fell in step. “What’s the hurry?”

“Adrian’s awake and calling.”

“Good.” Marc forced himself to sound as if he liked being in charge of Adrian’s camp. “I need some things from you.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t know what to tell people about Conner, for starters.”

Angela went to Kevin, who was on duty over the first truck.

“I need a 24-hour guard put on Matt, and Cynthia sent in here with me. You’ll need to cover the shifts for each person you move around.”

Kevin’s gaze went straight to the new patch of gray showing from the side of her ponytail.

Angela winced. It was noticeable. *Damn.* She gave Kevin a single head shake.

The Eagle understood she didn’t want her man to know the side effects of using so much magic. Wondering if the sharp guy at her side had missed it, Kevin took out the notebook Adrian had given him not long before they’d gone into that cursed city. He wrote as he spoke. “I’ll have it taken care of.”

She sent him a silent request. *How long? I need it before...I need it soon.*

The Eagle immediately vowed to work hard on the mental lessons he was going to be a part of when he reached the next level. “Fifteen minutes.”

Angela felt his silent despair and refused to offer false comfort. “Good.” She went toward the shower camper next.

“Angie.”

She grunted at Marc’s growing concern. “Give me some time to get him settled first. For now, he’s the only survivor from Little Rock that we were able to bring out with us.”

Angela got a chill at seeing Marc write down her words. Why? *Because it means he knows you’re my replacement.*

Angela scowled at Adrian’s weak words in her mind. He sounded bad.

“Are you okay?” Marc was frowning deeply now.

“No, but at least I’m not dying. What else do you need from me?”

“To know how he’s going to be able to be in front of the camp, so I can get it ready.”

“With our help and good, old fashioned drugs,” Angela tried to joke. “I’ve got that much covered.”

“Why am I still in charge of the camp and not Kenn? Isn’t he the XO? *Your* new XO?” Marc hadn’t meant to ask, but he didn’t



take it back.

Angela hedged, not wanting to do this now. She couldn't spare the time to convince Marc. She was still working on herself. "Because Kenn's still in the QZ."

"Not true." Marc kept his protest low as they neared Doug, the guard on the shower. "He could have been cleared and out of here by now. Adrian didn't want that. Why?"

Angela looked at Doug and the arm she'd put in a cast and sling last night. "Are you sure you should be working already?"

"No." Doug's demeanor was one of grief. "Just couldn't stay in there anymore."

Angela understood. "I need some things, and I need some men to assist me for the next few days. Men I can trust, and who can trust me in return. Is that possible?"

"Yes." Doug's tone was satisfied. "All of us." Doug's gaze flicked to Marc briefly.

Angela gave her approval silently. *With care.*

The big man understood. "Adrian told us to follow you, not Kenn, if anything ever happened to him. He said for us to make Kenn fall in line behind you, where he belongs."

Angela had suspected what Adrian was doing, but never that he'd taken it this far. "I didn't know."

"He didn't see the need to upset everyone unless it was needed, but he was adamant that you would protect our lives better because—"

"Because of my gifts," she tried to finish, a bit bitterly.

Doug frowned. "Because you value life the way he does. He even said..." Doug stopped, glance flicking to Marc again. He gave her the rest of it silently; the wolfman wasn't ready to hear it. *He said in another life, you would have been given this duty first, not him, and that he would have been honored to follow you.*

Marc studied them with a feeling of loneliness he hated. Here it was, that only for the boss's ears shit. *The real boss*, his mind whispered.

Marc walked away from them, drawing Angela's attention. "Hey? Don't you still need an answer on Kenn?"

Marc stopped. “I have it now, don’t I? I’m tending the herd until you’re caught up enough to handle both sides of the tape. Kenn’s not even in the picture anymore and no one knows it, not even him.” Marc scowled deeper. “That’s why he set me up in the cage! Adrian needed them all to see that I’m hard enough for this place.”

“Yes.” Angela stiffened her shoulders, doing what she had to. “Say it, Marc.”

“*I’m your XO.*”

“Yes.”

Marc marched toward the big camp, slightly shocked at receiving the position without expecting it. He was also furious at Adrian for giving him this gift when he held such a secret hatred for their leader. “Call me if you need anything, *princess.*”

Angela didn’t have time for his self-righteous anger. The weight settling onto her shoulders was far heavier than any she’d ever carried. She was in charge of Safe Haven. *This is my camp now.*

Angela straightened her sore shoulders, stretching them out to balance the awful load. When she thought she could handle it, she met Doug’s gaze. “I will do everything I can to keep these people alive, and that includes Adrian. I don’t want his place.”

Doug already knew that. “*You’re the boss.*”

Behind Doug, the senior Eagles began stepping out of the shadows, showing their unity. Team leaders and their XOs appeared, giving her their support, their loyalty. Their thoughts rang in her heart and held her up under the weight of the role she’d been given.

*He was right to choose you.*

*We trust you to guard his dream.*

Angela let a single tear trace her cheek. She’d come a long way from Cincinnati.

Angela found Neil waiting nearby. She knew what was coming and tried not to let it bother her that the camp was staring at them in small, nervous groups from the tape.

Neil joined her. “Got a few things for you.”

Angela blew out a tired breath and started to tell him now wasn't good for her, but he didn't pause.

"You'll wear this at all times and keep it by your head during sleep."

Neil helped her put on Adrian's cleaned radio and belt, then handed her a small cigarette box with a snap lid. "This is an alarm. Open it for a smoke, and we know to come quietly."

"I've had the course on protecting him." Angela grunted, heart frozen with pain. "I know what it's for." She shoved the alarm into her back pocket, adjusted the headset, and then keyed the mike. She let go just as fast. "What godawful name did you guys pick?"

Neil's lips twitched in the barest of smirks. "We stuck with his."

Angela snorted without amusement. "Raven to Kyle. Have someone escort Conner to the medical tent."

"Copy."

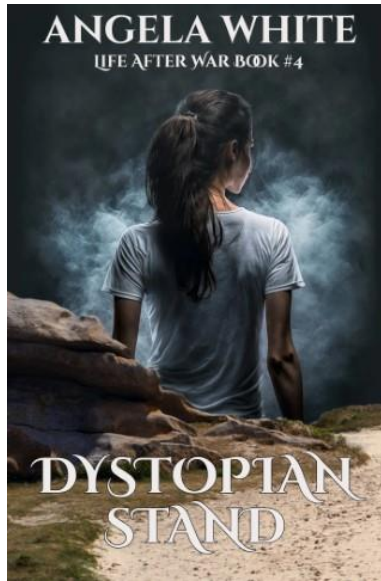
She looked at Neil in annoyance. "Next?"

She reminded him so strongly of Marc on his second day in Safe Haven that Neil smiled despite the heaviness in his heart. "Questions. You provide the answers."

Angela planted her feet firmly, as she'd seen Adrian do so many times. She found the stance almost comfortable. "Hit me. I can take it now."

## **The End of Book 3**

What would you like to do now?



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# Deleted Scenes BK3

## 1

Ignoring the chill, Rick stayed high and still as he spied on the battered brick building. When Marc had spun out of camp with the doctor, Rick had followed in the truck he'd gotten from McCook. That was before the slavers had destroyed it while searching for the radio rigged to lure them there. Cesar's men had killed everyone they found. Rick hadn't come down from his water tower vantage point.

The traitor studied the rest stop and the smoldering carnage through binoculars. Who was in such desperate need of a doctor that Angela's skills couldn't handle it? If it was Adrian, there was still hope despite the carnage.

But it wasn't.

Rick had viewed Marc's expression as he made the walk to the door. The woman was down, and that meant a group of extremely pissed males were in there, eager to kill anything that moved. Still, if Adrian didn't know there was a new threat, he wouldn't rush back, would he?

Rick settled against the slimy tree, being careful not to catch the attention of the Eagles on sniper duty. Once he saw where they were going from here, Rick planned to get busy collecting beans, bags, and, of course, bullets. He was certain Adrian would leave this area as soon as he could. The cicadas were all over the reeking bodies, birds circling below the layers of grit. Even the big ants were carting off gory chunks through the bushes, proving Adrian's carnivore theory. The thought of that happening to Cesar's body made Rick want to cackle maniacally. He didn't, of course. Unlike Cesar, Rick knew how to make himself wait for the right time.

Movement near the far edge of the ugly scene drew Rick's attention to shadowy forms that appeared and then vanished in the fog. A minute of studying told him it was scavengers—the human

kind. The few survivors from Adrian's trap were also lurking near the rest stop. To attack?

Considering their lack of organization in contrast to his careful stillness, they were probably waiting for Adrian's Eagles to be gone so they could clean up the scraps.

Plans quickly reshaped in his mind with little effort on his part. Rick settled in for a snooze. The phone set on vibrate would wake him in a bit, and then he'd get ready to follow the Eagle scouts that were always sent out first. After that, he would come back and talk with the lurking Mexican survivors. He expected to kill at least one of them to prove his point, but they would soon understand that Cesar's replacement was white.

It didn't make the hatred any weaker or change the plans for Safe Haven. Every soul cowering inside its borders would come under slaver control... and there would never be a better time to strike than now, when they thought they'd won.

## 2

Rick was the first one to pick through the remains after the Eagles left. He did it with one hand on his gun. Thanks to Safe Haven, he was very, very good with it.

*You could have been an Eagle*, his powerless witch taunted. *You were supposed to be one of them.*

Rick swallowed the bitterness and allowed it to sink into that ball of rage smoldering in his guts. It wasn't over. Angela's death wouldn't be the only price paid.

Foggy shadows shaped like tall mice drew his attention. The rats were coming.

Rick waited where he was, settled onto the charred hood of Cesar's once golden car to smirk openly at them. His days of hiding were over.

The slavers slowly came toward him. These men had been in the rear of the second convoy, catching up in time to see the slaughter. Helping hadn't been a choice. They'd hidden until it was over, were forced to, Rick guessed. Cesar had run their tanks

dry to chase Adrian.

These dozen men had waited for Adrian to leave, hoping to strip whatever was left and flee south. They had no intentions of going to Cesar's camp or even letting anyone know what had happened...except, there was a witness to be handled. If the white man met up with the others, they would be hunted down. Shirking your duty was unforgivable, even if it meant your life. Rick held a small advantage...unless he was alone. Then, he was dead.

Rick knew. It was in their furtive glances and stiff strides. They'd forgotten who they were dealing with. One reminder might not be enough. The traitor's calm was disarming. "Guess we all got lucky."

Not sure what he wanted, the Mexicans didn't answer. They still hated Rick as much as they always had, but now, there was also a layer of respect. What Safe Haven had done here was the first defeat they'd encountered. These men were reluctant to challenge anyone who had survived there undercover as long as Rick had.

"So...going south from here, I'll bet." Rick jerked a thumb toward the rest stop. "Avoid it when you pick through. He's got it wired. They knew there were survivors."

The deserters swept the shadows, as if expecting to see Adrian and his Eagles rushing toward them.

"Now that they're rollin' again, he'll send half of them to take care of Cesar's camp." Rick's manner grew pointed. "Those who haven't already deserted, anyway."

Tension crackled at his veiled threat, hands tensing, getting set.

Rick slowly stood up and took his smokes from his front pocket. He inhaled, snapped the lighter shut. "Be a shame if Cesar's camp got a call about you guys deserting him when he needed you the most. Kinda goes against the code, you know?"

"They won't survive," sneered one of the men in the rear of the group. "And neither will you."

The Mexican drew in a blur.

Rick was faster.

His bullet tore into the Mexican's throat. He fell forward, hands clasped around the gushing wound.

Rick gestured with the barrel. "Strip him and put it in my share."

The look the slavers exchanged made Rick chortle happily. "You've figured it out. Good. That'll make things go faster. Let's start with this: you go when I say so."

His hard stance dared them to protest the order. He would kill the first one who did.

The shortest of the remaining men stepped forward calmly, but despite his mild manner, Rick knew this was the one among them who had planned to be their leader for the trip back across the border.

"And when will that be, gringo? This land tastes like death."

Rick hoped to surprise them with half-truths and brutal lies. "Two days. Help me with something, and then you can run like the cowards you are. When I pick my crew, none of you will be on it!"

They didn't like that.

Rick felt it coming and fired as the would-be leader drew.

Another body hit the ground with a dull, final thud.

Rick gestured angrily, patience gone. "You will give me what I want!"

None of them was eager to die. The smarter among them began to recognize the new chain of command and bow to it. Rick's skill with the gun made him the boss.

"Two days, then we're gone. You have to sleep."

Rick knew better than to put his gun away until he was sure of control. He delivered that chain with a sneer. "There were other survivors." He gestured arrogantly. "And they joined me *willingly* to avenge Cesar's death. They're waiting one hour for word. After that, they'll make the call. You get one chance, and then you'll be hunted down by your own kind."

Caught by their own cowardice, none of the homesick men considered that he might be bluffing.

Sensing the victory, Rick lowered his gun. "Meet us half a



mile east of the Ellsworth Country Club by nightfall. Don't be late." Rick turned toward his truck, hand still loose, ready. "Without Cesar to hold them here...or me, that camp will hunt you all the way to hell."

The traitor picked up the small bag of treasures he'd looted, swung it over his shoulder before delivering a last parting shot. "Cesar was reckless, and it got these men killed. That will never happen while I lead."

It was enough to begin a tentative bond, and Rick kept moving, hearing them start to scavenge. They would show up and be a bit more willing to work, thanks to the manipulative techniques he'd learned from studying Adrian. By the time the slavers realized he didn't mean a word of it, running wouldn't be an option.

Rick kept his stride sharp and arrogant as he went to his vehicle. *It's what Adrian would have done.*

Rick liked that thought. Yes, it was, and he had a very good idea of what the blond leader would do now too. For a change, that Eagle had no idea trouble was so close. With Angela at death's door, there wouldn't be any warning.

"One mistake, baby," Rick crooned. "It was all I needed."

He moved steadily through the moldy area to prepare for the Mexicans' arrival. They thought he had more men. He would make sure that impression held long enough to finish what Cesar had started.

### 3

The remaining Mexicans were here. His bluff had worked.

Rick waited in the shadows of the horse farm, ignoring the enormous, frost covered skeletons that littered the edges of the fence. Unlike normal frost, this was a layer of frozen white slime that stuck like ice chips.

The traitor let out a deceptively defeated grunt as the small group of hostile men approached.

"You need to know two things. First, we've decided we only want willing men for the rush." Rick's tone said he suspected what

they'd agreed on. "No back-shooting that way."

Observing their reactions, the traitor saw he'd been right.

"The second is that if you at least cover us from the outside and pick off anyone we miss, we'll cut you in for part of Safe Haven's supplies."

There were surprised mutters at the boldness of his plans, and quick glances around the frosty dimness—maybe to verify it wasn't a trap.

Rick shrugged cruelly. "We'll be returning the bodies of Adrian and his Eagles in exchange, but the camp won't know that until it's too late." He could have given the Mexicans time to consider it all, but Rick didn't think Adrian would have, and he acted accordingly. "So, fall in with the plan or get lost. You're not really needed."

"Maybe we will—"

"Kill me and do it yourselves?" Rick sneered "My men are all around us. You may get me, but they'll get *all* of you."

That was something they hadn't been paying any attention to, but now that they were, each of them instantly respected Rick more. There were shadowy forms in trees, a glint of a pistol behind an overturned tractor, the edge of a sombrero showing next to a chicken coop. It was very convincing.

One of the slavers spoke up. "A fair cut?"

Rick snorted, hiding triumph. "Not if you don't take half the risk."

His leer was as cool as the wind. "I'm first man in—biggest share."

Rick let their greed seal their fate.

"I will fight."

"Si!"

"And I."

Rick studied them before agreeing reluctantly. "A provision. If I die during the run, you get nothing. If I'm still alive when it's over, you can split my share."

They all scowled at the unexpected generosity.

"Why would you do that?"

Rick allowed insignificant amounts of the truth to slip out, adding an irresistible lure. “Because Cesar gave me a new life, and they took that, but mostly, because I still want the woman. No one touches her.”

There were evil leers now, and nods. Rick was aware they thought he meant Angela. They didn’t know it was Samantha, always Samantha’s cornflower blue eyes that haunted him.

## Deleted Scene #2BK3

“Why would you tell him that? Make that deal for me?” Jennifer was loud and angry. “Don’t you know I’m broken inside?”

“I don’t pity you.”

“You want to be between my legs.”

Kyle only raised a brow. “And?”

Flushing, Jennifer shook her head, remembering the surprise, the trust that had flowed between them when he’d given her the pistol on her hip. They were out for a walk right now, being stared at, and Jennifer was uneasy. His admission of telling Adrian he wanted to claim her hadn’t helped that feeling.

“I’m offering for a lot of reasons.”

“People should get together because they love each other.” Her cheeks darkened. “Not for lust.”

Kyle smiled. “How do you know that I don’t? I’m offering a lot for a man who only wants sex that he can get from nearly any woman here.” He made sure she understood that wasn’t a bluff. “They’re keeping track—waiting for you to push me away, to prove you’re too young to handle being mine.”

Kyle picked them out subtly, eyes tracing the shape of the one who resembled Jennifer the most.

Jennifer turned slowly, counting how many of the females in his line of sight perked up, hoping to catch his attention. He could have one for every day of the week and none of them would gag in front of him, or fart, or belch, or scratch, or any of the other disgusting things she found herself doing while he was around.

Flustered, Jennifer snorted softly. “God, I’m a cow.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Why, Kyle?”

“Because I can.”

Getting angry, she put her hand on her hip. “Your enemy had me over and over, and I didn’t always fight. I was the slave of a

killer, and I used it to my advantage. In two months, I'm having his kids! Doesn't that mean anything to you?!"

She was on the edge of tears. Kyle lifted a large hand to lightly brush away the first one to roll down her cheek. "All of those things make you a survivor Jenny, one of us." Kyle stepped back as the relief and confusion settled in. "Get to know me. Let me prove I'm one of the good guys."

"What about my babies?" she demanded, not nearly as afraid now as she had been during these negotiations with Cesar. When she'd realized she was going to become a mother, everything had changed.

"You already know. They'll love me."

"*Why* would you do this?"

Kyle's eyes were glowing as he answered. "I get to right a terrible wrong. I get to be a father, something I've always wanted...and I get *you*."

The words were possessive, powerful. Jennifer was shocked to be flattered instead of terrified.

Kyle got them moving again, aware of how many camp gossips were nearby, trying to eavesdrop.

Spotting Marc, Kyle took a chance. "Got time for coffee later, Marc?"

On his way to the first half of the level tests, Marc ran a quick glance over them and shook his head, tone curt. "No."

Kyle didn't need to ask what the problem was. Sighing in resignation, Kyle headed them for the animal area.

Also on his way to watch the tests, Charlie observed the short exchange in surprise. His dad wasn't supporting Kyle?

"Have you figured it out yet?"

Kyle slowed them down. "What?"

Jennifer noticed the way his glance went over her stomach protectively, before resting on her face. "Why you want me."

A muscle twitched in Kyle's jaw. Unlike Cesar, Kyle kept himself cleanshaven. He showered every day and always came to her smelling good. He didn't wear cologne—that amazing smell was natural.

“Yes.”

Jennifer swallowed. “Is it good? The reason?”

Kyle considered. “Yes, and no.”

Sensing she honestly seemed to need an answer, Kyle directed them toward the trees, where Eagles subtly came closer.

Kyle took her hand, slowly getting her used to his touch, the sound of him. “You’re my light, my way to remain good in a world that is smothering me with evil.”

Jennifer wasn’t expecting such a deep answer—she’d assumed it was sex. She stared at him. “You’re so different, even than the other guards.”

Kyle wasn’t sure how she meant that, but her next words cleared it up.

“It’s why I can trust you, I think. You don’t lie to me, even when it’s ugly or wrong.”

Kyle’s thoughts were blazing with secrets. “Just don’t ask me if you can’t take it.”

Jennifer agreed, smiling a bit. “Okay.”

Kyle was aware of the disapproval from those nearby, but he didn’t care.

“Thank you. For getting us out of there.”

Kyle’s heart eased a little more from the knot it had twisted into upon first finding her in that filthy semi. “It’s my honor.”

Sparks flew, reminding Kyle that despite his altruistic appearance, he really did want to be between her legs—more than anything. He glanced at her in anguish. “I will leave you alone, Jenny. But not until you tell me to.”

A heavy sense of loss settled over her young shoulders. She shivered. “I know. And I know they’ll keep you away if I want it, or even...banish you if I say you’re hurting me. The den mothers made sure I know.”

Kyle was firm. “I want you to tell them if I ever do.”

Jennifer snorted. “Like I’d do that after all you’ve done for me, for those kids!”

Kyle refused to allow her to sacrifice herself again, but he also used the moment to judge if there might be any caring yet on her

part. “I mean it, Jen. I’ve seen men change since the war. They get so wrapped up in what they want that they don’t care for other people’s needs. Treating you that way will get me killed.”

Jennifer was unable to resist, fingers going to his arm. “You won’t.” She lowered her head, but not her hand. “I’ll think about it and try to figure out if it’s what I want.”

Kyle knew he should pull away, but her willing touch held him captive. They entered the Vet’s zoo arm-in-arm and smiling.

Jennifer’s memory of the healing was vague, blurred with long moments of pain and short instances of sleep. She knew she’d been burned on the inside and she was grateful. She probably wouldn’t have any other kids, but these would live as long as she kept Kyle close. Angela’s witch had confirmed that he was a man she could trust completely, though he didn’t think of himself that way. Jennifer agreed. The more time she spent with Kyle, the more she realized what a *good* person he actually was.

“Do we report it?”

Zack denied the eager rookie. They were on duty over this area. “Only if he does something wrong. Adrian thinks it’s a good match.”

“It is for her, but what is he getting out of it?”

Zack didn’t argue the general view of the situation. “Absolution right now. Later?” Zack shrugged. “That’s up to her. Maybe happiness, maybe hell. Too soon to say at this point.”

“Women trouble—it’s all over the camp,” Anderson quipped. “Glad I’m not in that mix.”

Zack didn’t respond. The truth *You’re so rude, not even the whores will hook you up, Andy, so don’t stress over it.* probably wouldn’t help in this case.

The extra weight Zack had been carrying around was gone now. He was well liked—high up in the Eagles and gaining ground. Zack was certain his sons were watching, waiting for him to pick a mate too, but Zack wasn’t interested. Despite the way he had mistreated his wife, he’d loved her. His heart wasn’t ready for the pain of picking a replacement.

## Deleted Scene #3 BK3

Angela moaned, head tossing on the damp pillow as the dream called, pulled. She didn't want to go, she wanted to remain here in the fog with Marc, but there wasn't a choice. The power inside that fed from the hope and horror around her was growing.

Letting out a defeated whimper, Angela sank into the grayness. There was something she had to show him, something he had to understand.

Adrian stared over the side of the tall cliff, not worried even though he was ten stories up and the hard stone was slick from the salty sprays of the angry waves below. The ocean roared, seduced as it pulled him closer. If he could just touch it...

"You must be strong."

Angela's concern cut through his daze. Adrian turned in slow motion.

The water crashed onto the rocks below angrily, protesting her interruption, but Adrian appeared not to notice.

"Why is the water only blue going south? Why isn't all of it red?"

Angela smiled, appearing much like an angel with her white pajamas and flowing black curls. "That is your path. Venture into the red, and death has you."

"But where does it go?"

She shrugged, realizing the water was trying to demand Adrian's attention from her, calling to him. "It will never willingly let you cross, and yet, that is the way you must go."

"Is there no place left here?"

She shrugged again, timbre a soft, eerie echo. "That has not been revealed."

"What about the blue? Where does it go?"

"That has not been—"

"I need to know!" he shouted over the water's roar. "I can't keep them alive here!"



Adrian's frustration fed the waves. The sprays crashed harder against the rocks.

*"Go away! Kill you! Never let you pass!"*

He could hear the rage now, the buzzing in his ears. Below them, the red water began lapping the edges of the blue until the entire ocean as far as they could see, was as red. Scarlet drops sprayed them from the crashing waves.

"There's not much time." Angela was fading, floating away from him. "You have to get ready!"

Adrian snapped awake but sank right back down into his dreams as the ocean called and the shadowy form of a sorceress danced for him.

# Place a Review BK3

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 the 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.

# More Of Angela's Books

## **Life After War**

(Post-Apocalyptic Fantasy)

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(Dystopian Adventure Romance)

## **Bone Dust And Beginnings**

(Dystopian Western Quest)

# From The Author BK3

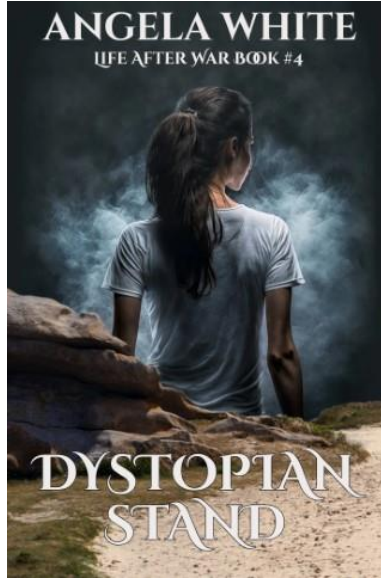
Did you enjoy our journey this time? I'm rather fried at the moment and can only hope I've done it justice. The final choice on that is, as always, up to you. I'll be watching the reviews and comments, and resting up to bring you the next leg of Safe Haven's adventure. The Mountains they've been hoping for (and dreading) are coming next.

Will Adrian live? Most of you already know the answer to that. No worries. Safe Haven still has a need for that troubled leader. So does the new guardian, who can't wait to return the camp to his capable hands. Only, there's a problem with that. The camp likes Angela in charge. So do I.

Tiredly sweeping the darkness for the rest of my Eagles,  
Angela

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

# Book 4



## [Dystopian Stand](#)

### 1

“**R**aven to Kyle. Have someone escort Conner to the medical tent.”

“Copy.”

She looked at Neil in annoyance. “Next?”

She reminded him so strongly of Marc on his second day in Safe Haven that Neil smiled despite the heaviness in his heart. “Questions. You provide the answers.”

Angela planted her feet firmly, as she’d seen Adrian do so many times, and found the stance almost comfortable. “Hit me. I can take it now.”

At the moment, Neil had little doubt. The waves of determination rolling from her were strong enough to bolster his own lagging faith. “First is camp security. Stays doubled?”

“Yes.”

“We’re taking in new arrivals, even though we know they might be assassins?”

“Yes. Myself, Charlie, or Jennifer—in that order—will go through them. If we’re all busy, then they wait.”

Neil hoped that would be a standard now. They couldn’t take any more chances, not with the government coming.

Subtly reading those closest to her, Angela opened a fresh layer of concern. “It won’t be just him, Neil. They know about Conner, and about me. One careless slip or forced conversation, and we’re on their radar for Jennifer and Sam as well.”

“They’ll take all of you!” Neil realized, horrified.

“And then kill the others here. It’s what you do when there’s an outbreak.”

“Otherwise it spreads.”

“Yes, but they don’t understand the dream of freedom doesn’t belong to one man or even an entire camp. It’s a birthright; we’ll never stop fighting.” She glanced around, including the nervously listening Eagles. “They’re not taking anyone from this camp. I’ll die first.”

Neil held out the notebook for her to read the next item on his list.

*Where does she stand on the Gov issue?*

Angela took his pen and quickly scratched two words.

*With Adrian.*

Neil slid the notebook into his pocket and waved Zack over. “He’s your personal shadow for the day. If you don’t see him, even for an instant, trigger your alarm.”

Before she could question, Neil motioned to an Eagle in the trees she couldn’t identify from where they stood.

“That’s Shawn. He’s your sniper today—fresh out of Marc’s class and eager to pull the trigger. If you don’t want them shot, stay out of reach of all new people.”

Angela agreed curtly. “What else?”

“Kevin will go over a couple things, and then you’ll be on your own.”

Kevin immediately asked what many were already wondering. “You’ve chosen Marc as your XO?”

“Adrian gave him that place. I didn’t argue.”

Neil hid a smirk at the prepared answer and gestured for Kevin to continue. He was getting a crash course on being an assistant to someone in the chain of command. Neil and Kyle had gotten their lessons from Kenn and hated every minute of it. Kevin’s would be better, though certainly not easier considering the circumstances.

“We realize you’ve had...”

“I realize,” Neil corrected without the malice that had always layered Kenn’s teaching moments. “The slot comes with the blame, as well as the fame.”

Kevin cleared his throat. “I realize you’ve had almost no time to adjust, but the faster you settle three things, the easier this camp will run for you.”

Angela liked it that she wasn’t the only one who was unsure exactly what to do. She answered reasonably. “You tell me, I’ll argue, and we’ll go from there.”

Kevin blinked. “Uh, yeah. Okay.” He cleared his throat again. “Your chain of command, your rules and punishments, and a meeting where you tell the camp those things.”

Angela raised a brow. “What’s the third?”

Kevin made a face. “That was all three.”

Angela was eager to rise to the challenge she’d been gifted with. “Picking and then telling the camp are on the same ticket. The second is getting the camp to approve my choices. What’s the third?”

Neil was impressed. He and Kyle had thrown that in with no real hopes she’d catch it due to their clever wording. “Third is following through—getting it to all work.”

Kevin frowned. “Do you know how you’re going to get their approval?”

Angela peered toward the medical tent, able to feel Adrian hanging on to a temporary alertness so he could hear her say she had it covered. He was ready to give up.

*Yes, the witch confirmed. He brought Conner here and gave you control. He will not keep fighting without a goal...and those who cannot find hope will not survive.*

It was a mirror of what the witch had told her back in Ohio. Angela glanced at the men waiting nervously for her answer. “No, I don’t.”

She retreated before they could respond. Of course, she knew how to do it. She had to save Adrian’s life, lead Safe Haven to the mountains, and start settling them inside. During that time, she also had to convince the camp to accept the magic in their midst and help fight the government troops that would come.

Kevin’s face was red as he caught up. “Sorry. I didn’t know they were testing you.”

Angela shrugged. “They got you too, rookie.”

“Yeah.” He grunted. “This is all new. I never thought they’d recommend me for this.”

“Recommend? I get a choice?”

“Sure. Neil said you’d probably let Marc know who you prefer for your...” Kevin paused, unsure what place he’d been shoved into.

Angela filled in the title with grave pride. “Personal assistant to the leader of Safe Haven Refugee Camp.”

Kevin’s mind went to places he knew better than to mourn. Those days would come around again. They were working hard on it even now. “I won’t be mad if you let me go for Kyle or Jeremy, or someone who already knows how the inside stuff works.”

From that, Angela understood Kevin had been given the chance at a place all the men would want. He was being rewarded for his steadfast performance in Little Rock, she was sure, but there was a feeling it might be more.

“I mean it. I won’t be mad. I don’t have enough experience for this.”

She grunted. “That makes two of us.” Angela ducked into the medical tent and went to Adrian, ignoring all those observing her. There were only Eagles in this tent, plus John, Anne, and Conner.



The time for hiding what she was, at least with this group, was over.

Angela raised a hand over Adrian's feverish body; the witch scanned him.

*Dying, came the prompt answer. Poison and infection.*

*I have to have Adrian. I can't do this without his guidance.*

*You know the price?*

*I do.*

*And you pay it willingly?*

*Marc will be Charlie's lifeline?*

*Yes. Fathers have the same gifts.*

*And Adrian's right about what he put in the notebook?*

*That...Marc's been lying to himself and everyone else?*

*Yes.*

*Then save Adrian. If the need ever comes, Marc will cover Charlie.*

*As you wish.*

*Now?*

*You haven't recovered enough. Another twelve hours.*

*He may not have that long.*

Adrian didn't wake, but she sensed he wasn't so far under she couldn't reach him. How long would it hold?

Angela turned toward the cooler and got a bottle of water. The more she drank, the faster the chemicals would leave her system. She searched herself briefly over the choice to save Adrian and found a strange chill that hadn't been there before. She should be devastated Marc had lied, but she wasn't. She hadn't been even from the instant she'd read that curtly scribbled paragraph.

*For personal reasons, I've chosen not to tell her what Marc's hiding. When she runs that blue glow through the filters, does she miss the meaning intentionally? I wonder if she hasn't known all along and allowed him to hide it because she knows what an ugly burden it is to be born this way.*

Yes, she did understand the price of power, but that wasn't how it had happened. Until Safe Haven, she hadn't suspected at all. Once here, though, Marc had fit Adrian's leadership profile a

bit too closely to be overlooked by the boss man. That had been her first clue—that Adrian found Marc useful enough to take advice and use him in FND work. Then, she'd noticed Marc's way with the camp women, heard him using it. Moments from their childhood had flashed her to the magic they'd always shared, to how he'd always understood her so well. By the time the glow had happened, it had only been a confirmation that she'd been scared to get before then. That was why she'd never filled up from him; they both would have had to face his lie.

Dribbling water, Angela wiped her mouth and mind clear as John joined her. She had work to do. Speculation and conversation would keep. "Have him ready to go out for evening mess and then get him prepped. Wait as long as you can to call me. I still have drugs in my blood that will interfere."

"Can we get another water truck and two more tents set up? A few of the patients can be switched out to give privacy and space."

Thrilled to be getting a cover story with the request, Angela was able to sound almost cheerful. "You, doctor, can have about anything you want." She hated witnesses.

John grunted, unable to play along. "How about the cure for Cancer?"

Angela viewed him in dismay. "It's back? Already?"

John took off his glasses, rubbing restlessly at the frame. "This is a particularly aggressive type. The chemicals we're absorbing are feeding it, I think."

Angela asked the question that now mattered most to her. "How many people in camp have terminal cancers?"

John didn't meet her observant stare. "More than a dozen, with twice that many suspected."

"Oh, my god!" Was this covered in one of Adrian's notebooks? "That's like... That's..."

"Almost a sixth of them."

Angela turned to stare toward the camp she could hear waking. One in six. There was no way she could help them all.

"He said to tell you not to drown in the bad—to swim through it."

Angela tried to breathe normally. She wasn't drowning in pity—she was furious. How dare fate take yet another cut! John's hand on her arm was a warm comfort she shrugged off. "I'll work on it. You'll have him ready?"

"For both appointments." John slid his glasses on. "You know he'll be groggy and in pain. They might see through his act."

Angela sighed, moving for the flap to relay the doctor's needs to Kevin. "Yes. I also know Adrian would rather be with his people than anywhere else. He'll pull strength from their joy. They won't know, but they'll be the ones who really save him."

Angela ducked out of the medical flap with guilt and anger fighting for room in her heart. They had five men inside with serious gunshot wounds, one with a high fever of unknown origin, and three with minor bone breaks. It had been a rough mission. Twenty-four confident, eager men had gone into that city with her. That number had come out, but none of them were the same.

"What should I do?"

Angela let Cynthia stay close as she left the medical tent. "Get the team—you're in charge on this one. I want the kids' group working the QZ gate. Have them scan every living thing that gets close to this camp. When there's a lull, I want them patrolling the perimeter with the senior Eagles. Make it clear they do as they're told or they return to being camp kids. We want their help, but don't need it should be the undertone."

Cynthia left without looking at Kevin.

"We hear from Kenn yet?" Angela asked.

Kevin made a motion to the perimeter man and got a quick response. "He checked in before dawn, but not since."

"I want him first when he gets home." Angela gave an order without realizing it. "Make sure I'm here for it."

"I will."

Angela spotted Mitch in the coffee line. "That's different."

Kevin filled her in on Mitch, the group fistfight, and gave her an update on Dog. Neil had shoved a paper into his hand while he waited at the medical flap for her.

Angela wanted to spend a few minutes thinking about all three reports, but she couldn't spare the time. The problems with their animal population would also have to wait. "John needs help in here. Go visit these people and tell them it's time they used their skills instead of mooching in fear."

Kevin recorded the names and left. These women had nursing skills, but hadn't told Adrian? Didn't they know they would have been priority members? Kevin was still pondering the weakness fear created as he crossed into the main camp.

Angela spotted Marc across the distance. That was another change she wanted to explore, but she headed for the little mess instead, where Li Sing was directing food into the smaller bins. She needed to study the area for a minute. They had to be careful not to let the camp know how injured Adrian was and that required a good illusion.

"Coffee?"

Angela smiled gratefully as Li Sing hurried to push a steaming mug into her hand.

"Sit, eat."

Angela wasn't going to, but the smell of freshly baked bread caught her nose and pulled her onto the bench. "Just for a minute."

Li Sing went to carve a thick slice.

Angela took her notebook out. Around her, the camp and QZ were slowly waking. It was okay to steal a personal minute—something she hadn't had since before going into Little Rock. Later, it would be impossible.

"Butter?"

Angela tore off a small chunk. "Nope."

The warm bread was perfect, and she found herself sitting quietly instead of viewing the notes and to-do list she'd made. The sound of the camp coming to life was...magical.

"You look like him. Stop it."

Angela didn't answer Kyle's half-joke as he came through the netting around the mini-mess.

He filled a tray with enough food and drinks to outfit a small army, and Angela gave him an approving nod as he slipped right back out. Kyle was off duty now. He'd more than earned the break.

*Crack!*

A number of people flinched at the distant thunder. It was something they hadn't heard in months.

"Yeah, that timing figures." Angela wasn't bitter. They'd known rain was coming. Adrian would have prepared for it.

As if to mock the assumption, a stiff breeze began rustling the papers in her notebook.

Angela pulled the pen from the holder. Her minute was up.

## 2

"How is he?"

Chris jumped at the hostile voice, backing away from the food bowl he'd just set down. "Perfect—like there wasn't even a fight."

Marc scowled. "Maybe there wasn't!"

Chris retreated as Marc came closer. It was easy to guess the man was upset. The vet grabbed for a calming trigger. "How's Adrian?"

Marc growled.

Chris cowered along the tent wall. *Wrong button!*

Dog was instantly alarmed at the waves in the tent. This wasn't the master he'd chosen to serve. This was the Marine—who Dog happened to loathe. The wolf wasn't sure what had occurred after the fight. The last thing he remembered was falling on top of the pile he had already killed, as more of them attacked.

Marc clenched his fists, throwing out a cold warning. "If anyone suspects what I did, you're who I'll talk to about it."

Chris stammered out a promise, but it wasn't enough for Marc. "That includes the chain of command—all of it."

Chris understood, but unlike the Eagles, he wasn't bonded with Adrian that way. In fact, in another world, he and Marc might even have been some semblance of friends. Considering who this hard man was sleeping with, it wouldn't happen now. "They'll

think it wasn't bad, that I took care of it. Keep him in here for a bit to cover."

Satisfied, Marc delivered a last blast from his anger supply. "Mitch told me he saw you skulking around the night of the sinkhole. I'm checking into that when shit settles down around here. Now get out."

Chris fled, shaking with fear and anger. Marc thought he could make changes while Adrian was laid up, did he?

"But he didn't notice he had help." Chris hadn't been able to leave the wolf to suffer. Marc's magic had done wonders, saved the animal, but the vet had also contributed.

Chris hurried toward the animal trailer; mind a furious maze of secrets and scars. "I'll show him. And when I do, she won't want him anymore."

Marc knelt to stroke the wolf, not reacting to Dog's reluctance. The animal would always sense the difference, but Marc had no choice in how he handled the vet. Adrian's traditional methods had barely worked on Chris before. This required sterner measures and he'd had to bring the military man inside forward to do it. Marc didn't like being mean, even to those he mistrusted or didn't care for. It wasn't in his nature.

Dog relaxed as the air of menace faded. He enjoyed the rub Marc was delivering. Dog wished he could speak to Marc, as he did some of the others here. He needed to express his gratitude, but more, to warn Marc.

Marc knew Dog was special. He'd watched Adrian put the wolf to work and been glad. He, too, understood what it meant to be needed, to have a place.

"But not this one." Marc frowned. "The load is too heavy. It'll use us both up."

Dog nudged Marc's hands. He switched ears, wishing he could talk to Dog. He wasn't sure what he'd say, other than to ask if the wolf had another name he preferred. After all these years, 'Dog' felt rude. The big animal was much more than that.

Dog strained, not sure if it could be done, but willing to try...

Marc stilled at the new sensation. He knew what it was—someone inexperienced trying to find a line in... Sudden intuition made him drop his mental walls.

*Take her and run—now.*

Marc drew his gun, even though he connected the deep voice to Dog almost instantly. “Where’s the threat?”

*In the medical tent, about to be healed.*

Marc winced, holstering. “The first time we’ve spoken and that’s what you pick?”

Dog blew out a damp snort. *A warning to get your mate and go, while you still have her. Isn’t that valuable?*

Marc sighed. “It would be, if I didn’t already know.”

Dog glanced up in confusion.

Marc forced the words out. “My time with her is limited. I don’t know why, or what I can do that would possibly change it without hurting all these people, but I know she’ll leave me. At some point, she won’t be satisfied.”

Dog didn’t know what to say, beyond the obvious. *Why would you accept that?*

“I haven’t. I’ll fight for her until I’m dead...or until she says she’s done. When I hear that, I’m gone.”

*Why would you go through so much pain for something you have no hope of keeping?*

“Love sucks like that, Dog. It doesn’t give you a choice.”

Dog considered. *Like the breeding heats.*

Marc was startled into a smile. “Uh, yeah, I guess. You have no choice, right?”

Dog whined lowly. *I’d hurt you, if you got in the way.*

Marc understood. Some things just pulled a male like that.

*What will you do after?*

Marc grunted. “No idea. Find a substitute and hurt, take off and roam this dead world, blow my brains out... It’s hard to say at this point.” Marc shook off the depression. “But for right now, I plan to enjoy every second she gives me. I had no idea what I was missing. I thought I did, but Angie willing is...”

Dog whined again, burying his head under a large paw.

Marc laughed. “Sorry.”

Dog rolled over. *I’ll stay out of sight for a while.*

Marc was reminded of his secret, but Dog already knew what he wanted there too.

*I would never volunteer such information.*

Marc didn’t want to ask, but he had to. “And if she questions you directly on it?”

Dog, who was sure telling Adrian those forbidden things had caused his near-death, made his choice quickly. *I won’t answer in any way that would imply I was healed.*

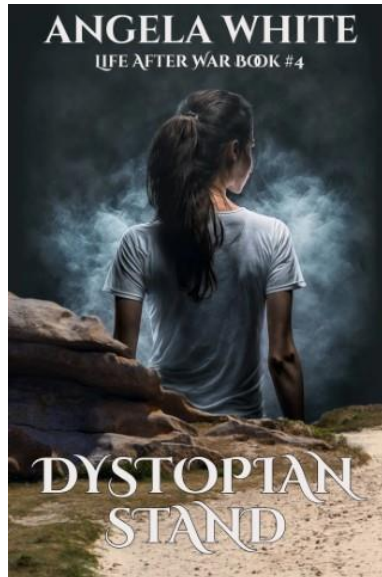
“Can she...” Marc sighed. “Could she pry it out of your mind?”

*She won’t need to. If I refuse to answer, she’ll know it’s to protect someone.*

“She won’t think of me.” Marc hated keeping secrets from her.

*What happens when she finds out?*

Not if, but when. Marc stood up and left the tent without answering.



[Dystopian Stand](#)

Book 4

[The Next Box Set: Books 4-6](#)