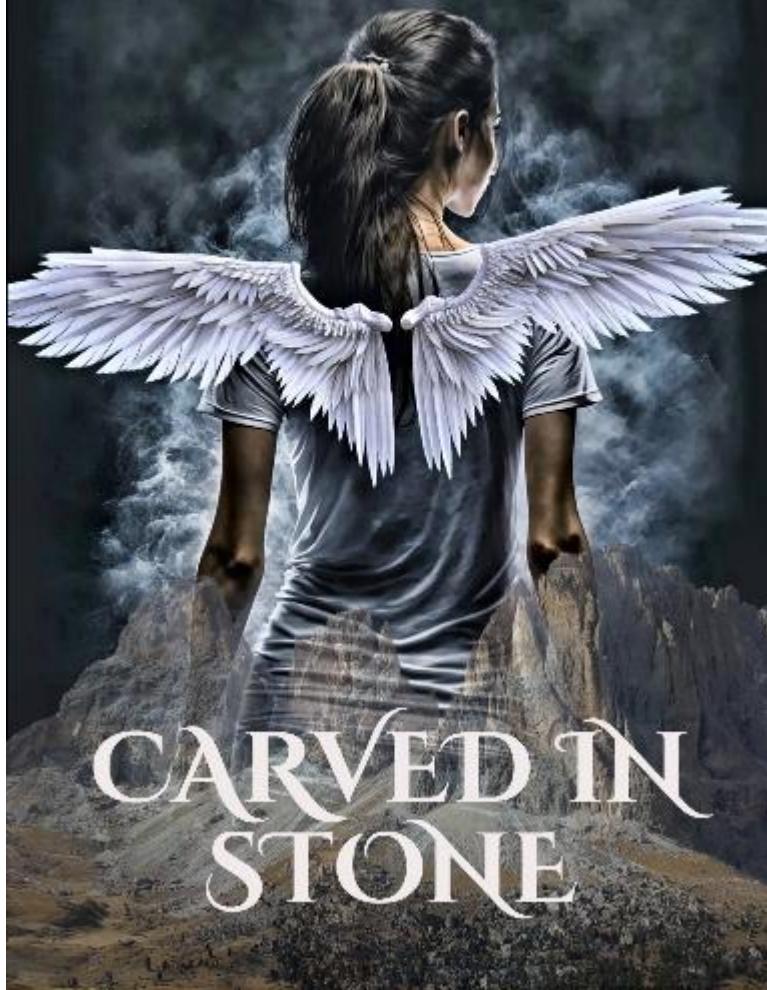


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #6



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

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Life After War Book 6  
**Carved in Stone**  
by  
Angela White

**Title:** Carved in Stone  
Life After War Book 6

**Edition:** 2021

**Length:** 804 pages

**Author:** Angela White

**ISBN#:** 978-1-945927-86-7

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Carved in Stone

Close

# **Settlement**

We came to these mountains in search of safety,  
Desperate for the peace not found below.  
We chose a place among the trees and cliffs,  
And coaxed our herd to grow.

We carved our holes into the ground;  
We took our comforts deep.  
But the earth had little welcome,  
And her anger, have we reaped!

The brief calm vanished;  
The wildcard was outvoted.  
Always in our own blood,  
We end up coated.

The walls cry for souls,  
Again sent out to roam.  
Longing for a peaceful sun,  
Among the relentless stone.

Chapter One

# We're Here

September 5th



1

In the last vehicle of the miles-long convoy, Samantha's shoulders stayed tense. The woman and her child were trouble. Jeremy came to stand by her door during the stop. He started to tap on the window.

Neil shook his head.

A moment later, Samantha let out a sigh of relief. "She said no. We're okay... Wait." Samantha paused. "Damn. She scanned the kid and found something."

"What does that mean?" Neil flashed gestures to fill Jeremy in. He also lowered the heat. Samantha was roasting him.

“Angela’s going to ask us to do something.” Samantha frowned. “It’s as hard as what we’ve left behind.”

Samantha looked at him with the determination he’d come to respect more than her courage. After listening to her tale of facing down Donner, both he and Jeremy had reevaluated their views of her as weaker. Their woman was an Eagle, a hunter, a sniper, and pregnant with twins. It was humbling. “Is it worth it?”

“Only if you kill them all.” Samantha was a bit dazed from the clear connection to the future. Angela was usually the one to experience this; it was terrifying. “If you miss a single target, we’ll be at war again, with *my* kind this time.”

“What are you talking about?”

Samantha knew Angela wouldn’t like it if she told all of the truth, so she settled for somewhere between. “It’s a future problem that you’ll either be asked to handle or overlook. I can’t tell which way she’ll go yet.”

“Can you start from the beginning and speak slowly?” Neil didn’t mean to be snarky. He’d just had enough secret plans to last a lifetime. They’d lost a lot of friends during the war with the government. Thanks to Angela’s plans, they didn’t have any missing members, but everyone was feeling the losses they’d taken, like Crista.

“The woman we picked up asked for sanctuary with Safe Haven. She also asked Angela to send out descendants to do battle with her former captors, who are chasing them. When these other descendants come, they’ll see all our power and we’ll end up at war again. This time, it’ll be with magic instead of guns. The camp will have to run or they’ll be crushed between the two sides. If the new descendants come here, you

have to disobey orders, Neil. Don't let them go and gather their people. I don't think we can win against that."

"They've sent a scouting team?"

"Yes, but don't be fooled. The group Tara is currently describing to the boss is gifted beyond what we have in Safe Haven. Angela can't stand alone against that type of power."

"Alone?"

"These are trained fighters, Neil. The rest of us won't be able to damage them with magic."

"If we kill their scouts, won't they come after us anyway?"

"Angela didn't search that far ahead, so I don't have an answer."

"But you're confident enough to ask me to go against my orders, my training, and my honor?"

Samantha realized she wasn't giving him enough details. "They'll be too far from their own camp to call out. If you take them out, their people may never know we were involved."

"We do know how to make it appear like someone else did it..." Neil snapped his mouth shut. He loved Samantha and he trusted her, but he wouldn't make this choice in mere minutes.

"I'll talk to Angela."

That made Neil feel better; he reached over to hold her hand. He loved having someone to do this with, to share the warm emotions that she'd woken in him.

Samantha swallowed a moan. She couldn't get enough physical pleasure right now. Hunger and sleep were second to sex. Sam assumed it was a hormone thing, but she wasn't about to dig into that. She wanted to enjoy herself. She'd earned it.

Neil smiled knowingly. The heat in the cabin was intense.  
“Shower?”

“Yes, please!”

Neil laughed, gesturing to Jeremy. “I’ll set it up.”

## 2

“She wants me to stay with you.” Shawn frowned in the silent truck when Marc didn’t answer.

Marc swung the big rig gently onto the final road that they needed to take to reach Pigeon Mountain. He understood Angela wanted him to make peace with Shawn and Greg for letting her sacrifice herself. Marc was still cold about it, but she had lived and come back to him, so forgiveness was possible. If she had died, the two men would have also.

Marc sighed, tossing his rage into that strong mental cage he’d built for moments like this. He hadn’t used it upon first joining Safe Haven, but it was as necessary now as it had been on missions. Not paying attention was likely to get people killed. “What’s on her list, besides you and me?”

Shawn had been waiting for Marc’s quiet hatred; he was relieved it wasn’t coming. There hadn’t been another choice. Stopping Angela wasn’t something mortal men could do and Shawn was glad Marc had recognized that fact. “You have point, evenings.”

“Already figured that one.” Marc used a stiff tone to let the man know forgiveness hadn’t actually set in yet. “Next?”

“I need to know your preferences for coffee and food, so I can get your trays right. And what time for your wake up calls?”

Marc looked over in wary confusion. “I get my own food and I use my own alarm. What’s going on?”

“They didn’t tell you.” Shawn’s brows drew together. “Figures I’d be hazed on my first time. I feel like one of the rookies now.”

“Shawn?” Marc drew patience and Shawn’s attention simultaneously. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh!” Shawn reddened a little. “I’m your new personal assistant. You get one when you’re the leader or XO.”

“Kenn didn’t have one.” *I didn’t expect a lackey. I’m forever underestimating her. That has to stop.*

“He had Zack. And good thing, cause no one else was going to volunteer.”

Both men snickered. Kenn had regained a lot of the respect he’d lost, but his mistakes would always follow him. Safe Haven gave a pass on most sins of the past, but the effects of transgressions committed in camp lasted a long time.

“Black and strong for my coffee. The wake up time depends on Angie’s schedule.”

“Cool.” Shawn wrote it down. He’d thought Marc would pick Jax or Quinn for his Man Friday.

“What else?”

“She wants you to supervise the setup with Kenn. She said no one else will catch the small details.”

Marc liked that feeling. “Okay.”

“Great. We have a couple more items and then we can get into the Eagle training she wants outlined.”

Marc was realizing being Angie’s XO would be a lot of work and responsibility. After witnessing how gifted she had become, he’d been having doubts about how much she

actually needed him. If she had a list this size for him now, that meant there was a lot more waiting.

“We also need to gather all the numbers on food, water, fuel, and the other items on my list. She wants this one done by morning if possible. I’ll get people on it as soon as security is in place.”

“Security’s already up.” Marc increased speed as the dust cleared. “She sent a crew last night.”

Shawn mentally scrolled through the people in their convoy. “Kevin’s team?”

“And the ants.”

“That’s great! Camp will be up quick.”

“I want mess two hours after we land and lights out by midnight.” Marc ended Shawn’s thoughts of an easy shift followed by a night of drinking and bullshitting. “All patrols are the dual setup Kenn and I agreed on—half rotating, half stationary.”

“And that was the final thing on her list.” Shawn closed his glossy new notebook. “Sweet.”

Marc went over it a bit mentally, but he kept most of his attention on the road. Now that the wind had settled down and the grit wasn’t blowing, the drop-offs and narrow, winding roads were too obvious. He reduced speed even though it wasn’t a problem for him, not wanting the twitchier drivers to fall behind.

“I want breakfast with her as much as you can arrange it.” Marc decided to test the man. Was Shawn actually his or one of Angie’s endless stooges? “I need to keep track of her eating habits.”

Shawn had been expecting that too. “I’ll try to cover that even when you can’t be there. But I won’t put it in the book.”

“Good.” Time would tell if Shawn could be his or not, but that was a good start. “I’m used to government food, so give me whatever we have the most of each day. Save the best stuff for the camp.”

“Got it.” Shawn understood Marc didn’t want any preferential treatment; he liked that. “We’re all set on her list. We can get into Eagle training now.” Since claiming best gun in camp, Shawn had been looking forward to the next level tests. He had a lot of ideas.

“Actually, I’d like you to talk to Kenn about it first, then come to me. He’ll chop it apart and leave you with what I can use.”

“No problem.” Shawn wasn’t offended. He knew they’d served together before the war and were used to coming up with plans like these.

Marc steered around the decaying top of a tree that had collapsed over part of the lane. He wasn’t spotting signs of people. There was nothing fresh that said humans were here, but he felt them. He was suddenly anxious to be camped so that he could concentrate on his grid. If he sent it out now, his driving might suffer. “From now on, I want someone else behind the wheel for me. For at least a few months.”

“We’re camping for the winter.” Shawn frowned. “Why would you have to leave?”

“I’ll still be going out on supply runs and such.” There was an awkward silence where Marc realized Shawn was holding something back. “Won’t I?”

“Uh, maybe you’d better talk to the boss.”

Marc sighed. "Just tell me."

Shawn unconsciously leaned away. "She doesn't want any of the descendants out of camp, but she especially mentioned leadership. The Chain of Command has been grounded."

### 3

"We came from Canada. We were held there before the war." Tara stared at Angela.

"Where are you from?" Angela studied the woman's clothes. Her blue robe appeared clean for someone who'd been on the road with not even a bag of gear. The black gym shoes on the woman's small feet did have wear-and-tear, however. Angela was betting her heels and ankles matched. Gym shoes were not good for hiking.

"Maine!" Missy blurted before her mother could answer. "We's from Maine."

Tara gaped at Missy.

Angela pushed harder mentally. Missy seemed almost feral, but with time among her own kind and special care, she might recover. "Why did you leave?"

Tara was still stunned, but none of Angela's people were surprised when Missy began answering questions while drawing on the van seat with a red crayon she had taken from the stuffed pocket of her red and blue jumper.

"They took me when the loud bells came. We rode a train!" The little girl dug the crayon into a small tear in the fabric. "They hurt momma."

Angela gently eased the crayon from the child's tight, filthy grip. "Eat this."

The girl grabbed the apple and chomped it into bits that were gobbled as if they were pudding. As she crunched, the pointed ends of her teeth were visible and creepy.

“What’s up with her?” Jennifer didn’t trust these new people. They were hard to read. She was laboring for every glimpse into their minds.

“She’s been in and out of labs since she was born.” Tara twisted her hand into the corner of the robe that covered her clean jeans. “She’s wild. That’s all I ever seem to know.”

“Tell us your story, from the start to now.” Angela glared. *I’m already tired of this.*

Tara shrugged. “I was born in a lab. I didn’t have parents.”

Before any of the other passengers could interrupt with corrections or questions, Angela sent a glare around the vehicle; mouths snapped shut.

“I’m sorry.”

Tara’s meek words drew disapproval and anger, but not from Angela. “Go on.” She settled back to listen, confident Marc had the convoy covered.

*And if he doesn’t, we know who’s bringing up the rear, don’t we?* the witch remarked snidely. Adrian’s betrayals were an open wound to the demon.

*Yes!* Angela flung. *One in front, one in the rear, and my teams in the middle. Now will you please shut up?!*

Stung, the witch vanished.

Angela swept the uneasy witnesses in resignation. “It was a long nine days, for *all* of us.”

Tensions eased a bit, replaced by sympathy. All the fighters in Safe Haven were feeling the effects.

Attention gradually shifted back to Tara, who had clearly picked up a lot of it. Her face stayed red as she explained how she and Missy had come to be here.

“I was created from donors. Descendants created that way don’t have a bond with their biological hosts and are considered not to have parents.”

“To break the ethical lines?” Angela confirmed one of Adrian’s endless theories while the others muttered in disapproval.

“Yes. Descendants who have contact with free parents often have to be forced into corruption. Those who have corrupt parents also swing toward the light, but cannot resist the temptations.”

“And those who have both?” Angela asked, knowing if she didn’t, Jennifer would. “One of each?”

Tara’s gaze went to Missy, who was finished with the apple and staring longingly at the hole she’d widened with her crayon. The child was humming softly. “Most of them go bad. It’s hard not to in the labs, especially if they get them young, but some kids resist. It changes them.”

“And if they were already...damaged?”

“They become like Missy. They hurt her!” Tara dissolved into tears.

Angela gave her full attention to the child. “I’m Angie. Will you tell me what happened?”

“They made me do things.” Missy’s young countenance glazed over with hatred. Evil rose to the surface, demonstrating dangerous intelligence. “When I wouldn’t, they hurt my mommy!”

“Are they coming for you?” Angela leaned forward. “Tell me when!”

Missy arched. Power flooded the cabin.

Jennifer grabbed Tara’s arm before she could interfere. “Let them be. She’ll get the truth from your kid.”

Missy’s eyes turned solid black as she took a clawed grip on Angela’s wrist. “A week is all you have. My daddy rides his death train even now.”

Angela’s mind shuddered at the thought of her time on the train, of being below ground and dependent on Donner.

Missy read the gruesome scene in her mind. “You killed him.”

“Yes.” Angela patted the child’s cold hand. “And I’ll do the same to your demons.”

“For what price?” Flames twined around Missy’s hand to sear Angela’s finger fuzz.

“You must be good!” Angela used her alpha gift to be certain she got through. The child’s physical magic was weak compared to her own. It didn’t hurt. They were the same type of descendant, though. “Corruption isn’t allowed, not even in children.”

“Being good is easy.” Missy smiled. The flames receded until they were gone. “I am good.”

Angela lifted the little girl onto her lap, where they snuggled for a hug that filled the cabin with relief and serenity. None of them had been sure if Missy was corrupt. Her wild mind was too hard to read. Even Jennifer couldn’t make sense of the images she saw in her mind.

“Missy’s father is an alpha,” Tara told them nervously in the silence. “He took us from the complex after the war and

went to Canada. There were others like us there. Her father wanted us to help lead, but everyone was scared of Missy's predictions. She told them a big fire was coming. We didn't realize Major Donner was the one coming to deliver it. He showed up a few months after we got there. The others were thrilled to be getting help from any government, but I hate soldiers. We didn't go to the final meeting." Tara's eyes glazed over as she recalled the nightmare. "We almost didn't escape the flames when Donner's men came for Missy. I killed them and took a truck. It's hidden not far from where you found us."

"How many others escaped?" Angela kept Missy on her lap, letting the child play with the necklace Marc had given her. The pendant twirled and spun, twirled and spun.

"Half a dozen? Her father was with them. We got separated by the river."

"Did he see you?"

"Yes. He's not far away. We can feel him."

"He wants me," Missy stiffened. "He has questions."

"Questions?" Greg had been observing until now, storing thoughts and information as Angela had mentally instructed.

"He wants to know about death." Missy tucked Angela's necklace inside her Eagle Jacket. "He wants to talk to my angel."

"The angel of death?" Jennifer was horrified. Surely, she was misunderstanding. This child couldn't communicate with death... Right?

Angela frowned. "Why does he want to talk to your angel?"

“I told him his death date. He wants to negotiate.” Missy clutched Angela’s wrist. “He hopes to find a way in.”

“To control the angel?” Jennifer wondered if the matching clothes of the people in this van—jeans and jackets—wasn’t allowed where Tara came from. The woman kept eyeing their patches with tiny frowns.

“He thinks he should be the one who decides life and death for the world. He has stolen more lifeforces than any other descendant.” Missy regarded Angela reproachfully. “More than you.”

Angela shuddered. The images Missy was replaying were as bad as the carnage Safe Haven had left in its wake—maybe worse, because the Canadian corpses included elderly and children. Missy’s father appeared capable of killing without remorse. Angela wouldn’t know for sure until he arrived, but as of right now, the tall, sandy blond man in Missy’s memories was on her new list as a priority target. “What’s your father’s name?”

“Jack, but he gets mad when people call him Jackie.” Missy didn’t notice her mother’s flinch, but Angela and the others did. “He likes it when we call him Big Jack Devine.”

There was instant recognition for Angela and Greg.

Jennifer drew the reason from their thoughts. Before Adrian’s banishment, he’d given all the top Eagles a list of people to watch out for. Devine had been at the top of it.

“What about Kranten, Stevens, and Vlad?” Angela remembered all the names that had brought a sense of dread to Adrian.

“They’re with him.” Tara’s voice was a resentful mutter. “Always. If not, I might have been able to kill him by now.

They're his personal defenders and they're sick. They actually *want* to die for him, for the honor." Tara stopped talking as coldness permeated the air.

Angela controlled her anger. *I hate this part of my job, this part of the plans and schemes. I hate feeling so alone.*

"We're pulling up now. Prepare to stop and make your way into the assigned areas. The map is in the glovebox or with your front passenger. I repeat, *drive* to your assigned place. Vehicles left without drivers will be shoved off the side of this cliff."

Angela snorted at Kenn's radio call. He was testy. The com truck was right behind the lead semi. Kenn was scheduled to hand the radio over to Tonya as soon as he parked it in the proper spot. After that, Kenn would stay with Marc and finish his training for these setups. Marc hadn't dealt with this many people in such a limited space yet, but Kenn had at a bowling alley and a few other locations. Marc needed that knowledge under his belt and Kenn needed a better role model than Adrian, even if it was someone he hated.

"The area is already secured, but it will take a few minutes to get the bathrooms set up. Stay out of the way and it'll happen faster." The new people needed these lessons on procedure and Kenn's attitude said to pay attention. It would also remind the soldiers of the old world and let them relax a bit. The soldiers who had chosen to stay in Safe Haven were mostly draftees, but they had spent enough time in awful military care to need a firm hand.

Angela made two gestures and immediately received a disbelieving glare. She didn't change her expectant expression.

Jennifer let out a grunt. “Fine.”

“You’ll tell Kindle?”

“Yes.” Jennifer grunted. “You know how much I adore chatting with the survival queen.”

Angela grinned. “Yes, I do.”

“When?”

“Now would be best.”

Jennifer concentrated on the woman she was coming to consider a rival and future enemy. She didn’t like Kindle one bit. *Hey, killer! Boss wants you on the new arrival.*

Jennifer braced for a nasty response, but didn’t get one at all. She narrowed in on her prey and found the scarred island woman asleep in a rear passenger vehicle. Jennifer wondered what Kindle was dreaming about so deeply that she’d missed Kenn’s arrival announcement. She pried, aware of the dangers and possible bonds that could come from such contact. She entered Kindle’s dream carefully.

*Oh, God!* Jennifer immediately hit the button on her belt. She had to interrupt that. “Kindle to the boss. Report ASAP!”

“Copy...” Kindle’s groggy tone said she’d been nudged awake.

Jennifer thought she also detected a note of gratitude and tried to harden her heart. Kindle’s nightmares matched her own and then surpassed them. Cesar had been a cakewalk compared to what Kindle had suffered, but Jennifer didn’t want to feel sympathy for the island woman—mainly because of Adrian. As long as that former leader had a way in, he would always be able to cause problems. Jennifer resented that. Kyle should have received orders to kill him. Jennifer had voted for it and she wasn’t sorry, though she did understand

Angela's reason for not doing it. Adrian was a library of knowledge, but he was also a traitor and they couldn't forget that, or worse, actually forgive it.

Jennifer peered at her newest duty and found the little girl staring at her fearfully.

"What?" Jennifer was suddenly cold to her bones.

"She lied."

Jennifer felt her stomach drop. "Excuse me?"

Missy opened her mouth to reveal more, but the van became icy. Her head snapped toward Angela.

Angela nodded. "I mean that. In time, it'll be proven, but you have to control yourself. If you're not sure, ask me."

Missy's stubborn expression held for a moment, and then her head dropped and she returned to picking threads from the hole in the seat.

Angela glared at Tara before Jennifer could form the next logical question. "Why doesn't she know the rules yet? How can she communicate so easily if she's wild? What are you lying about?"

Tara paled. "She's not hiding anything! Her gifts are frightening, and she's never been around people who needed her to act normal. In the labs, they kept her wild to promote her powers."

"What gift?" Angela already knew. Little Missy was currently predicting the fates of people in this van, and Angela noted each one. Missy had all of the same gifts that she did, and then a few more, it appeared.

"She sees...events."

“Lots of descendants do. Your group didn’t have a witch?” Like Angela, Greg was positive there was more to this story than what they were being told.

Tara’s head shook. “Not like Missy. She predicts endings, based on shifting choices and changes.”

Tara heard the silence and didn’t think they understood. “She sees your exact death, based on each choice you make.”

Angela gave Jennifer a pointed glance.

Jennifer sighed. “Yes. As soon as we’re set up? Marc won’t like us roaming yet.”

“Now, would be better.”

Jennifer obediently left the vehicle that was already surrounded by the Eagles on Angela’s protection detail. Kyle’s team appeared tense. Jennifer approved. They were safe as long as they remembered there was danger everywhere.

The Eagles on duty around the waiting convoy understood Jennifer was on orders from the boss and didn’t comment. They were all aware of Angela’s rules now, and if she was breaking them, there was a good reason. It did make them nervous, though.

Jennifer smiled at Kyle as she passed by him and got a leer in return. She blushed and continued, aware of the snickering and approving murmurs. The camp had flipped completely since Angela’s rescue. Jennifer suspected her request for another son had traveled throughout the camp, but mostly, it was Kyle and Autumn who were changing minds. Watching him care for her newborn was enough to soften anyone.

Jennifer tapped on the door before entering the noisy living area for the youngest kids. She spent a moment with the happy children, but she didn’t linger to help Peggy get the gum

out of the hair of two of them. Both of those kids were sporting vivid red orbs as they sat with their coloring books. Jennifer wondered if Angela had this issue covered yet. Descendant kids were powerful.

Jennifer made her way to the rear of the camper, where Cynthia was on duty, stepping over toys and pieces of food the kids had scattered “Hey.”

The reporter’s shirt was stained, short, dark hair wild, and posture defeated. She didn’t respond.

Jennifer slid into the sticky booth across from Cynthia, wiping her hand down her jeans. “You okay?”

Cynthia’s attention was on Hilda, who was trying to change a diaper on a squirming mass of hands and hair. “Earlier, we hit a bump while she was doing that and a pile of shit actually floated through the air.” Cynthia glanced down. “I caught it with my hands. Ever had a shit shower? It’s lovely.”

*That explains the smell.* Jennifer frowned. “You don’t sound okay.”

“I’m not.” Cynthia’s tone sharpened. “What does the *boss* want this time?”

“Babysitting.” Jennifer noted the tone that said Cynthia had been pushed over the line and then a bit further.

“I’m doing that.” Cynthia shuddered. “Did you know kids this age never shut up? I swear, the one in the red sweater doesn’t even breathe between babbles.”

Jennifer didn’t snicker. She had sympathy for Cynthia. She didn’t want to make things worse, even accidentally.

“Who is it?” Cynthia had hoped to work on an outline for the first edition of her newspaper, but that idea had been given up hours ago. “And why me?”

“The new people we picked up on the way. Mother and daughter. You have duty over the daughter.”

“Great.” Cynthia sighed. “Who has the mother?”

Jennifer’s voice lowered. “Kendle.”

“Must be trouble.” Cynthia’s face darkened as she swept the kids. “Thank God. Let’s go.”

“I was summoned?” Kindle was near the door as Cynthia and Jennifer came from the noisy camper.

“Boss wants you on the new arrival.” Jennifer refused to stare at Kindle’s scars. She now knew the source of them and thought Kindle was incredibly strong to have survived. It didn’t make her like the island woman, however. It would take more than pity to accomplish that.

“They must be...special.” Kindle couldn’t find any other reason for Angela assigning her to watch someone. She was dangerous. So must her ward be.

“She and her daughter are descendants. Cyn here, has the kid.”

“Sweet.” Kindle felt no sympathy for the reporter’s pregnancy problems. “Where are they?”

“With the boss.” Jennifer led the way. “She doesn’t believe most of their story. Store details, both of you. She’ll ask for them later.”

It should have felt odd to be taking orders from someone so young, but Jennifer had proven herself deadly and it showed, even in her stride. She no longer appeared scared of

the world or those in it. Only the people she loved could be used against her now and she guarded them fiercely.

“Got a short note here, folks. Some good news.” Kenn’s voice echoed across the stopped convoy. “The Eagles need new rookies. Everyone who fought in the last month is eligible! The signup sheet is at the com truck. Stop by at any point today, *after* we’re set up.”

The van door slid open as the trio of women arrived; the little girl barreled out of Angela’s arms with a wild shout. She leapt straight at Kindle, who was forced to catch the sweaty child or fall.

Kindle staggered, but kept them upright.

Missy cackled happily at the juggling. “Like you! Fun!”

Kindle’s heart melted despite her cold exterior. Her scars usually drew the opposite reaction from children. It was another part of her life that Ethan had stolen. She couldn’t imagine ever having her own now.

“You’re gonna watch over me?”

Kindle smiled at the girl. They had the exact same shade of hair. “Yeah. I could kill for you if I had to.”

Becoming aware of the silence, Kindle shifted the now humming girl to her hip and growled at the gawking members around them. She hadn’t readjusted to the fame yet.

Jennifer and Cynthia cackled.

“Guess we’re doing a switch.” Angela was glad the more observant, experienced members weren’t around. Marc would see through this in about ten seconds. She would have to keep him busier than she’d planned. “Kindle and Cynthia will be Missy’s settling partners for now. Kindle has nights.”

“What the hell did I do to you?!” Cynthia didn’t like Kendle anymore than she did kids.

Angela ignored the tone. “Jennifer will assist Tara until this evening, and then someone else will take over that post.”

All the females swallowed their protests as Angela left.

Angela went to Shane.

He took his notebook out as she joined him. The expression she wore said there was work waiting.

“Take Jax to the lumber yard we rolled by. Bring back everything on this list. We’ll have a dumpsite cleared for it. Keep good records of what you collect.”

Shane took the paper as he peered at the trees around them, then the jagged cliffs above. “Lumber?”

“We’re not lumberjacks.” Angela zipped her jacket. “We’ll use the piles of sorted, precut wood in the stores that are waiting on an industrious person to gather them. It leaves the trees around our base for winter if we need them.”

“Which means we won’t have to travel as far in the snow... Good idea!”

“It also gives us time to figure out how to harvest these trees without getting hurt or taking too many.” Marc joined them. He pressed a quick kiss to Angela’s warm cheek. “It was a terrific idea.”

“When should we go?” Shane wondered if Angela was sleeping yet. The bags under her eyes hadn’t faded from her time with Donner yet. Many of the Eagles were watching for signs that she needed a break. They all knew losing the baby would have bad effects on Safe Haven.

Marc knew to let Angela answer that.

“By dawn. Get rolling on it now. You don’t need to wait for Kenn’s clearance call.”

Shane was gone an instant later, suddenly excited. A lumberyard would have more than lumber. This was an opportunity for their team to make a big score and add early points.

Shane spotted Nancy and found himself hoping she joined the Eagles soon. If she could be one of them, he would show his interest. Until then, it was expected that the male Eagles would take strong partners who could fight alongside them. Shane agreed. When Nancy joined, he would make his move, but not a minute before that. He refused to carry anyone, including his woman.

“They’re switching shifts without Dog here to tell them it’s time.”

Marc followed Angela’s line of sight to the ants on the perimeter. They were neatly changing positions, and then patiently waiting around for the feeding that now came after mess. The ants were still getting scraps, and a portion of actual supplies. Angela had promised them protection and care, and she was honoring her deal. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good. And you?”

Marc pinned her with a dark glare at the too bright voice. “Liar.”

“I’m a little tired, a little hungry, and distracted.” She put a hand on his big arm and let her wall down.

In her mind was the huge construction project he’d glimpsed in Jennifer’s thoughts. Only this was ten times the size, with shiny gold threads stacking into a starless night. It

was a massive undertaking. He surveyed the rafters and beams of light. “What is it?”

“The future. Ours, theirs, and those not yet born to us.”

“When will it be finished?” Marc didn’t understand whatever it was she wanted him to.

“It’s complete when we run out of branches.” Angela was aware of his confusion, but he wouldn’t like the detailed explanation of death and the end of humanity. “When nothing else fits, then we’re done.”

Marc was afraid to ask how many years that might take.

Angela didn’t tell him it was more like centuries. These plans would be inherited and added to for generations to come. *If we survive*, she thought, remembering the last dream of being overrun by victims of a disaster. She assumed it was from Yellowstone, but there had been a clear sense of missing pieces.

Angela pressed a soft peck to his cheek, mindful of his sore mouth. His chipped tooth would be their student dentist’s first challenge, but not until after they were in the caves and had the medical bay set up. Marc had insisted on waiting. Angela was sure he didn’t want to be the student’s first live patient.

“Can I ask you something, boss lady?”

*Uh-oh.* Marc’s tone said he wasn’t happy. “What’s up?”

“Do you know how old I am?”

Angela pretended to have to count it. “Uh, let’s see now. You were born before me...”

“Angela.”

She rotated slowly to find him standing with his hands resting on his guns, and afternoon sun melting over him like a honey topping. Angela blinked. *Hungry again, are you?*

*Yes, momma.*

Angela gasped at the clear communication, a bit stunned.  
*What am I?*

Marc caught enough of the exchange to be concerned, but Angela's expression said she wasn't ready to deal with this newest horror yet. Neither was he. Marc steered them toward his truck, where he had a bag of snacks stashed. "Do you know how long it's been since I was grounded?"

Angela forced a snicker, suddenly terrified. "A week or so?"

"I'd like to know why the chain of command is grounded. What new hell am I preparing us for, that you don't want me out of camp?"

Angela hid the wince. "I'm ensuring the future, Marc. Like I'm always doing these days. The people here need to know how strong they are."

"I don't understand."

"I'd rather not go into details right now." Angela was spotting too many people who might pick up on the conversation.

Marc shoved into her thoughts. *Tell me.*

Angela fought her first reaction to vomit and let him remain despite the upset stomach and the migraine. In here, they were alone. *We have to let the rest of the camp have a chance to be shepherds, but especially the ones who are pregnant or fathering a child now. We need them to step up while they can. In a few months, most of them won't be able to*

*and it will make them feel helpless. Adrian made an amazing amount of progress with the stronger people here, but the weaker people have as much to contribute.*

*And they won't?*

*Not if they don't have a taste of the glory that goes with the gore. Let some of the backburner people handle some of these things, so when they're laid up or on minor duties again, they don't forget how powerful they are. We can't survive if the camp backsides into letting us care for them. They have to be able to care for themselves.*

Marc agreed with that, but he was positive there was more to it by the way her answers were so vague. Angela was a detail-oriented leader and she usually had plans already made by the time she shared even a hint of what was coming. Which meant she needed him to be caught off guard by whatever it was. Otherwise, she would tell him.

“Yes, I would. You’re so smart. I love that.”

Marc grinned. “Right back at ya, Baby-cakes.”

Marc continued his rounds of the stopped convoy, not worried about missing the lesson on setups as he sent his mental grid out to search around them. Kenn had it covered and Marc wanted to know something he wasn’t comfortable asking anyone about, including the Indians who had chosen to stay. He wanted to know if their traitor was following and who was on duty in the rear. He had to make sure those sentries knew how close Adrian could come before they were required to shoot him. Anyone who failed to pull the trigger would wish that they hadn’t hesitated.

Angela waved at the vet as he came from the livestock truck to complain about the wait, dingy white coat fluttering out behind him. “We’re clearing the pet store in town. Go along?”

Completely distracted, Chris was elated to be given work; he stared adoringly. “Yes!”

“Good.” Angela hadn’t forgotten that he’d tracked her down and helped with the rescue. “Turn the animals over to someone you trust and meet a team by the livestock trailers at dawn.”

Chris rushed off before he could do or say anything stupid, mind eased. *This is the start of her using me! My gifts aren’t being overlooked.*

“You have plans for him?” Greg was sticking close as they traveled toward the front gates. One of the Eagles would drive her vehicle when the line finally advanced. Right now, the supply trucks were being guided into place. Angela had given them a new map for Safe Haven, and while Kevin’s team had outlined it with red tape, the ease of setups had been lost. Not that it mattered. They were here for a lengthy stay.

Angela wasn’t concerned over the delay. “I have plans for everyone.” She swept the site, approving of the QZ going up first. The new people hadn’t all been cleared yet, but she didn’t want them out at the same time anyway.

Angela stopped near the gate, where a small jam was blocking the next rig from coming through. She gestured for Logan, the driver of the stuck truck, to switch with Ray, who was on gate duty.

Logan flushed but didn't argue. He hadn't learned to handle the big rigs yet.

Angela pointed toward the distant shape of buildings that were a part of the Pigeon Mountain resort. "I need that area reconned and then the pet store stripped. Tell Billy I'm sending people to him at dawn. He needs to pay special attention to pools and aquariums for fish or plants. Jerry Jones appears to be our resident fisherman. Take him along and have him put his knowledge where his mouth is. We'll have a dumpsite waiting, but tell Billy to keep good records of what they collect."

Greg wrote it down, then signaled for a rookie to come over and carry the order, instead of going himself. She had snipers and men within reach, but Marc wanted someone at her side at all times.

Quinn saw Angela's expression as she approached and got his notebook out. He would much rather be on a run than taking notes, but at least he would be working. He'd been XO on Marc's team, but now, no one knew what was going on with the tests. Many of the teams had lost someone.

"Take Scott and Josh, and get up on this mountain. You're searching for a clear, or at least flat area, to set a snow gathering operation. Gear for it is in trucks four and ten. When you find the right area, mark it, leave three sniper kits, and then get home for a hot meal and a good night's rest."

Quinn regarded the jagged peaks and winding road that traveled to a nauseating ledge over a hundred feet up. After that, it disappeared from view. Excitement flared. "You got it!" Quinn left his post to his partner and went to gather the other men.

“You have too many irons in the fire.” Peggy fell in step as Angela and Greg entered the gates. “You need to rest.”

“Tell Hilda I’ll knock out six hours a day, no matter what, once we’re inside.”

Peggy left it alone, recognizing Angela’s short temper in that tone. “I came because Doug said Adrian knows how to help the cancer patients. I want to go find out if that’s true.”

“Permission granted.” Angela had been expecting it. “Report directly to me afterwards.”

Peggy left; two other members hurried forward for instructions and information. As Angela walked, a small group of followers formed, all wanting a minute with the boss that was given as patiently as she could. These people needed this. It reminded them of the beginning, of Adrian leading them. Angela also needed it. These moments were a reminder of a time when she’d almost felt like a whole person. With Adrian gone, so was some of her joy at being here.

## 5

“Rookie Eagle signups are still open, with about a quarter of the slots already filled.” Kenn’s voice echoed calmly across the settling camp. “Don’t forget to stop by and add your name to the list. We need you.”

Marc approved of Angela providing new meat for the Eagles. He settled onto the bed of a truck in the rear of the convoy, happy with the responses he’d received from the guards back here. None of them had forgiven their traitor.

Marc concentrated on a thinning trail of dust behind the convoy. He sent his mental grid out and found his target within

a mile. Adrian and his new faction of soldiers were settling in on a nearby ridge that had a clear view of Safe Haven. He would be able to use his binoculars to spy on them, on Angela.

Marc had other plans. He'd been busy diving through the muck for the old scrolls and he'd discovered several things he didn't care for. One of them was that he'd been lied to—again—about the bond Angie and Adrian now shared. He'd also learned how to access a new hall of doors, but he hadn't had time to explore them yet. With Safe Haven camping for a while, that would change.

Marc made a quick note in his book, then went back to scanning the area. The road going through Safe Haven had two branch-offs, one of which Adrian had taken to get to his site. Marc made another note. The sky was gritty. Samantha had already warned them of a coming storm. They would have to check out the cliffs for a flood path.

Marc stayed in his position, making observations until he felt Adrian glaring at him. That sensation of hatred was unmistakable now, equaling his own loathing and bitterness. While Adrian glowered, Marc gestured to a nearby guard, using Adrian's Eagle code. *I want a shooting area set up right here. Have them aim where he's standing.* Marc pointed at Adrian.

Whitney chuckled and wrote it down. People would line up all day to take turns, especially his own teammates. With Kevin gone, no one knew if they even had a team anymore and the consensus was that Adrian was to blame.

Adrian also copied the order, as he was meant to. He resignedly stormed to his vehicle to pick a new location. Staying close wasn't going to be easy.

Marc waited for the trail of dust that said Adrian was moving his site, gloating a bit as the man pulled out with annoyed gestures. Satisfied, Marc made his way back to the front of the long convoy to join his setup lesson with Kenn.

## Chapter Two

# Settlement



### 1

**T**he ugliness has seeped into my soul. For a small while, I thought I would be able to tolerate this level of guilt and regret, but I will carry it forever and that's a long time. Only death may provide a relief, and even that isn't certain. The only thing I do know is that I have to find a way to shore up my soul. I have to find the light again. If I don't, I can't lead.

Angela didn't reread her notes as she used to do with her entries in Adrian's notebooks, closing the cover instead. She had wondered about his state of mind in some places as she went through them after taking over leadership. Now, she understood how Adrian's pain could feel so real from mere words. He bled onto the paper, so that his people wouldn't see

his weaknesses. She was now doing the same emotional control and she dreaded the day she would hand these books to a successor. Knowing someone else would read her entries and be horrified was ugly, but it had to happen. Without those important notes, the newcomer would have no idea how hard and serious this job was. They had to respect it, to be able to do it.

Angela left her tent and stayed there for a moment, chin tilted in concentration.

Those around to witness it assumed she was communicating with someone, but Angela was scouring the land around them for trouble. She didn't send her witch far; confident the problems were waiting, as they had been all along. She just needed to be sure that none of those coming battles had advanced further than anticipated during the night.

"Things okay?"

Angela ignored Tonya.

The redhead waited without resentment, still missing being able to twirl her curls while she was idling. She was working on body language and figuring out timing. It was a struggle for her some days, and part of why she'd been lurking in the dawn fog to have a moment alone with the boss.

Angela slowly brought the witch in, aware that her demon needed to sleep longer. The witch had expended an enormous amount of energy over the last ten days. *You've earned it. Rest.*

The witch settled obediently into her place and fell into a thin slumber.

Angela regarded Tonya. "Are you sure? You can't go back on this."

“Yes.” Dreading the disappointment, Tonya made eye contact, positive it was required. “Please take me off your team.”

“I could never be disappointed in you. You’ve come a long way.” Angela smiled softly, shoving out a blast of light that enveloped the former gold digger. “I couldn’t be prouder.”

“Figures you’d say something like that.” Tonya wiped at her sudden tears in annoyance. “Didn’t you see my makeup?”

Angela chuckled. “Cute.”

Tonya’s shoulders slumped; her hands dropped to her sides. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“Cute and a bit lost?”

“You could say that. I know I can’t do what you guys do. I panicked in the final chaos, and I hate the blood and dirt. But I’m an Eagle and I...” Tonya stopped, becoming aware of the whine in her tone. She didn’t want the boss to know that part of her still existed. She was working daily to kill it. “I’m adjusting.”

Angela pointed to where people were slowly staggering toward the mess that would have coffee and toast going, even though the bell hadn’t rung yet. “Go have some breakfast and then draft a few hands to put the pharmacy tent in the front row Kenn will be marking off. After that, you’re on call for the pharmacy and radio during both dayshifts.”

Tonya knew from Kenn’s words that the front row was reserved for the important tents. Her stomach flipped. “Because we’re going to need it, right?”

Angela stared, impressed at Tonya’s intelligence. She’d honestly expected gushing gratitude, not eerie insight.

Tonya snorted and then let it go in favor of the answer.  
“Well?”

“Yes.” Angela didn’t have to force the approval this time. “Stock it heavy out of each supply load that comes in. I’m giving you and the doctor first dibs.” Angela evaluated the woman again and came up with a better summary than she’d hoped for when she’d suggested Kenn try to reform her. “I have work for you. Quiet work.”

It was a magic moment for Tonya. She had always been on the outs with authority, no matter the location or leader, but now, she was one of them.

“I can give that gushing gratitude now, if you still want it.” Tonya was honored to be on the inside of Angela’s plans. That was part of why she’d hesitated to resign. She liked being in on things, and she loved being an Eagle.

Not letting Tonya know that she had just shown signs of an advancing gift, Angela chortled. “Thanks, but no.”

“Adrian loved it.”

Angela’s countenance twisted into something Tonya assumed was pain.

“I actually hate it. But it’s what Adrian trained you guys to give and I have to make that type of change slowly. Old habits are hard to break.”

“Don’t I know it.” Tonya sighed. “But it is possible. Kenn and I are living proof of that.”

“Yes, you are, and I love you for it. Walk with me. We’ll go over some things.”

Tonya stayed close as Angela listed the items she wanted available at the pharmacy at all times, not needing to write it down. The issues Angela wanted covered came with an

outbreak. Of what, didn't matter. People needed fluids, vitamins, fever remedies, and stomach calmatives. *Along with toilet paper.* Tonya's mind switched into list mode; she took her notebook out. The items were too important to take the chance on missing anything.

Angela finally left Tonya in line for a tray, still scribbling. She would indeed be removing Tonya from her team, but everyone would know it was because she'd been asked to. Tonya hadn't done anything wrong this time. In fact, the choice she had made would ease more suffering than her gun could have reached and Angela intended to reward her for it.

## 2

Marc sensed the Indian behind him and didn't react, though he wasn't sure of the intent. Most of the natives were gone now, with only one full group still here and another mixed handful who'd chosen to stay. Most of the braves had been eager to return to their camps and proclaim victory. Others had been concerned over the ash storms and tremors. Marc was confident all of those people would go south. It was another sign of his connection with Angela and of his gifts working for him, but Marc's brain took it further than either of them had. His heart sank. "Everyone we've found is fleeing! Why didn't I see that? The traveling store people said west, then south. The deer herds were moving north. Max and Lenore had come south. If we found them on the road, they were leaving."

“As are we, my friend,” Natoli stated from behind him. “Our stories did not end with the arrival of the Ghost and his final battle.”

Marc slowly turned around, dreading it. “Tell me.”

“It is the end of days. We must go south, to the jungles, where there is still safe hunting and good ground to farm. This earth is splitting, shifting, and only the north or south is safe.” Natoli held out a small hide pouch. “Take this, my friend, as our pledge of peace with the white man.”

Marc took the intricately carved pipe, recognizing some of the symbols. “This is powerful.”

“Yes. It calls to those far away.” Natoli extended his arm. “Until we meet again, my friend, my brother.”

Marc clasped arms with him and then the Indian vanished into the trees as if he’d never been there.

*I want to go with him.* Marc swallowed that pain.

“You can.”

Marc found Angela nearby. Her tone was even, but her eyes were showing more emotions than Marc had thought one personal capable of feeling. He stalled. “What?”

“Go with them.”

“No.”

“I know you’d be hap—”

“Stop.”

Angela did. She knew he would go with her to the ends of the earth, but she needed his light and he had to be happy to provide that.

“I am. I’ll adjust.”

“You’ll loathe every second you’re away,” she intoned, falling into that mental state he hated listening to. “And you may not return at all.”

That was a blow he wasn’t prepared for.

Angela went to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. “If you stay here, you will survive. I’ve seen it.”

“I love you.” Marc held her tightly and forced his mind to shut that terrifying door. “I’ll never leave you.”

Angela swallowed her tears. They would take the time fate gave them and be grateful for it. “Thank you.”

Marc sealed their lips, and then tugged her toward the mess. “Come on, let’s get you fed so *my* stomach will settle down.”

### 3

“What do you feel like doing this evening?”

Tracy scowled at Charlie’s cheerful tone. “Nothing.”

Charlie knew she was having her period; he held out the chocolate bar he’d traded from Doug.

Tracy accepted it with the first smile since before the chaos.

He took a seat next to her and waited for the candy to vanish.

Tracy enjoyed the treat and felt some of her emotions come under control. It was amazing how chocolate could do that.

“I’d like to shoot better.”

Tracy looked over at him, licking the gooey sweet from her fingers. “What?”

Charlie had frozen at the sight of her with a finger in her mouth and she giggled. His innocence was refreshing.

“Huh... Hi’d....” Charlie shut his eyes and took a deep breath. “I’d like to be better with my gun. Feel like helping?”

Tracy considered it. Shooting something didn’t sound bad.

“Sweet!” Charlie answered her thought, not giving her time to change her mind. “Hot chocolate and a steak sandwich at the mess on the way?”

“Okay...” Tracy wanted to hide in her tent and try to find the peace she’d known before, but even she knew that couldn’t be found inside these canvas walls.

“Here.” Charlie handed her the Eagle jacket she hadn’t worn in days. “It’s chilly.”

Tracy slid into the leather with a blast of pain and a wave of determination. “I can do this.”

Charlie gently put an arm around her shoulders. “We’ll do it together. When you’ve had enough, I’ll get you back here in less than a minute.”

“You promise?” She was suddenly terrified of being out there around people.

“You know it.” Charlie steered them for the flap. “Let’s live a little and see how it goes, huh?”

Tracy allowed him to lead her from her den, hoping he would always be as considerate as he was being right now. A woman wouldn’t even glance at another guy after this type of attention. It showed a soul that was deep enough to drown in and to Tracy, that was ideal. Shallow men were the ones who hurt people. Deep men built and created. They had respect for their power and didn’t use it against those who were weaker. *But when the real man inside him emerges...*

“This is the real me,” Charlie murmured as they stepped under the mess canopy. “I could have gone that other way, but I wanted you more than I wanted to be wild. You saved me.”

Tracy gasped at the pain of that honor.

“Come on.” Charlie tugged her into his arms. “Let’s get you some more chocolate.”

Tracy snickered through her tears and leaned her head against his. “Thank you.”

Charlie wasn’t certain on the correct reply, so he went with what felt right. He kissed her softly and hugged her. “It’s my honor.”

“Well, isn’t that sweet.”

The center table stared in surprise at Candy’s bitter sneer.

“Are you okay?” Theo and Candy had come by to drop off some papers, but Angela wasn’t here yet.

“No.” Candy stared at the couple. “I’m not sure why they can touch and kiss in public. We have age rules here.”

Charlie glowered over Tracy’s shoulder. “Just because you’ve been thinking about Conner, that doesn’t mean we’re all bad, you know.”

Candy flushed guiltily. “I have not!”

Theo studied her red face, disappointed. He’d thought maybe Candy had a thing for him, but if she was daydreaming about Adrian’s demon seed, then that wasn’t the case. Theo spun away from the table and vanished into the crowd forming around Li Sing’s grill.

“Why did you do that?” Candy pointed. “You know I wasn’t thinking about Conner in a good way!”

Charlie shrugged, aware that Tracy had tensed under his arm as if she was about to flee. “You should have minded your own business and then I would have done the same.”

“Asshole!” Candy stormed off to track Theo down and explain.

“Maybe I am.” Charlie shrugged as the eating people snickered. “But I won, so who cares.” He steered Tracy straight for that center table and settled her between Becky and Samantha.

Samantha understood Tracy wasn’t out and about of her own free will. “I have some new magazines and a bit of snacks stashed.” She included all of the females at the double table. “Who’s up for a potluck, gab-fest, poker game tonight?”

Conversation stayed on that topic for a while and allowed them all time to observe Tracy and a few of the other rookies who’d had rough missions. Most of them appeared to be doing okay, but Tracy had clearly gotten the worst of it. Her flinches came often and everyone approved of Charlie getting her out of her comfort zone. As long as she didn’t hide, they could all help her. It was what Safe Haven had been created for.

## 4

“There are a few things I need to tell you while we enjoy this wonderful meal. You can go on eating, but keep track of the update I’m giving.” The radio crackled when Kenn let off his button, alerting those on duty to Angela’s coming words.

Not far enough away for Marc’s peace of mind, Adrian flipped his radio on, and told David to shut his off. The Safe

Haven setup Kenn had given him would deliver Angela's voice as clear as an angel's bell.

"You've noticed Doug working on the board, I'm sure, maybe even picked out your name and wondered what new hell I'm assigning you to. You've also probably noticed there are teams getting set to roll out. A lot of us have hard work waiting. I'll explain that as soon as Doug is finished. Please remember not to touch the board or you'll smear the liquid chalk."

Adrian settled on the uncomfortable rock, perfectly content to let their dinner burn while he listened to Angela update his camp.

Conner and David shared a confused, slightly concerned glance, but didn't comment.

Conner took over roasting the wild turkey that Adrian had stalked right after they arrived. Conner was still a bit disturbed at the memory of his father leaping off the side of a cliff. He hadn't known there was a ledge below at the time, or that the ledge had been a nesting site. They even had eggs for breakfast now, but Conner didn't think he could eat those without suggesting they grab a few turkeys to raise for food. It was on his mind now, but the smell of the meat was distracting him. In the morning, when he wasn't starving, he planned to bring it up.

"That's better." Angela's voice was clearly amused. "Stained another shirt, but hey, barbecue sauce does that right? Supposed to be messy. Where was I...? Oh, okay. Tomorrow, we start getting the caves ready."

A loud cheer echoed to Adrian twice. Once from the radio and then again, from the sound of the large camp below. There

was an empty landing directly to their left. Adrian's eyes swung to it repeatedly as Angela updated everyone.

"There are two large teams of people—a mix of Eagles and camp members. They are the builders and gatherers. Each team is broken into two shifts of twelve hours each. We have ten hard days ahead of us folks, but nothing like the last ten in comparison, right?"

Even David nodded to that. The last ten days had been a nightmare that none of them ever wanted to experience again, no matter which side of the battle they were on.

"After you locate your name and shift, remember it. Be at the assigned place by the time on the chalkboard, no excuses. There wasn't time for me to let you pick the crew or shift you'd prefer. I chose it by where I need you the most, based on the strengths you have. Please don't ask to switch shifts or crews unless you're confident that I've put you in the wrong slot. In ten days, we will be in the cave and then every team will receive a full week off all chores!"

Another double cheer came. Adrian's heart filled with pride. She had learned even faster than his own children had—certainly faster than Conner would. That son needed what he'd been unable to give the other one.

"Builders, you will go in, determine what has to be done, then prepare that area. You will camp outside the entrance to secure our men, our work, our supplies, and to be right there to keep each shift change rolling. Large common tents and bathrooms will be provided for each crew. At the same time, gathering teams will be out working. As they bring in each load, they will get your new lists and go right back out, with a short stop for sleep and food between each run. And when I

say short, you know I mean that. Prepping and gathering is the start. This is stage one.”

Adrian ignored the plate of steaming meat Conner sat by him, content to listen for as long as Angela talked.

“As you gather things, you have to stay organized. Each building crew will be sending gophers to the dump areas. The kids don’t know what these items are for or what harm they can cause. It is part of your duty to help the gophers get the correct materials safely to the cave entrance, in the amounts asked for. If we bring too much up, we’ll clog our work area. If we don’t bring enough, we’ll slow down. You get the idea. To organize this a bit, gathering crews will also camp next to their dumpsite. You will assist the gophers and provide extra security for our materials.”

Adrian could almost see her standing with a plate, picking off bits of food to show calm leadership. His longing to be by her side was overwhelming.

“As for patrols, there will be five per crew—senior Eagles who can assist in labor, provide security, and attempt rescues if there are any problems. For gatherers, there must be a sixth and seventh man to provide sniper rotations. Each crew is being given a copy of a map we’ve made that shows the best and worst places to search for the items we need. Any area shaded in red is too dangerous without multiple teams of Eagles. Don’t try those. Remember the Safe Haven code when you go into towns and neighborhoods: We don’t steal from people and we don’t tolerate people stealing from us. Help those who need it, but don’t get caught up in drama. We have enough of our own right here for you to work on.”

Adrian dutifully snickered like the rest of her Eagles were likely doing, and then quieted so he wouldn't miss her next words.

"As each shift ends, drop off notice of your next run, tally your numbers, and deliver it to the contest box in the mess. Once a day, Doug will go through that box—he has the only key—and update totals on the board. To add protection and even out the contest, descendants will also help. The builders get two and the gatherers get two, split between the day and night shifts to keep things fair. Use them wisely. And to spice that up, there will be another contest for the descendant who helps their crew the most. Betting is encouraged!"

Laughter rolled across the mountain, but it didn't carry far enough to lighten Adrian's camp. His son and new soldiers were sharing glances and staring at him in disappointment. Adrian's soul decayed a bit further as he realized Angela had set it up this way so he couldn't wallow in his grief.

*"Everyone else has work. The older folks have lighter chores, like sewing curtains, rugs, and quilts. The teenagers are on duty with their Eagle teachers, learning to take their places. Pregnant women, non-Eagles, are helping with mess, babysitting, delivering meals and messages, and caring for our weaker members."*

She'd obviously considered every issue in his notebook and sorted them through to discover a solution. Adrian couldn't have been prouder.

"All rookies, and fifteen senior Eagles will cover our main camp during this stage. I need everyone else out there. This is a level test for many of you. You have to listen, follow orders, and enforce all rules. You also have to keep our Safe Haven

running, as in water, waste removal, and food. Follow the lead of the Eagles with you, and hurry. We're fighting nature here and we all know how she feels about us. Let's pull together and get inside that mountain before winter comes."

There was a pause and then Angela's voice came again, ringing with confidence. "Yes, we can take a real break here, if we can get inside. Will *we* do that?"

Cheers echoed again.

Adrian's faction felt left out of that safety, but Adrian knew it was a false promise—which was why she hadn't actually said they would be safe here or given them an amount of time for that break.

"I've offered rewards for us doing this quickly and I'll honor them. I'd like to give out some of that now. Kenn and Shawn are drawing up plans for the Eagles. They'll also be implementing the new teams list. Be patient while you're hounding them for your slot, but know that every fighter here has earned the next level."

This time, the cheering and yelling was enough to startle a small colony of bats from their roost above Adrian.

"I miss my team." Conner looked at his dad. "Will she still have the Jr. Eagles?"

"How would I know?" Adrian was trying to listen to the rest of her speech.

"Because she's following your notebooks." The teen glared. "We all know that."

"You don't know shit." Adrian grunted. "Stop underestimating her intelligence." He waved off Conner's next words so he could hear Angela.

“I have a couple of reminders next and then we can relax for the rest of our evening. First, please don’t bother the ants. We have a deal in place. I promised to protect them for their help with the government and for future assistance. Make friends with them. They’re not the enemy anymore.”

Adrian sighed in obvious awed approval.

Conner was confused and disappointed. This wasn’t what he’d envisioned.

“And what was it you envisioned, boy?” Adrian was annoyed with his new crew and their expectations of a fallen idol. “That we would roam through the wastelands, killing evil and being heroes?”

Conner flushed. That was exactly what he’d hoped.

“Your sister has that honor. You’re still a pup.” Adrian sneered. “Now shut up and let me listen. It’s almost all I have left now.”

“You have your son!” Conner drowned out Angela’s last words. The radio fell silent.

Adrian pinned the teenager with a resentful glower. “Yes, let’s talk about that. I have a rebellious, know-it-all, banished, peeping-tom, untrained *child* to care for. Great trade-off there.”

Crushed, Conner left the light of their small fire.

“Was that right?” David was sitting on the other side of the short flames. “He needs guidance.”

“Was it guidance you needed while you were hunting your fellow man?” Adrian shot back. “Was that right?”

David’s profile changed to stone.

“That’s what I thought.” Adrian grunted again. “Mind your own business until you understand what I’m doing.”

“What are you doing?” David didn’t hide his anger. “All I see is a disgraced leader following his old camp like he’s waiting for a chance to steal it back.”

“That’s because he is.” Peggy emerged from the darkness, flanked by Allan. “That’s why I voted for Marc.” Peggy joined them at the fire. “Angela can’t recognize this traitor for what he really is.”

Adrian stiffened, switched off the radio. *This won’t be pleasant.*

“Get lost, rookie.” Peggy gingerly took a seat on the rock near Adrian.

David opened his mouth to argue.

Adrian jerked a thumb over his shoulder. He didn’t need direct witnesses to the coming, well-deserved humiliation.

Also a bit crushed, David vanished into the shadows after Conner.

Peggy regarded her former leader, her one-time hero. In the beginning, she’d been among Adrian’s staunchest believers. But he had quickly fallen short and then disappointed her, and now, he was a traitor. He even looked the part with his unshaven face and bloodshot eyes.

“When did I lose you?”

Adrian’s sudden question surprised Peggy, but it wasn’t hard to answer. She just hadn’t thought he cared. “Your game with Tonya. You punished her for killing Joe, who was a useless drunk, instead of helping her change. Angela made her an Eagle and returned her self-worth. The others think you did it, but I know better and so does Tonya.”

Adrian’s countenance darkened further, but he didn’t respond.

Peggy switched topics. “Doug told me he’d make me come, but he didn’t have to. I don’t want to die.”

Adrian winced. “I’m sorry. I can’t stop that.”

“Can you slow it?”

Adrian understood she had permission to be here because she had an Eagle escort. He was filled with bitterness as he realized who had given that permission and what she expected from him. “For a while. But it will fade faster each time, like when she helped John.”

“How long?” The new doctor hadn’t been willing to give her an estimate, but Hilda had told her it was only a few weeks.

Adrian didn’t want to do it; he hesitated, trying to find a way out.

“Tell me! You owe me that!”

“A few months.” Angela had trapped him with this one. He had expected her to tell Doug no.

“I want them! I want every second you can give me!”

Adrian sighed, suddenly weary. “There are prices for deals such as this.”

Peggy only hesitated for an instant. “I agree.”

“Don’t you even want to know the cost? I could be betraying you again.”

“You wouldn’t do that.” Peggy had thought hard about this visit before coming. “She’d never forgive you for hurting the camp or the dream while they’re in her hands.”

“Got me all figured out, do ya? Be careful, Ms. Kelly. I’m not as harmless as you seem to think I am.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She was still angry, and even more upset that she had to barter with him. “What do you want in exchange for helping me?”

“You’ll have to bring Doug.” Adrian stood. “It’ll take a few hours and you’ll need a day off afterwards. Kenn will help you arrange it when I tell him to.”

Already suffering, Peggy had been hoping for something immediate. Her expression grew dark with fear. What if the cancer did too much damage before Adrian helped her?

Unable to feel her terror and ignore it, Adrian let guilt force his hand. He grabbed her by the arms, jerking her up. He slanted his mouth over hers.

Too shocked to react at first, Peggy quickly realized it wasn’t a kiss. He was sending heat down her throat, warming her insides while connecting their minds in awful flashes that made her stiffen and try to pull away. The life he was giving her had been taken, through deception!

Adrian held on until the entire life had been delivered, not letting her revulsion or her ugly words in his mind break the hold. The last of it rushed from him like a bullet.

Adrian shoved her, not caring when she tripped and landed on her ass. He stumbled to his knees, vision blurring, stomach clenching. He’d forgotten what this felt like, why he had stopped doing it and began using others to do it for him.

Peggy rose to her feet, ready to blast him with her annoyance. She froze at the sight of his body glowing with dull blue light. As she stared in surprise at the beautiful hue, it faded.

Adrian shut his eyes. “I’ll need a couple weeks,” he ground out through the pain in his chest. He controlled his breathing as the squeezing fire gradually subsided. “Get lost, will ya?”

Peggy slowly did as he bid, casting worried looks over her shoulder. In her concern, it took her a moment to realize she wasn't in pain anymore.

She strolled faster as the tall gates of Safe Haven came into view. She dismissed her shadow as soon as she was inside. She was positive Doug had requested a full report since he hadn't been free to come with her.

Following the bell that signaled a meal being served, Peggy veered toward the mess. She assumed Angela would still be there, but she hadn't even gotten under the canopy before Angela's cool voice echoed in her mind.

*He can only do that once more for you. Don't waste such a precious gift.*

Peggy got in line for a tray and tried to act normal as Adrian's light continued to work on her body and Angela pulled every second of the meeting from her mind.

## 5

"I'd like to talk to you...about the new people."

Storing Peggy's memory of Adrian, Angela motioned to the bench across from her, glad that Samantha had a full plate. She wanted everyone well fed and with a good night's sleep under their belts come dawn.

"I caught something while you were feeling them out. I think we should eliminate the first group that comes, and maybe we can avoid another war."

Angela sliced off a small chunk of the rare beef and dipped it in the steak sauce. "Samantha, for a little while, can you just concentrate on the weather, the garden, and hunting? Those

three things will save more lives than you're worried about sacrificing.”

Scolded, Samantha wanted to argue, but she was interrupted by the arrival of the ants. Every person in the mess, including sentries and leadership, stopped eating and talking to gawk at the colony.

The line of ants held roughly one hundred workers, led by a huge red Captain who inspected the scrap boxes lining one side of the mess. He then swiveled toward his crew and squealed.

The people winced and cringed from the high-pitched noise, but it only lasted for a brief blast and then the worker ants came forward to create five lines that led from each box to the edge of the mess. From there, a single line of ants completed the assembly. This meal was full of proteins and fats the ants also needed if they were to survive. Later, there would be other, less palatable food options, but Angela intended to honor their deal and even extend it. For now. Safe Haven would get a second, smaller harvest from the garden and the new seedlings she was having them plant would be a source of mega-vitamins in about a month. By then, the snow would be here and growing topside wouldn't be feasible.

Samantha shifted restlessly, waiting for Angela to focus on her. She had a lot to say.

“Samantha?”

“Yeah?”

“I already have plans running. Do you want to be a part of them? I always need hands, especially ones as good with a rifle as yours are.”

Samantha considered the question, understanding she was being given an option to skip the gardening and hunting, if she was ready for action. “I can do things for you, if you need them, but I’d rather not yet. I thought about resigning, to find out if I like it on the other side.”

“A few people are considering that option. Some have already chosen it,” Angela confided without rancor. “Each person has to do whatever is best for them. I’d be sad to lose you, but happy to hold a place if you go that way. But you don’t want that, do you?”

“No...” Samantha sighed. “I still want the glory. I just need the peace too.”

“I understand. When you find your name under the gatherers instead of security, don’t stress over it. Enjoy what peace you can get for a few weeks.”

“And then?”

Angela sighed. “Be ready to do whatever you need to.”

“I’ll stay that way forever, I think.” Samantha let a bit of her inner turmoil show. “Once you kill someone, you can’t go back. Ever. You know?”

Angela flashed to Little Rock; her grip tightened on the fork. “Yes, Sam. I do.”

“Good. I’d hate to think I’m the only one who’s damned.” Suddenly eager to examine the board and see who she was teamed with, Samantha stood up. “You need anything?”

“I’m all good.”

Samantha left to join the crowd around Doug.

Angela took a moment to inspect the rest of the camp mentally, even though she knew Marc was on rounds.

*And your pet killer is outside on duty,* the witch reminded.

Angela ignored the jab, closing her grid. It was amazing how she saw a gift, or thought of one she didn't have yet, and then the ability appeared in the form of a new door. Her hall of choices was long, but unfortunately, it was all fueled by the same amount of energy. She felt like a gamer with new spells available, but no extra power to run them.

She had asked the witch how to increase her energy levels, but that answer was one neither of them had cared for. Taking more lives wasn't an option. The witch understood the problems that could come from her host accepting corruption and pursuing it to gain more power. Greed was a fault of many descendants and it had cost too many lives to count over the centuries.

Angela felt worry and intense concern flood the area and realized she was still tied to the emotions of their former leader. Something was happening outside the gates.

“Hey!”

“It's snowing!”

Angela shivered, snapping into replay mode to determine what she had misjudged. She wanted to be relieved that it wasn't something more dangerous, but the snow wasn't supposed to be here for weeks. Enough of it would be extremely dangerous.

“It's not cold.”

“It's ash!”

“Get under cover!”

“It's more ash! Get under cover!”

Around the center table, Angela's guards and leadership stood, each with a specific job to do. The gloveboxes had

contained new instructions for handling the Yellowstone fallout.

Across the mess, Kenn and Tonya marched to the com truck, hitting their radios alternately to spread the word.

“This is an ash storm. Go to your tents. Zip flaps and windows, and hang the blankets like we’ve been discussing.”

“Eagles will make rounds to assist you, and if you haven’t signed up for the rookies yet, let them know and they’ll add your name to the lists right then!”

“People on duty or outside should have their masks and respirators on. Full coverage gear is mandatory. Get suited up or get under cover.”

Angela felt Greg’s hand on her arm as he led her into the mess truck—the nearest shelter—instead of trying to get her across the entire camp during the storm. Angela stared out the truck door as the people vanished and the ash coated everything. She considered ordering leadership to bring up the bubble, but the storm stopped, leaving a faint coating. The winds didn’t abate though; it blew the ash away from her camp.

Greg called for a mask and escorted her to her tent a bit later, aware of the sparks running up his arm from the innocent contact. She was clearly in the groove. He stepped inside with her to make sure she at least sat down and took off her boots.

Angela stopped in the center of the tent, swaying a bit as she searched for something Greg didn’t think he wanted to know about. The Eagle carefully removed her jacket and led her to the rocking chair that Marc had carried in earlier. Greg

tugged off her boots. *Now would be a bad time for that man to walk in.*

He quickly retreated when he finished, but he didn't feel right leaving her alone while she wasn't aware. Greg grabbed a blanket from the cot to wrap around her.

Satisfied he'd done enough for her comfort, Greg took a second blanket, tossed it on the floor, and lay down. That meal had worn him out. He hadn't been so full in a long time.

Greg snapped awake a bit later to find Angela sitting on her cot, surrounded by notebooks. Her wild hair and dazed expression said she was still in her own mind. He put his head back down. *If she needs me, I'm here.*

## 6

Marc removed his mask as he entered the QZ and the light rain began to fall. Thankfully, people wouldn't breathe in as much of the ash while it was wet. Marc noted the alert QZ guards and fastened, dark tents, but he wasn't worried. Angela was being cautious. She would release their new members soon.

Marc nodded to Wade and Morgan, who had point together over the QZ for the first time. He strode toward the center, where the newest people had been stashed. Kindle and Daryl were outside the large tent, backs to each other and not speaking.

Marc wasn't surprised. The camp might consider Kindle a former star to be admired, but the Eagles knew she wasn't all there. They also felt the tension she caused, like now, with

her hot gaze locked onto him and not letting go. “Things okay?”

“5-by.” They were the first words Daryl had spoken since this shift started. He had little to say to the mean island woman and he wasn’t pleased with Angela for putting him here.

Marc swept the shadows on the canvas wall, showing a sleeping child and her mother next to her, reading a book. *What bothers me about that?* Marc hadn’t met Tara yet, but the woman was clearly a threat or Angela wouldn’t have two killers outside her tent. “Got a minute?”

Tara emerged from the tent slowly, pale and scared.

“I’m Marc Brady.” Marc introduced himself, but didn’t declare his title. If she didn’t know who he was yet, she would. He held out a hand.

“Tara.” Her hand touched his for a brief second.

Marc got a strong flash of Angela before she’d changed. *Another abused female. Great.* Hadn’t anyone made it through life unscarred? “Do you have everything you need?” Marc observed her sickly pallor and her quick peeks toward her sleeping child.

“We’re fine now. Thank you.”

Tara’s meek tone made Marc rest his hand on his holster. “If you have trouble here, I’ll handle it.”

Tara paled further at the double meaning, swallowing nervously. “Okay.”

Marc nodded again at her guards and headed for the next row of tents. He wasn’t sure why he didn’t like the new woman, but he didn’t. Once again, his instincts were screaming. He continued to dwell on her as he patrolled the soldier area in the QZ.

“He’s second in command here, right?” Tara spoke to Daryl.

Kendle instantly assumed the new woman had already heard the Eagles talking and had decided to ignore her too.

“That’s our XO and the *mate* of our boss.” Daryl used a pointed tone. Kendle was still staring at Marc like a lovesick teenager.

“He seems...edgy.”

“He is.” Daryl frowned. “And you’re the reason why. He knows trouble will follow you guys.”

Tara paled. “I’m sorry. There’s no one else who can help us.”

Guilt swamped Daryl, but before he could reply, Tara ducked into the tent and blew out the lantern.

Daryl glanced at Kendle, expecting empathy, and found her smirking. “Was that funny?”

“You swallowing your own boot? Sure. It’s what you get for being mean to someone weaker than you.”

“Me? Do you know we call you the Queen of Cruel around here?”

“Why? Because I kill on command? Because I enjoy it like you and your team leader?” Kendle scoffed. “I’m not afraid of the truth.”

Daryl’s face was scarlet; he fired ruthlessly. “You’re cruel in every way, even to Marc. Do you think it’s fair for him to watch your misery and carry that guilt? It’s already eating at him. Angela may not care about your presence here, but Marc does and so do I!”

Kendle thought about leaving her post and also about pulling her knife, but she chose to accept the nickname she’d

been given. If they thought she was cruel, she would prove it. “Your sloppy-second is carrying the bastard of a traitor, and you beat on people as punishment for their supposed crimes. You’re not better than me. You’re not better than any of us.”

“Why you snarky little bitch! How dare you!”

“You gave me the nickname. I will now be the Queen of Cruel every time you speak to me. I suggest shutting up.”

Daryl’s mouth opened.

“Goodie!” Kindle rubbed her hands together eagerly. “Another man who doesn’t know when to quit.”

Daryl snapped his mouth shut and resigned himself to glowering. *This bitch has to go.*

Marc heard their raised voices behind him, but he didn’t stop. Kindle was better now, and Daryl was an Eagle in good standing with everyone. They would learn to work together.

Happy to find security cameras going up around their front gate, Marc strolled through the Indian area next. He noted that the natives had a guard posted even though they were inside the QZ, with Eagles on duty. The soldiers didn’t. Marc understood both actions, but he only approved of one. The soldiers felt safe here because the leadership style was familiar to them, but the Indians were wise. In Marc’s opinion, the soldiers were too trusting.

As Marc reentered the main gate, Shawn fell in step. “We’re all calm and clear. You have point.”

Marc confirmed that he’d seen the board as he went to their rear gate to check in. “Yeah, until four, then Kenn has it.”

“Well, I’m yours until then. What do you want me on?”

Marc considered the sizable list in his mind and gave Shawn the top few things. There was no need to rush on most of it. They would have a lot of nights to bring his to-do list under control. Thanks to the apocalypse, disasters and wildcards were now a way of life, and they had to prepare for as many of them as they could. Marc didn't know what was coming next, but he was tired of being caught off guard and he was fed up with running.

Shawn stopped suddenly, turning with a concerned expression. "Can we trust the new woman, Tara?"

Marc shrugged. "It's too soon to tell about *any* of the new arrivals. Watch your six."

Shawn's happiness burst. He nodded, sighing. "I always do."

## Chapter Three

# Doggone Shame



### 1

**I**'m hungry.

Dog had only been gone from Safe Haven for a few days, but he was missing the mess. Out here, surrounded by mountains and wilderness, there was only whatever food he could hunt. He whined. *Marc ruined me. Always scratching my ears and wiping rain from my ass. Made me into a damn house pet!*

Dog stared intently at the small town below him. He'd been studying it for hours and hadn't witnessed a single movement—human or animal. Whining again, he rose and made his way down the street. The farthest building held what he wanted, but he wasn't happy about it.

Dog padded down the weed-dotted street, wincing at the soreness. His paws had been used to the slow shifts and canvas floors until Angela's war; he was still aching from all that traveling. The pads of his feet would build up again and become stronger over the next weeks, but until then, it was easy for him to imagine curling up inside the building he was now facing. A long rest sounded good.

He had taken one so far, during the ash storm, but the urge to catch the wild female was too strong to ignore for long. He'd pushed on even though he knew breathing the ash was a bad idea. He had to catch up. *And I won't if I keep stopping to hunt. It's easy meals from here on.*

Dog went to the main doors of the brick building and scratched with his paw, testing.

The door swung open with a loud groan.

Dog's spirits picked up. Any of his fellow canines would already be dead or gone, and there was little reason for the humans to come here now that the animals had turned on them. The pound was a perfect place to hunt a meal he didn't have to stalk, chase, and then kill while listening to it scream for mercy.

The smell was old and empty; the sounds were the same. Dog eased into the pound with nerves mocking him. He'd spent time in a place like this right after being captured, but the experience had stayed with him.

Dog ignored the many rooms with their desks and cabinets, following his nose down the long hall. The doors at the end swung open at his touch. He padded through.

The swinging door came back hard and fast, and smacked him in the hip.

Dog jumped forward, stifling a yelp. He snorted in annoyance at himself as he spotted the cause. *What am I, a pup?*

The doors continued to swing, stirring the air. Dog caught a whiff of what he was both dreading and anticipating. He followed the scent down another long hall. This one ended at a steel door with a handle he nudged down with his paw.

The odor was powerful—one of rot and abandonment. Humans hadn't been here in a long time. They'd fled and left their animals to die.

Dog almost understood this time. He'd been locked in the bottom of Marc's home, but he'd heard the panic and understood the humans had all been in fear for their lives. It was the first time he'd ever been able to discover an excuse for their behavior.

Dog padded down the row of cages without glancing into any of them. He kept his gaze on the door at the end. It was where the food had come from. During his weeks in that cage, Dog had spent the miserable hours studying the people and the patterns. When he realized the humans weren't evil, just inconsiderate, it had helped him control himself and not attack.

Dog was surprised when the hall ended with a rear door to the outside pound, showing an overcast sky. He had assumed there would be more rooms. He retraced his steps, now inspecting each cage to determine if he had missed a door.

The skeletons bothered him. Caging his kind had been a way of life, and after living with the humans and learning their reasons for such things, Dog even agreed. Nevertheless, to be here and witness their bodies was another view—one he wished the humans also had to experience.

One of the cages was actually a gate. Dog leapt it in a two-lunge process that balanced him on a file cabinet and allowed him to spot another series of doors. One of those was open. The comforting smell of crunchy food came.

Not used to a slippery surface under his paws, Dog slid as he jumped.

The crash of cabinets was loud as he landed in the office chair and rolled to the ground without being hurt. The cabinet he'd fallen from toppled over and smashed through a side of the gate. It was now possible to squeeze through the bottom. Dog was glad he didn't have to try to jump over it again later. One fall a day was enough.

Dog entered the feeding area with a feeling of pride, counting five full bags, one of which was already open. He plunged in and began to eat. *Not the kind I love, but good! Good!*

*Crack!* Thunder rumbled a few seconds after the lightning strike. Rain soon followed.

Dog kept eating. He emptied a quarter of the bag before he came up for air, belching and farting as he sat down. *Next?*

*A drink.*

Dog went to the opposite side of the room, to the deep boxes that smelled like water. He rose up, paws on the edges, and found the sinks dry. He licked the faucet, able to taste the chemicals left from the water. It had definitely come from here.

Dog tried to remember watching the humans gather water in Safe Haven. It had come from big blue buckets with white stems. *They rotated those stems!*

Dog stretched his neck out and pushed on the silver stem by the faucet, but it didn't move. He danced on his hind legs to get closer, then used his front paw to swipe at it.

Water gushed from the faucet, splashing him. The stream immediately became smaller and smaller, but the hole in the bottom was plugged. The basin slowly began to fill with rusty water.

Dog didn't mind. He drank his fill, not stopping even when the trickle of liquid turned to drops and then halted. He hadn't had a good, long drink in days.

Dog dropped down from the sink, listening to the storm beat against his shelter. He had no intention of going out in the rain, especially on a full stomach. He searched for a place to nap.

A pile of empty dog food sacks in the corner was inviting. Dog nosed under a few of them, inhaling deeply. It smelled a bit like home, like Marc's backseat. He quickly fell into a dreamless slumber.

## 2

Dog jerked awake to the sound of lapping and crunching. The noises echoed through the brick building, sounding like an army of animals was in the room with him.

Dog stayed still.

The crunching became quieter after a while, as did the lapping. Dog guessed both sources had run out. That would mean at least three animals his size to have cleared the bag of food so fast. *And what else is my size?* Wild dogs.

The wolf tensed, ready to spring out, and then the smell of the mutts hit him. *It's...her! She's in the room!*

Dog stiffened further. So was her pack. He was trapped in the corner by wild wolves.

Unable to remain still with her so near, Dog raised his snout to get a glimpse.

And found her nose inches from his.

The female wolf was resting on the floor near him, waiting for her pack to finish eating. Her startled gaze met Dog's, neck fur bristling.

Dog scanned her pack, counting, evaluating, and then he regarded the female. In that glance, he conveyed his interest and a warning. "I'll kill all of them."

The female's snout drew up, a low growl rumbling.

Dog pushed his alpha power as hard as he could. "You don't see me!"

Stung by the command, the female whimpered and rose, retreating.

"What is it?"

"What's wrong?"

"Where do we kill?"

The female's pack circled her protectively, not finding whatever it was that she had, but ready to rip apart whatever she told them to.

"It stinks here." The female wolf lowered her snout in disgust. "Let's go."

The pack dutifully followed her from the feed room, none of them understanding there was more. The closed bags didn't have a smell.

Paws and nails echoed for a moment and then the pack was gone.

Dog stayed where he was, positive he'd gotten inside the female's mind. He would be okay to finish resting here. Knowing she was near would help. He hadn't been sure how far ahead of him she was. Now, he would be able to catch up to her within hours.

Dog quickly returned to his dreams of the female. Her scent covered the room.

### 3

The female took her pack to the cave they'd sheltered in overnight. All of them were eager for sleep in the late afternoon drowsy period. The food would give them needed energy, but until then, they would be sluggish and irritated.

The pack was asleep in minutes, but the female lingered at the entrance. Her thoughts were scattered and that was unusual for her. Even when the Angry Wind had come and forced them to go north, her thoughts hadn't been this confused. She had never chosen a stranger over her own pack.

*He wasn't a threat to us.*, She excused her behavior, knowing that wasn't true. The big wolf she'd been nose to nose with was a killer. *He interests me.*

The female lay down in the entrance, enjoying the blowing spray that her pack avoided when they could. She didn't have an aversion to the things that they did, and she was capable of questioning the Wind's orders even while following them. Her pack was single-minded. They wanted to go north, join the others, and attack humans. It's all they thought about after

food, drink, and mating. In fact, if not for her season being so close, she wouldn't even be with these males.

Her scent had pulled them as she traveled north, but females were the leaders, giving her time to pick a mate from among them. Then they would fight it out and the survivor would be her new mate. The female had avoided it for almost a year now, but the season was closing in on her. The choice would soon be taken away.

Her thoughts returned to the huge male who could have attacked and killed her before her pack could help. Why hadn't he? Surely, he knew there were too many males around. Perhaps he would also fight for her. The thought was a ray of hope. The female went to sleep.

During their rest, the males woke to find her away from them. They joined her at the entrance, shielding her from the awful rain with their bodies in hopes of currying favor.

The last wolf to pile on was a brute. He nosed and bit his way to the bottom until he was covering the female with his body and his scent. She would be his, no matter who she chose.

## 4

Dog had little trouble tracking the female to the cave. He'd torn open another bag of the food and now had a full stomach again, but the need for a drink had brought him out of the brick shelter sooner than he'd planned. He had found the scents of unclean water everywhere, but the stream near the cave was pristine. It was obvious to Dog that he was supposed to come here. He didn't know why, but he expected it to be bad. His

time in Safe Haven had taught him that survival was nearly impossible when you were alone.

The wild female's scent filled Dog's mouth; he opened his jaws to catch a stronger version of it. Alone or not, trap or not, he wanted a taste of that. He wanted to roll in it.

*And I will.*

The cave was low and wide, too dark for even his vision to peer through. Dog sighed in resignation. *The things I'll do for a bitch.*

He stepped into the cave and waited, letting his instincts tell him which set of appearing red orbs was the biggest threat. Death appeared in the rear; Dog lunged that way.

Outside the cave, the female waited. It wasn't time for her to choose, but she'd underestimated the intelligence of those with her. Her pack had developed a keen dislike of man's ways and they hated this big stranger.

Snarls and yelps of agony echoed from the cave and spread through the damp woods, making the female whine. She didn't want the stranger driven off or killed. She wanted to get to know him and study his ways. He wasn't going hungry. Watching his big body pad into the cave had been mesmerizing.

Silence fell for an instant and then two bleeding shadows fled the cave, both from her pack. They took off into the town below, but the female doubted they would go far.

Ugly noises came again. The female was unable to stand it. She darted inside, unsure if she would break up the fight or help kill the stranger to have peace in her thoughts.

## 5

Dog snarled in warning as the last two wolves approached him. The bodies of the others, in various conditions, were strewn about the cave. "Stay back! Pain will come!"

The big brute's snout drew up in fury. He lunged with the intensity he'd been lacking before as he let the inferior mutts fight for him.

Dog winced as the wolf's teeth sank into his shoulder, but the fight in Safe Haven had prepared him for this. He struck back viciously, going for the throat. He found a grip and squeezed.

"Stop!"

The female's command wasn't the same as an alpha, but it was still hard to resist. Dog reluctantly let go of the throat between his powerful jaws.

"The Wind has forbidden killing each other!" The female huffed angrily. "You'll bring her against us. Go away!"

Dog didn't understand, but he wasn't about to be run off after winning the fight. He strutted toward the female with light steps. "I'm Dog."

The female gaped at him. "Why do you take the name of a human pet? Humans are the enemy."

Dog was already positive he couldn't win that argument. "I like being called Dog."

"Why?"

"It takes people by surprise, gives me the advantage." Dog was aware of the other wolves slinking toward the cave entrance. Except for Brute, who stayed on the ground, growling lowly as he observed them.

“We use that tactic as well,” The female pawed at the cave floor. “Humans are easy to fool. They never expect it when we attack.”

Dog understood he wasn’t going to be able to convince her to be peaceful. Her pack hunted humans. If he stayed with her, he would have to do the same. It was disappointing.

The female was regarding Dog with expressions that Brute didn’t like. He found his courage, rising to his feet. “This isn’t over!”

“He sounds like a human.” Dog was confident it would be taken as it was meant—a giant insult.

Brute lunged forward, aiming for Dog’s belly.

The female lashed out in a lightning quick reaction that surprised both males. Her teeth sank into Brute’s nose.

He yelped loudly, jerking away to flee the cave.

The other wolves who had survived Dog’s defenses also limped out, leaving Dog and the female alone.

Dog sniffed the air. He was able to tell it wasn’t time for her to pick a mate yet. Wanting to be in the running, but needing to be loyal to Marc and the Safe Haven code, Dog lingered, torn.

“Will you travel with us?”

Dog snorted. “No.”

The female took a hesitant step closer, drawn to his golden eyes and the power in his body. Even Brute was smaller than Dog. “Wolves mate for life. I can’t pick you.”

Dog held still, and swiveled at the last minute to deny her the scent of his breath. It would tell her a lot of things about him and he wanted the same information, from a fresher source.

The female inched by him, tail coming up.

Dog whined eagerly to encourage her. She rubbed against his hip and he spun around, burying his snout under her tail.

The female pranced away, circling, and found Dog padding toward the entrance of the cave. "Wait!"

Dog didn't stop; the noises of another vicious fight filled the air seconds later.

The female realized he was eliminating the others, driving them off. The voices in her mind eased. Dog could defend her when she swelled with pups, and he was smart enough to keep her fed while she nursed those children. Other males would still join their pack, as would the occasional female, but in the end, Dog would be her choice because at this moment, she was at peace.

Dog was running on pure animal instinct as he struck a smaller male and sent him rolling down the muddy embankment. The Brute tried to come up behind him, but Dog spun in time to resume the death grip on his rival's throat. This time, he snapped his jaws shut and enjoyed the coppery taste of victory with the scent of a perfect female still ringing through his nose.

The winds picked up suddenly, driven by rage. Dog felt the tree branch coming before it hit, but he reacted too late to avoid it. The heavy wood slammed into his leg, snapping the bone.

Dog brayed in agony, scaring all the wolves, who fled the area.

The female was the last one to go. She stared mournfully, watching as the tree collapsed and Dog was buried. Grief set

into the female's heart, thick and deep. She threw her head back. The howl was haunting.

It gave away her location, bringing the surviving pack members to surround her with their licks of condolence on the loss of her chosen mate. While they comforted her, they also used their bodies to get her away from the area, continuing their trek north.

Under the rotten tree, Dog was unconscious. He stayed that way as afternoon faded into dusk.

## 6

“Can we eat it?”

“Yeah, that’s not against the rules!”

“If it will die anyway. We’re supposed to eat it, you idiots! Wind doesn’t want the humans to be able to find food.”

Dog slowly became aware of the voices, but the pain in his leg almost drowned them out. It took a minute for him to realize his level of danger had increased.

“How do we get it out?”

“We don’t. We’ll chew off parts for a quick snack and then go. We have to get north.”

Dog whimpered, struggling to get free.

“It’s a full meal. I want to pull it out.”

“Go on. I’m going north.”

“I’m hungry!”

The feel of a fight coming helped Dog concentrate; he sent out a sharp blast. “I will take you to food. Enough for all of you.”

“What did he say?”

“Food! He said food for all of us!”

“He lies.”

Dog stopped struggling and used his strength to push out an alpha command tone. “I never lie!”

“We need food! The pups cry all day.”

“He lies!”

“We have to have food!”

Snarls echoed as wet, wiry bodies thumped against the ground and each other.

“Stop!” Dog tried to get their attention, but the fight moved away from his burial place. He groaned in annoyance and pain. Coyotes were known for being unstable.

Dog squirmed around, hoping to discover a place where he could wriggle free, but the pain in his leg limited his mobility. He realized he could die here.

Suddenly cold, Dog shivered and drew his body into as tight a ball as he could. He would warm up and wait for the next opportunist to wander by. He’d caught the scents of dozens of other animals while tracking the female here. He just had to wait.

“Is it okay to eat it now?”

“If we can get it out.”

The rumbling of branches being pawed away woke Dog. He held in a groan at the jostling.

“Hurry! Hungry!”

“We eat a little. We have to take it to the others.”

“Right! The others!”

Eager paws raked the logs and leaves away to reveal Dog still curled into his ball, but it was obvious that the two coyotes

were too weak and too thin to drag his body anywhere. Dog chose his words carefully, not moving yet. "There's food in the tall building."

The coyotes yelped in fear, running away.

Dog wanted to laugh, but his leg was flaring into throbs and lances that poked and bit at him from the inside. He was free of his grave, but he now had to find a place to layup that had a supply of food and water. Tracking down his female while hurting like this wasn't possible.

Dog forced himself to limp to the town, where he at least had a meal waiting and there was a chance that he could find more water from human sources.

It took him a long time to get back into the room and it was a chore to get up on the sink. He was lucky to discover a thin layer of water in the bottom. He consumed it gratefully.

It was gone too soon. He limped to the far corner of the room, unable to make himself take cover under the bags this time. He'd already been buried once today.

## 7

The sound of paws alerted Dog to company. He tried to gather himself for fighting, but the pain in his leg had increased over the hours. His leg was nearly double in size. Dog swallowed a whimper as he got set to lunge.

"I smell it!"

"He's here! We will go!"

"We will find out if he was telling the truth!"

Dog recognized the yapping of coyotes and settled down in relief. He hadn't thought the mangy animals possessed enough courage to follow him.

The first coyote to peer through the door spotted the bags first and rushed into the room, moaning in delight. "Food! Food! We eat!"

The others in the hall came more slowly, but the sight of their pack mate scarfing down crunchy bits was too much to resist; they joined the feast with whines and moans of ecstasy.

Dog snorted, drawing instant attention that turned to terror. He put his head down in a universal sign of submission.

"It lives!"

"He told us where the food was!"

"We must go!"

"It's hurt. Shut up."

Dog stayed still as the crunching gradually resumed, actually feeling a bit comforted at not being alone. *How odd.*

Dog studied the large pack as they ate, observing thin, hard bodies and too many pups to feed. The pack was doomed unless they had a strong leader.

Dog waited until the crunching settled down. "I might be able to find more food."

"The Wind told us to stop eating each other," one of the coyotes answered between bites. "We're going north to meet the others."

"Where is your leader?" Dog winced as his leg throbbed harder.

"She died at the human den. We were there for food, but the woman tricked our breeder into a box. We left after we heard her howls of hurt."

"The woman might help your leg," the second coyote stated. "But watch out for the box."

"I will." Dog shut his eyes, weary. "My thanks."

"Where can we get the waters?" Coyote One yipped. "The pups drink nothing today."

"There's a stream near where you dug me out." Dog grunted, joking. "Bring me a bowl."

The ideas forming in his mind weren't appealing, but Dog knew his odds of survival alone, hurting this way, were slim. When the coyotes returned, he would discover where the healing woman lived and try to get there. If he couldn't, then he would have to call out to Marc—something he didn't want to do yet. In fact, it might be something he didn't want at all.

He'd been reborn to this life to serve a sentence, but a cushy setup in a human camp hadn't been a part of that judgement, he was sure. If he wanted another life, another chance, he had to atone during this one and that couldn't be done while neatly heelng at a human's hip.

## 8

The coyotes insisted on following him to the human den. Dog had hoped to get there and lay low for a while to check things out. He hoped to avoid the box he'd been warned about, but the coyotes had other plans. After the two long, painful hours it took to get there, they howled wildly and then disappeared into the shadows.

Dog stood there, stunned at their stupidity, and missed the opening of the small cabin's front door.

"Aww. Poor baby has a hurt paw."

Dog spun to discover a tall woman in faded jeans standing on the porch, gazing at him with sympathy. He huffed. *So much for laying low and checking things out.*

“I can help with that.” The woman crooned gently, stroking her long brown ponytail in consideration. “But you’ll have to go to sleep for a while. Come on, big wolf. Come have a bite to eat and a drink.”

Dog stayed where he was as she took things from a basket near the door. He understood the food would be drugged, but he wasn’t worried about that. It was the box that he was concerned with. He had to know he could get out of it *before* she put him in it.

The woman set two bowls on the bottom stair and moved toward the door. “I’ll wait in here, big boy.”

Dog snorted. She sounded like she did this often. That might mean a kennel. It would explain the coyote’s impressions of a box, but Dog could get through nearly any gate. It was why he’d been sent away and eventually ended up with Marc. The local pound had gotten tired of replacing the cages he’d destroyed. He’d never attacked people, though. He just hated to be caged.

Dog made his way to the rear of the home, unable to stop a whimper when he jostled the broken leg too hard.

“Well, you’re a smart one, huh?”

The woman was in her backyard, a gun in her hand. Dog didn’t want to scare her, but he didn’t think he could go much further. He chose to allow fate to make the choice and lay down, whimpering.

The woman approached him slowly.

Dog stared at the gun. If she was evil, he was in even more trouble.

Sally wasn't sure what to do. The large wolf obviously wasn't going to eat or drink the drugged food, but that leg had to be set and casted. She knelt down tensely, gun ready.

Dog didn't budge as her hand came toward him; he groaned as she gently stroked his ears. Dog wagged his tail, trying to show that he wasn't dangerous to her.

"Aww. Poor baby." Sally decided she would help him as much as he would allow. "Hang on and let me get my supplies."

Dog remained laying down as she went into the house, but his head swiveled alertly, searching for the box. He didn't detect a kennel, but he did see a shed and a small barn, either of which he could escape.

The woman emerged a few minutes later with a large kit that she took things from and spread out on the grass next to him. Dog noticed the gun was still in her hand, but it was no longer pointed at him.

"I have to give you shots." Sally slowly put the gun down so she could fill all the syringes she would need. "If we can get by this part, you won't feel the rest." She held out the needle for the wolf to sniff, as she did with all of her patients. "It will sting a bit, but then your leg will feel better."

Dog liked the sound of that. He refused to flinch when she used a fast movement to stick him. The medicine was working before she drew back to protect herself from any reaction. Dog groaned again, body relaxing. *Better!*

Dog's vision blurred. He struggled to stay alert as the woman stuck him again, though he didn't feel it. He also didn't

feel her touch as she rolled him onto his side and carefully arranged his head and leg so he was breathing clearly and she had access to his injury.

Sally worked fast, not confident the amount of painkillers she'd used was enough to keep such a large animal out for long. The fact that his eyes were still open and almost alert was enough to convince her that haste was needed.

The break wasn't bad, but it did require putting the bones back together. She did it with a practice born from years of experience. The most common injury for domestic animals that were allowed outside was a broken limb. She'd fixed hundreds of them during her time as a veterinarian's assistant.

Sally had the leg finished and casted in less than ten minutes, proud of herself for helping another innocent creature. She put away her supplies and cleaned up, gun now in her hip holster. She'd only had to use it a few times, but those awful moments had been enough to convince her to keep it handy.

Sally rotated to check on the wolf and found him on his good feet, sniffing at the cast.

Sally's hand went to her gun, but she didn't draw it. "That might itch a little. Try to leave it alone for a week or two and you'll be as good as new."

Dog was grateful the pain was gone. He slowly limped toward the woman's porch, vision blurry. He curled up carefully under her porch swing, almost hidden by the vegetable plants in pots and bags. He faded off to sleep right away.

Sally glanced from the wolf to her barn, where she had cages for the animals until they were ready to be back out on

their own. There was no way she could get him in there if he didn't want to go, but later, when he was hungry and thirsty, she could drug him and use the sled to get him to the barn.

Content she had things under control, Sally went into the house and resumed sewing on the blanket she'd had in her lap when the howling started. Winter would be fierce this year, but she would be ready to last. Let the other survivors fight and die together. She had her cabin, her cellar, and her animals. *I don't need anything else.*

## 9

"I don't think I can do this, Momma."

"She has food. We need food."

"But she's that sweet lady from the vet's office! She don't mean no harm to anyone."

"She has food. Are you hungry?"

"Aw, Ma, you know I am!"

"Then shut up and do as I told you. Get on up there and knock."

Dog's fur bristled as the pair came from the dusk shadows; the smaller girl was limping, but it drew no sympathy from him. Dog understood it was a trap. He inched from under the swing. The pair didn't notice him.

"Hey! Can you help us?"

"Who's there?" Sally had been sleeping peacefully, comforted by the thought of a wolf on her porch.

"We need help. My leg is hurt."

Dog heard the lock click on the door and saw the taller woman's hand behind her back.

Sally pushed the screen door open, peering through the shadows. “Do I know you?”

“We seen you at the vet!” The younger girl took a step forward. “You were always so nice.”

“I thought your leg was hurt.” Sally flipped off the safety on her gun.

“Down!” the mother ordered.

The younger girl dropped to her knees.

Dog lunged at the mother.

Sally started to aim her gun at the wolf, but couldn’t. He was right and they were wrong. Judgment had been passed.

Dog felt no sympathy for the screaming woman now trying to shoot him. He squeezed his jaws together around her neck, increasing the pressure until blood flowed and she stopped moving.

The younger girl screamed in rage and grief, grabbing for the weapon her mother had dropped.

Sally put her gun to the girl’s head and pulled the trigger.

Dog flinched, but held his ground as the healer holstered and then stepped around the bodies. That was a Safe Haven reaction. Dog found it soothing. When she strode to the shed, he watched curiously.

Sally brought out the large sled and a bottle of bleach, walking by Dog without hesitation. He was like the few others on her homestead that had eventually chosen to stay with her—different.

Sally rolled the mother’s body onto the sled and dragged it toward the barn.

Managing his pain like he always had, Dog limped after her.

Sally unlocked the doors and threw them open wide so she could tug the heavy sled inside.

Dog followed, seeing healthy, bored animals in padded cages with food and water. It was indeed a kennel, but much nicer. Dog gently sat down in the doorway, recognizing excitement in the air. He surveyed the cages, noticing intelligence and fear. The ferrets were especially alert, heads swiveling from the human to him and then back in perfect unison.

“Those are the twins!” a loud voice brayed in his ear.

Dog spun awkwardly to discover a raccoon holding onto the cage bars, nose twitching in excitement.

“Oh, yes! Here it comes!” The raccoon’s drool hit the wooden floor near his paw. Dog flinched away in disgust.

Sally drew the sled to a rusty concrete area that had a drain. She flipped the bloody body onto it.

The instant it was on the ground, the other animals in the cages peered out, chattering.

“We had another one.” Sally pulled her cleaver and apron from the wall holder. “You guys get meat tonight instead of vegetables. How’s that sound?”

The animals went wild, jumping, banging, and chittering eagerly.

Dog retreated to the doorway as the woman began to chop up the body.

Because of his friendship with Marc, Dog tried to feel anger or even revulsion, but he couldn’t. Man was the enemy to every animal here, including the woman.

“It’s good that you helped her.”

Dog turned at the new voice and found a medium-sized coyote on a short leash inside the barn door.

“She is one of us.”

Dog didn’t doubt that as he watched the woman hack apart an arm to split between two snake cages.

Dog swept the smaller female. “You are almost healed?”

“Yes.” The female shivered delicately. “My pack is near! I heard them today! I can’t wait to be with my boys. I miss their feel and their weight.”

Dog rolled his eyes. *That’s how you got so many pups.*

Sally finished with both bodies and then used the bleach to scrub away the mess, humming to herself. When she finished and went toward the house to clean up, she paused on the way to rub Dog’s ears. She no longer had to guess about his intentions and he knew she would kill him if she had to. *It should be fine.* She left him loose to monitor the property.

Dog lingered near the open barn doors to eavesdrop on the chatter of the animals now enjoying their dinner. All of them appeared to be going north, like the others Dog had met so far. He listened with growing concern for the humans. The war still wasn’t over.

## Chapter Four

# The First Morning



### 1

*O*ne of the hardest things to handle after a volcanic eruption is the flood of refugees. Thanks to the war, we won't be hit as hard, but we will be hit. I estimated the numbers based on the average total of refugees we've taken in per state. Only 1/100<sup>th</sup> of those hiding ever came out or were found. We averaged eighty contacts or new members a month. Then, I added the organized people and groups that we didn't pass close enough to, or those who were flushed into the Midwest because of the war we had with the government. As many as ten thousand refugees from Yellowstone may make it across the Mississippi and that, we can't prepare for. We must get the herd out of the way or lose roughly 50% to disease, fighting,

*and eventual starvation. I pray this never happens, but we know nature loathes humans. What better way to finish destroying us, than to set off a chain of events that will finally lead to our long-dreaded nuclear winter?*

Angela let the book shut, slightly stunned. Adrian's notebooks had all been scary, but most of it, she could do something about. This last notebook, titled *Volcanoes*, was horrifying. Ten thousand starving, sick, desperate survivors? Not a chance.

*Is he wrong on the numbers?* the witch asked from a distance. She was staying back to help Angela conserve energy.

Angela considered it from her own view. Was 1/100 right? That would mean an average of eight thousand survivors per state, in places where the population had been millions...with no direct bomb damage.

"No." She moaned, making Marc jump. "It's too low." Angela rose from the mattress, pulling on her guns as she ducked out of the tent.

Marc stretched, hand brushing the book. He felt no guilt about flipping to the last page she'd been on. Lying next to her in the dawn chill, he'd already been catching bits and pieces of information for the last hour.

Marc read the passage without rancor or surprise. After she'd gotten the books from Adrian, his own mind had already come up with this problem, though he hadn't estimated the numbers as high. He'd been out in those places since the war and Adrian hadn't.

*Then why is she concerned?* his demon queried.

Marc ran it again and still didn't see how there could be so many, or how Adrian would have sensed them without Angela's gift. But she hadn't known and she'd been searching their surroundings actively after becoming a rookie. *What am I missing?*

Marc followed a guard's direction to discover Angela standing near the new shooting range, staring at the sky to the east. It was cloudy, almost hostile even, but not more so than usual. "What is it?"

Angela was still scanning; she let Marc into the smallest area of her mind that she could close. It took too much energy to let anyone in all the way right now.

Marc groaned in annoyed frustration. "You've got to be kidding me!"

Angela gently pushed him out and felt her muscles ease. It had only been a few days since she'd been belowground with Donner. The effects of that ordeal were hitting her harder than she had expected.

"What's the plan for this one?" Marc gestured angrily. "He's had a plan for everything else."

"Not for this." Angela kept scanning. "He left it for his successor because it was too big for him."

Marc stared at her worriedly. "You've got it covered?"

As much as she wanted to say yes, Angela couldn't. "Not yet." Her thoughts went to the few members who might have the mind for the problems they were about to face, but she didn't think there was anything anyone could do at this point. The reactors were melting down. Even if they had ten trained, equipped teams, they still couldn't reach all of them. The time for generators and final attempts had all been passed before

Safe Haven arrived in these mountains. The remnants of the East Coast were going to be wiped from existence and she didn't have the energy to call out and warn anyone. "I led them into a future radiation zone." Angela's voice shook. "And he let me!"

Marc wasn't positive Adrian had known, so he didn't respond to that part. "You can only cover so much. You have to forgive the errors and go on. You know that." Marc slid an arm around her shoulders.

Angela leaned against his comfort, but she didn't take the words to heart. Marc would do anything to ease her pain, no matter if she deserved it or not.

"Yes, I would, but you don't deserve the guilt for this one. There is nowhere else. The west is heavily contaminated where it isn't destroyed. We barely survived the Midwest and nature's anger. Now we're in the last place we can run to and we..."

Angela's guilt increased at the open pain ripping through Marc. He was quickly reaching the conclusions she had as soon as she realized the numbers didn't include zones from the north, south, or the east. Adrian had known, and let them come here anyway.

"How could he do that?"

She sighed. "He knew it would push them out instead of staying here for the winter."

"What's wrong with wintering here? We all need a break."

"Because then we'd never leave and that will wipe us out."

"How? If we make it through the winter, we can survive here. We don't need to leave."

"We won't."

“Won’t what?”

“Survive the winter. We’ll starve.”

“But we have all those new ideas for—”

“For a year?”

Marc knew she’d never been wrong. Now he understood why she was so concerned. “A full year?”

Angela trembled as the wind blew against them. “More by a couple of months. We’ll be reduced to eating our dead. Then, each other.”

“We have to find a new place.”

“Yes, but not here. It’s time to go south.”

Marc opened his mouth to deny that.

Angela walked away without saying anything else. Marc’s instant need to fight the idea was common in Safe Haven. They’d beaten the government and were now at the top of the food chain. Few people understood why they needed to leave and unless she could make them, they wouldn’t budge from US soil.

Marc would have followed her, but his demon brought up another fact. *She isn’t going to tell them yet. She’s taking them into the caves.*

*Why? If we have to go, why do all this anyway?*

*Because it’s the only way these sheep will leave,* the demon replied sadly. *She will have to watch them die by the hundreds before the truth can be accepted.*

*She can’t take that.*

*She has to. Your existence depends on it.*

“We can’t do it in that time period. You have to make her understand.”

Kenn snorted, gathering the equipment for the day’s labors. “Right. ‘Cause she values my opinion.” He was scheduled to mark off tent spaces right now. Tomorrow, he would get their activities and classes running. The medical bay and Eagle training tents were already open for use. It would be a busy week.

Theo’s brows scrunched together. “I mean it, Kenn. We can’t run the pipes, set up power, and get everyone inside in ten days. No one can.”

*Adrian could.* Kenn wisely kept that to himself. “Shortest time?”

“A month.” Theo had already calculated it. “We haven’t even been in the cave yet and the clock is already rolling on day one.”

Kenn sighed. “I’ll talk to her, but don’t expect it to matter, is all I’m sayin’. She does as she sees fit. You know that.”

“And normally I respect it, but this time, she’s asking too much for the skills we have here.”

Kenn left the building tent without any of it showing in his expression. He hadn’t thought it was doable either, but Angela was forever surprising him. Maybe she had this covered.

Kenn took a minute to survey the area that Angela had led them to last night. It was a relatively flat spot surrounded by trees on two sides. The south was rocky roads and the north was a mountain, right up close and personal. Kenn could see bird nests in the crags and a gaping hole that their men would soon descend into. It was humbling and haunting. He wasn’t

one of the people who were happy about going underground. He didn't fear the walls closing in. He feared them falling.

Kenn spotted the point man and approved the change from Allan. That man had been switched to radio coverage for the day. Angela had turned the radio over to Kenn and Tonya when they arrived here. She'd told him they needed to search through the Eagles and find at least two more people to cover the airwaves. Kenn liked the idea of being Safe Haven's mouth, as did Tonya. They'd stayed up late discussing how to do it and gotten so involved that they had crashed without having sex. It was a big adjustment that Kenn had never thought he'd be happy with. He liked a knockout at bedtime, but things were shifting rapidly in this new life and he was learning to handle it.

Kenn spent the next hour traversing the camp to make sure everyone knew where they were supposed to be. At lunch, he would have Allan announce schedules over the radio in code. It would cover all the shifts since everyone was here right now.

*Except Adrian.* Kenn was hoping Theo was wrong and that it could be done in ten days, because Kenn planned to ask for Adrian to be pardoned. Considering some of the other requests Angela was likely to get for their rewards, Kenn thought his might be the easiest for her to grant. What Cynthia desired didn't even seem possible to the Marine, despite all the proof of magic around him, and Kindle wanted time alone with Marc. Kenn mostly expected Angela to Welch on the offers, but he wasn't entirely sure. If it were bad enough, she would give Kindle a night with Marc to save these people.

“You think so?”

Kenn flinched. He hadn't heard her come over.

Kendle snickered and remained by his side. After waiting a few seconds, she repeated her question.

“Yes.” Kenn scowled. “But it would mean something awful is coming for us, so don’t wish for it!”

Kendle stopped, shocked, as Kenn strode off. She wouldn’t wish it anyway, would she?

*Of course, you would, that voice inside replied. But you would hate yourself even more afterward.*

Kendle veered toward the garden trucks that were in the process of being replanted, soothed by the response. She had enough self-loathing. If she added to that weight, it would have to be for more than just one night.

Kendle let her feet take her to the rear, where the gate was open for teams going in and out. No one else was supposed to leave, but Kendle walked through the gate without reporting to any of the frowning guards. They knew where she was going.

Kendle followed the rocky, weed-dotted path that had clearly been here before the war. It appeared that it had been traveled since then too. She could tell by the beaten weeds growing around rocks instead of over them, and by how the garbage on the trail wasn’t molded into the ground yet. People had been here recently.

Kendle didn’t speak as she entered Adrian’s small camp. The five soldiers lounging around a small fire regarded her in surprise as she stepped between them, but no one interfered with her progress. Despite her being on their hit list, they all went back to snoozing when Adrian didn’t order her removed or shot. She’d killed patrols and teams by herself and led dozens more into lethal traps. She was enemy number three to

these soldiers; it offended her that Angela was above even Marc in that pecking order. *Isn't there anything that bitch is bad at?*

"You can't do that around me."

Kindle found Adrian in front of the flap of his battered tent, smoking and drinking from a bottle of Wild Turkey.

"Gonna be one of those days, is it?" She kept her distance. She didn't like drunks.

"I mean it, Kindle. Stop hating her for her strengths."

Kindle sighed, taking a seat on an overturned bucket. "What about her weaknesses? Are those fair game?"

Adrian took a long swig, not answering.

Kindle didn't follow the remark with another snide comment. Instead, she examined the man she was pinning her hopes on. In the light of dawn, he certainly didn't look like much.

"Good morning to you too."

Kindle flushed as she recognized that moment of being too sober to get drunk unless he wanted to go straight to the pass out stage. *He's in the early stages of alcoholism.*

"Maybe." Adrian shrugged. "The least of my worries."

"Will it become one of mine?"

Adrian sat the bottle on the ground. "It's unlikely we'll be together that long."

Kindle still didn't feel a sting, except in knowing that it would be Angela he went to. "So what's the agenda here? People are asking. I've been told to get that answer."

"By the sheep, the wolfdogs, or the boss?"

"The first two. Angela hasn't even mentioned you."

Adrian didn't wince. Of course, she wouldn't mention him to anyone. She had to put distance between them right now.

"And later? Later, she'll call for you, right?"

Adrian's gaze swung toward the busy camp that was sending all sorts of noise echoing up the mountain. "Not even if her life depends on it. She'll never break her vow."

"Which one is that?" Kindle snorted lowly. "She's made a lot of them."

"And delivered." Adrian evaded the question. He didn't want to talk about how strong Angela's love for Marc would make her. "If you didn't want her man, what would you think of her?"

Kindle didn't want to discuss that. She pointed toward Conner's tent. "What about him? Where does he fit in while you lurk out here?"

"Lurk?" Adrian stared coolly. "I'm in plain view."

Kindle grunted. "Fine. What happens when the winter comes and snow covers your little area? You guys don't have a cave to hide in."

"Don't need one."

"Because you'll be in Safe Haven?"

"Conner will."

"And where will you be?" She was aware that Conner's fake snores had stopped.

"Working. Like you."

"On what?"

"Your former career is about to be used." Adrian stood up. "Remember your lessons on rappelling and rock climbing?"

Kendle nodded, flashing to scrapes, soreness, and a few heart-stopping moments of adrenaline-laced excitement. “Vividly.”

“Good. Be prepared and you’ll earn points with her.”

“Won’t she know it came from you?”

“Of course. The points come because you were smart enough to follow the advice. She likes anything that helps her goals along. She doesn’t care who they come from.”

Kendle stewed on that as Adrian walked by her, not concerned that he was in his boxers or that he lingered next to her to place a soft kiss on the top of her head.

“Don’t ever call her a bitch around me again. Please.”

Kendle swallowed, nodding nervously. The menace under the request was clear.

Adrian went by her, kicking snoozing soldiers as he passed them. They jerked awake in confusion and annoyance.

“What?”

“We under attack?”

“Where’s the coffee?”

Adrian whistled cheerfully as he disappeared down the farthest path.

Kendle ignored the whining men around her who had mistakenly thought sleeping in would be their life now. If she could get ahead of Angela on enough things, Marc would like her, but more importantly, he would respect her. If she could pull off something big that way, she could earn real points and Marc would be forced to acknowledge that publicly. It would also settle down some of the more outspoken people who hated her associating with a traitor.

The sky rumbled loudly. Kindle slowly went back to camp, deep into planning lessons that would give her successes. Safe Haven had a number of problems. *How many of them can I fix?*

Adrian knelt by the small creek and fished out the now cool Cokes he'd dropped in last night. It wasn't the same as ice from the mess, but it would do.

He wiped off a stump and flopped down, now feeling the small amount of alcohol that he'd consumed. An empty stomach and drinking were not a good mix.

He lit a cigar, wincing at the thought of how the doctor would react to him smoking and drinking so soon after a heart attack. That lecture would be long and graphic.

Adrian spared a brief moment on the way he'd evaded and manipulated Kindle. She was a babe in the woods, even compared to how Angela had been when she'd come to Safe Haven. Kindle needed a daddy, not a lover. Adrian wasn't happy to have to be both. Marc had known it would take a lot of time, energy, and focus to help Kindle and he'd also known that if Adrian failed, Angela would be disappointed. She wanted Kindle to settle in and be happy, but Adrian already knew that wasn't possible with him. Kindle needed a mate who would love her. Adrian was confident there were men who could do it, but not until she recovered from her illness. Few Eagles would know what to do with her violence. It was a wonder that Marc had, considering the way he'd coddled Angela.

Adrian listened to the camp, to the voices and the sounds of an existence he was no longer a part of. He'd given them

up, like he was supposed to, but this living afterwards hadn't been in his plan. He had no idea what to do with himself now, but he'd also predicted this issue back when he was busy scribbling in notebooks daily. Angela would read those notes. If she cared about him at all, she would cover it.

*And if not?*

"Then it's over." Adrian sighed deeply and tilted the bottle up. There was nothing more he could do to influence her. She was the boss and he was a traitor. His life was hers to use, give, or leave behind as she saw fit.

### 3

"Save us a table." Tonya motioned to the rookie females she'd chosen from the list in the mess. The contest board was going to be handy for keeping track of people and locations. "I'd like hot tea with whatever sweetener we're being offered."

The rookie females, all happy to have been picked for something so fast, rushed off, each planning ways to curry favor. Tonya was on the boss's team. She had fought in the war. She had their respect.

Tonya knew they'd eventually discover that she wasn't on the team anymore, but she wasn't worried about their reactions. Angela would help her keep the place she'd earned. Tonya spotted Kenn near the entrance to the cave and hurried to catch up. "She has me working on the pharmacy today. Where do you want it?"

"If she sent you to me now, it goes in the main row. Give me an hour and I'll have the spot marked."

“Great.” Tonya lingered, staying with him as he measured and taped off a large square of rocky, weedy ground. Angela wasn’t wasting fuel or energy on mowing. She said the weight of their tents and vehicles would keep most of it down.

They both looked over as a silence fell among the laboring people around them. They found Samantha, Jennifer, and Cynthia headed for the training tent, with Kendle a few grudging paces behind. The front females were joking and chatting, while Kendle’s sullen expression screamed worlds. To backdrop this image, Allan’s voice droned through the radios.

“Rookie signups are now halfway full. Get in line soon. Everyone wants to be one of us.”

Kenn and Tonya exchanged glances of misery and annoyance. Kenn knew she was resigning and approved of it. He even sympathized with her, but Allan’s boring dialogue was a concern for them both and it overrode her misery. Getting new people into the Eagles was still one of Safe Haven’s top goals and that lifeless call wouldn’t be responded to.

“I’m on it as soon as the pharmacy is up.”

“Good.” Kenn stood up to view his work, aware of her edge of unhappiness. Now that it was done, the sense of loss was hitting her. “Why don’t you go eat first? Then, you can help me until I get to the pharmacy.”

Tonya smiled gratefully and went to the mess. She wasn’t looking forward to what she would have to do now, but it wasn’t the worst thing she’d done here by far.

Kenn refused to let her carry that. “You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. You pulled your weight and then some.”

Tonya stumbled at the praise.

Kenn laughed. "Easy there, little momma."

Tonya continued to the mess in a better mood. Kenn was right. She hadn't reverted. She'd done well.

Kenn watched her vanish into the crowd that was about to enjoy their first post-apocalyptic breakfast of steak and eggs, then got back to his duties. Kenn wanted to be on the pharmacy by the time he'd told her. At 4pm, Marc would take over point and Kenn would be free to shower, eat, and sleep. Angela had them all on rough twelve-hour schedules starting today, but the results would be worth it. To combat the fatigue, the shifts began and ended at odd hours. Kenn approved. Keeping people awake from 4-7am was hard.

Kenn noticed Theo's group approaching the cave entrance and didn't make eye contact. He wasn't going to waste Angela's time by passing Theo's message. The boss was busy; she didn't need the naysayers taking up her precious hours.

Kenn glanced upward, toward the cliff Adrian had chosen for his banishment. He would stay there, where he could observe them all and mourn the life he could have had among them. Kenn still wasn't sure Adrian deserved such a punishment, considering the outcomes of his plots and schemes. But the choice had been made and all that was left was to find a way to get him allowed back in. Kenn knew there had to be one. There was no way Angela had left that out.

## 4

"We're not spending enough time worrying over the future."

Angela's opening sentence sent concern through the training tent. The females gathered there settled down to listen as she got their meeting rolling.

"Get your notebooks out and don't leave this tent until you're clear on what I expect from you." Angela dropped into the chair behind the small desk she'd had placed in front of two picnic tables. She would be in here off and on for the next two weeks, updating teams and going over new plans. She would need the space.

"I'm assigning some quiet work. Not all of you will be involved in all parts of it, so even though you know the basics of what's going on, keep your mouths shut. Don't even talk to each other about it if you can help it." Angela opened her notebook. "I'm passing around a sheet of items I need you to collect above all others. Pay attention to the notes at the bottom of this list. It will tell you what we're doing. Keep in mind you already have the perfect cover for it. I promised to send descendants out for luxury items."

Angela handed the page to Jennifer, who read the notes at the bottom first. Her smile sent relief through the tent.

Jennifer put it between her and Samantha. Both females began to copy it into their notebooks.

"During each of these activities and chores, you will be helping train the rookies. As you do this, do not give special treatment to the females. None of us received it. We earned our place and it has to be the same for them. Someone tell me a reason why."

"The men will rebel." Tracy was in the back of the class, away from the teacher.

"Yes. Another?"

“It isn’t right or fair.” Becky’s mind was only able to go so deep because of her age.

“Yes. Another?”

“We’re weak when we’re divided. It has to be the same for everyone.” Cynthia took the paper as the front row finished with it. She placed it between her and Becky, and started copying.

“Yes. I need you to pull in those with the ability to do the things we’ve done, and to train the others to the best of your own ability. Bring the teams together during meals and events; don’t tolerate badmouthing other crews. I want us united.”

All the females were busy writing down her instructions or copying her first paper. Angela handed out a second page. “If your name wasn’t on the board, I have other work for you. This is a copy of it. Once we get into the caves, all of you will be on this, so copy it word for word and keep each other up to date on anything concerning this one—especially security. A patrol team will meet you there, but you’ll have to be able to work and watch out for each other.”

“Who’s in charge?” Samantha’s name hadn’t been on the board under the gatherers like Angela had said it would be.

Angela shrugged. “It could still change, so you’ll have to figure that out when you get there. The guards will keep you alive and help with the labor. You ladies do the same, huh?”

“You know it,” came the reply from each of them. As long as they weren’t helping an enemy, it didn’t matter.

“Next is replacing team members.”

The tent instantly became tense.

“I’m getting a lot of questions and I know you are too. I’ll handle that. Until I do, tell people I’m evaluating every

member of Safe Haven's population for that slot." Angela sighed. "And that brings me to the next topic. We've actually lost two members. Tonya resigned this morning. She's in the mess now, waiting to give me her Eagle jacket." Angela knew it wasn't a surprise to most of her team. She made it clear where she stood. "As far as I'm concerned, it didn't happen. She's working on other things for now, direct stuff for the boss."

"So you won't accept her jacket?" Candy was curious who Angela might pick for that slot.

"No. Next is last. Here are your personal assignments. If you're not scheduled for anything when you leave this tent, it's because you need sleep—whether you want it or not. Go eat and then crash." Angela shut her book and beckoned to Greg, who had come to the flap but waited for a break. "We're finished. Come in."

Greg joined her at the table as the women finished copying the papers and passing around their assignment envelopes. "I'm caught up."

"Great. Ready for the next list?"

Greg obligingly took out his notebook, barely awake.

"Tell Seth to take Allan, Donald, and three rookies from the a.m. shift to the nearest golf course. Use trucks and load up all the batteries, carts, and the rest of the items on this list." She handed him the sheet and waited for him to finish writing. "I want Neil, along with these people, sent to a few local power and lighting stores. Locations are on the list. Find one that's stocked and clean it out—every bulb, every wire, every tool."

Greg stored the list with the first one and completed the notes, wondering briefly if Angela had even slept. She certainly didn't look like it.

"I want a complete fence up around the third QZ area, Zone C. It will be finished by morning, no matter what else is on Marc's list."

"I'll make certain he knows." Zone C was going to become a problem or else Angela wouldn't have given that order. Greg made a note to also tell the Eagles on duty near there to stay alert.

"Kyle should take Whitney and five members from the pm board to heating and air conditioning stores. Pick one and strip it. Give this sheet to Kyle. It has possible locations and other details. Everyone leaves after mess tonight."

"Got it." Greg left while still writing down her orders.

Angela glanced around the tent. Most of the females had already opened their new envelopes and vanished. Only Samantha remained.

Angela sighed. She hadn't expected any of them to figure it out so fast.

"Why?" Samantha scowled. "I understand the cover is that we're out gathering, but I have to know your true motives."

"It's needed, in more ways than you want details on right now."

"As long as it's not for *him*."

"It is in ways. Adrian will benefit, the same as the rest of us. There's no avoiding that."

"So long as you aren't setting it all up to have him forgiven." Samantha went to the flap. "I won't ever forgive him for betraying us. Neither should you."

Marc entered the tent as Samantha left. Clearly, he'd heard their short conversation, but he didn't hassle Angela over what he had put together from it. If she wasn't lying to her team, she wasn't lying to him either. She didn't want Adrian in Safe Haven. Marc didn't care why. "I have those reports you wanted on food, fuel, and water."

"Great. Stuff it in this notebook."

Marc put it where she indicated; she snapped the band around the book before depositing it in her deepest pocket. She would go over it later when she had time to run the numbers.

"You ready?"

Angela slid an arm through his. "Starving."

Marc chuckled and led her to the mess, where he had things ready to go. Li Sing would bring her fresh plate out as soon as they sat down. He'd been instructed to keep it coming. He'd also told Shawn to wake him three hours early tonight so he could relieve her during afternoon chow. She hadn't slept yet and that wasn't good.

Angela leaned against Marc's heat as they entered the mess, soaking up his presence even though they were only going to be apart for a little while. She hated any time away from him.

"Got a minute?"

Zack sounded like he hadn't slept either.

Angela turned to confront him with stiff shoulders hidden under Marc's big arm. "Zack, I'm going to ask you a question. After that, we'll cover your latest complaint. Ready?"

"Go on." Zack was set to embarrass her in front of the eating camp.

"Do you want me to accept it or refuse?"

Zack paused, stuttering. “I, um...”

Angela nodded. “Check the board, Zackie.”

Zack did.

Doug pointed at the name Angela had drawn there last night on the way to her tent after the ash storm.

*Head of camp security—Zack*

“I have great and terrible work for you. Accept or refuse? Pick now.”

Zack couldn’t keep playing the emotional game. He caved, shoulders slumping “Accept.”

Angela smiled. She hadn’t been sure. “Sweet. Come have a steak with us and we’ll discuss some of the details for the next few days on basic issues while Marc eats. When he’s done, you can escort him to our tent. Then, go brief the security team now gathering in the training tent.”

Zack was shocked, grateful, and finding it hard to stay resentful.

Angela took her seat and beamed at Li when he placed a large, rare steak in front of her.

“Eggs comin’, Missy!”

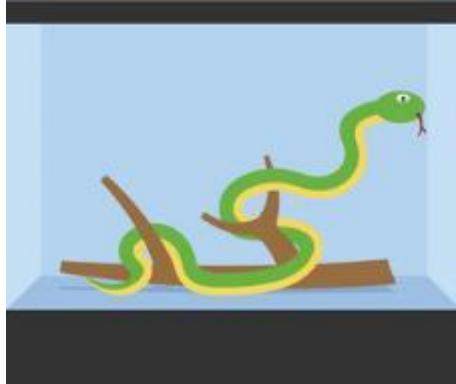
Angela made a face and shook her head. “Just the beef, please.”

Those around her chuckled, but Marc worried over it. He would have to find vitamins to give her in place of the things she wouldn’t eat now.

Angela didn’t tell him they were low on eggs. Her new smell aversion was a convenient excuse. Her people came before her, even now.

## Chapter Five

# One Bright Afternoon



1

“W

hy are we doing this?”

Quinn was the only one of their crew with enough breath left to answer. “We’ll need water. After it snows, we’ll collect it, melt it, boil it, and be flush all winter long.”

After his trek with Marc, Quinn was now in the best shape of his life. The rocky, treacherous ground was giving him little trouble.

The others weren’t so fortunate, but Josh’s confusion was at least distracting as he continued to push Quinn for an answer he could accept. “I mean now. Why worry about it so soon?”

Quinn assumed his leadership role for this run. “You give me the reason.”

Realizing he was being tested, Josh struggled to come up with the correct response. “Even she doesn’t plan things eight to twelve weeks ahead, so I don’t know.”

Quinn shook his head. “There’s your mistake. She plans things out as far as she can. There is no limit on the future.”

“So why, then?” Josh used the conversation to help him ignore burning lungs and a slightly dizzy feeling.

“Because bad shit happens. If we don’t prepare for it, we don’t deserve to survive. Why wait until it snows to get ready? What if someone screws with our water again? Or if we have a leak? We’re doing it now because we can. There’s no guarantee of later.”

Josh’s mind accepted that reasoning; he trudged along behind his team leader while mulling over the deeper issue connected to that type of thinking. “Do you think she was one of those crazy prepper nuts?”

Quinn scowled, refusing to answer.

Scott, the man next to Josh, stuck his foot out and tripped the rude Eagle.

Josh landed without injury to anything except his pride.

“You didn’t watch your mouth, so I didn’t watch my boot. Wanna go further?” Scott was proficient in kai, often sparring with Neil because he could take a hit and still keep coming.

Josh glared. “What did I do wrong?”

“Preppers are not nut jobs.” Quinn tossed it over his shoulder. He hadn’t stopped hiking. “And we’re all preppers now or we don’t survive. You insulted every member of Safe Haven.”

Josh’s countenance went scarlet. “I didn’t mean to!”

Scott marched around him, still prepared for a negative reaction.

Josh wasn't a slow learner; he followed Scott with new thoughts in his mind.

Scott and Quinn took the lead together as they climbed the summit they'd chosen to recon. The two men shared small grins. They'd gone through these training sessions and life-altering moments not that long ago, but it already felt like another lifetime. Their battles had changed them completely, as it did with everyone who joined the Eagles or labored quietly for the boss. Adrian had begun something that none of them wanted to end. It was a relief to know Angela planned to continue the traditions.

The crew reached the crest of the hill and stood there, gazing in awe and concern as they recovered from the exertion. There hadn't been another way to get up here.

"We'll have to make a road of some kind if we pick this spot." Scott inspected the opposite side of the flat area. It was covered with jagged edges and cliff sides that would crumble under the weight of heavy machinery.

"We'll cause a slide from here." Josh's voice was subdued. "I vote we check a different place."

"I agree." Quinn waved. "But we'll do lunch up here now. It's a great view, and we can use our glasses while we eat to narrow down another location."

All of them were glad for that order. The small crew dug through their kits for the lunches from the mess. Li Sing had tables of boxed lunches waiting for all of the workers who couldn't be there for regular meals. It was viewed as a nice service for their efforts, but a few of the deeper-thinking

people understood Angela was already beginning to ration their food.

## 2

“Can we eat these?” Billy was standing next to a long, murky aquarium where shadows swam sluggishly through the water. They’d gotten to the resort area with no trouble and hadn’t encountered anyone. They had two men on sniper duty on top of the church and were now exploring the buildings to determine how they would cart all this stuff home.

Chris, standing behind them at the long aquatic plants tank, would have come over, but Billy waved him off.

Chris was offended.

Jerry Jones swelled with importance. “Well, let me see here... Ah, minnows. They’re good for bait.”

Billy pointed at the next tank. “And these?”

The vet stayed quiet as Billy quizzed Jerry on his knowledge of fish, realizing it was a test. Chris was still offended, but it also made him determined to be the good news on this team. He hoped to find something useful.

Billy quickly tired of asking Jerry to verify his knowledge. He motioned toward Chris. “Do what my XO says. Everyone needs to remember to keep your hands out of the cages until we get the gloves from the truck. Some of these animals could still be alive.”

Billy left the shocked vet to keep things under control as he joined Tommy outside. He nodded to their snipers and then got his notebook out. Both men spent a few minutes making lists of items they’d discovered inside, and also notes on what

they would need to haul it all. Billy was already positive they needed large trucks, but he had no idea how they were going to lift some of these items. Angela wanted every drop of water they found brought in for cleaning.

“We’re gonna be here for a while.” Tommy tried to shake away a hand cramp.

“Yeah. At least a week.” Billy grunted. “Maybe longer if the basements here are as full as the stores.”

“Are we sending two men back and camping out?”

“You know it. This will be an amazing load. Great points.”

The two men continued to write down notes and details to be carried to Angela. The mood was good.

In the pet shop behind them, the small crew wandered the aisles, peering into tanks and cages. The dim store smelled like mildew, but it wasn’t as bad as they’d been expecting. All of them remembered visiting establishments like this before the war.

“Hey! This is a rattlesnake. We could use the poison for something, right?”

Chris frowned from a few aisles over. “No. There are enough poisons on this planet without resorting to killing for it.”

“But it’s already dead.” Jerry slid the screen off the dusty tank. He stuck his hand in and grabbed the coil of skin by what he assumed was its head.

“You’re not putting your hand in—”

“Ahh!”

The rest of the crew rushed to help Jerry.

Chris stayed where he was, examining a long tank on the bottom shelf. “Dumbass.”

When Billy and Tommy ran inside, they focused on the vet in surprise; he shrugged. “I’m not a doctor. No cure for a snakebite now, anyway, is there?”

There was little they could say. They went to offer Dale comfort.

Dale was shuddering and almost crying. “He’s dead! How could he die so fast?”

Billy observed the purple face and the swollen hands. “Allergic reaction to the venom. Probably suffocated.” He gestured to Tommy “We’ll clear the body. The rest of you get to work.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Dale scowled. “One of your crew died!”

Billy and Tommy ignored the upset man as they lugged the body out to their vehicle. It would also be sent to Angela.

“Hey! I want to go back.” Dale followed. “It’s not safe out here!”

Tommy sighed in frustration. “Its fine if you don’t do stupid shit. Jerry didn’t have to put his hand in the tank. Go put the screen on that cage. We don’t need a loose snake in the store while we work.”

Dale, panicked at the thought, ran inside to make sure the angry reptile hadn’t already escaped.

Billy observed the door, where the vet was now using the daylight to illuminate the notebook so he could see to write. “You okay?”

Chris glanced over in surprise. “Why wouldn’t I be? I wasn’t bit.”

Billy snickered, impressed. “Cool. Help us with the body, will ya?”

Chris didn't mind the dirty labor. He went willingly to help them wrap and tape Jerry's corpse. He'd done much worse...recently.

Billy clapped him on the shoulder. "It's good that you finally joined the Eagles. The camp will get off you now."

Chris didn't reply. He couldn't care less about the herd or the precious Eagles. His obsessions were more personal.

### 3

"I mean it, Angie. You have to sleep."

"I will, I promise, but not yet." Angela turned to Greg before Marc could argue further. It was after four and he'd been trying to get her to go to their tent, but she was busy.

"All the crews have chosen to stay at their sites. Other than Shane's team, everyone else is at the first spot on your list. Shane said the lumberyard they went to had been torched. Nothing was usable. They're going to the next location and will check in later."

Angela could feel Greg holding something back. "And?"

Greg sighed. "Jerry Jones is dead. Snakebite."

Angela winced. "Anything else?"

Glad to move on, Greg held out a paper. "These are the new Eagle signups so far. It's getting better now that Tonya's on the radio."

"Pharmacy open?"

"Yeah. She has a couple of the rookies running things and coming to her with questions about people's requests. Appears to be working."

"Good. Next?"

Tiring of the fight, Marc went to the mess truck, choosing to work the problem from another angle. If she wasn't going to cooperate, he wasn't going to play fair.

"A group of refugees came in about an hour ago. Lot of coughing and runny noses." Greg continued to give Angela the hourly update. When he finished with her, he would go to Doug at the mess so the big board could be updated too.

"Not wearing masks during the ash?"

"That's what they're claiming, but a couple of them have awfully red cheeks considering the lack of wind right now. The doctor is checking them out."

"He's wearing the protective gear?"

"Yep." Greg snickered. "Looks like a giant ninja turtle."

Angela gave the hoped-for smile. "How are we coming with the storm prep?"

"We've got most of the supplies gathered into the two trucks you specified, but it's a mess. We'll have it organized before our shift ends tonight."

"Good. We'll need it ready."

"Winds?" Greg surmised from the supplies they'd collected.

"Yes, and lightning. Make sure Kenn gets a chance to go over the main den before the storm. I don't know if he needs to ground anything or even exactly what that means, but he will. If he needs hands for it, give him the best people no matter where you have to pull them from."

"You got it. That's all from me. You?"

"All caught up for a bit."

Greg headed for the mess.

Angela continued toward the QZ before Marc could appear again and nag about her going to bed.

“What do you mean you haven’t tested it today?”

Angela kept going, but also kept track of Peggy yelling at Doug for not checking his sugar levels.

“What do you mean you haven’t done it in days?!”

Angela remained on course for the QZ. Doug deserved the scolding and the public scene. There was no reason he couldn’t still have a good life if he started taking care of himself; keeping track of his sugar levels was the key to controlling his illness.

“The needle hurts? You’re kidding, right?”

Angela tried not to snicker. So Doug was scared of needles. Angela got a flash of what would happen next and snorted in amusement. “You shouldn’t have told her that, Doug.”

Angela spotted Kindle and Daryl, both coming toward the mess from the tent area. They’d gotten sleep and were now set to eat and resume their posts from last night. As she watched, the pair avoided each other, each picking a different mess line to join. Angela sighed. *That’s going well.*

“Angie.”

Angela jumped, and then snickered, hoping to stall the complaining. “You scared me.”

Marc saw through the act. He held up a plate of steaming, rare beef. In his other hand, was a joint and a bottle of water. He grinned as her face lit up, retreating. “Come on, pretty kitty. Come get the food...”

Marc ran as Angela gave chase.

Witnesses cackled at his antics.

“That’s not fair!” Angela cornered him against their tent.

“That’s the idea.” Marc tossed the joint inside. “Go on, kitty. Get your nip.”

Angela punched him in the arm and then ducked under the flap, deftly snatching the plate from his hands. “Get out there or I won’t stay in here.”

Marc vanished as the shadows of her sentries appeared on the canvas.

Angela laughed and dug into the beef.

## 4

“She’s finally asleep.” Marc joined Zack an hour later. “Get these extra fences up while you can.”

Zack agreed completely. He was honored by the duty he’d been given. He directed the work personally while other senior men stood guard or helped rookies figure out what to do. It was slightly chaotic right now, but both men knew things would settle down and become smoother over the next week. Teamwork took a little time.

“Damn.” Marc swore as the bell for evening mess rang. “I meant to tell them no bell.”

“Maybe she won’t wake up.” Zack knew there was little chance of that. If the bell didn’t wake her, the sudden rush of voices and footsteps going toward the food lines would.

Marc sighed. “If she comes out, I swear, I’m going to throw the ugliest tantrum she’s ever seen. I may even shit myself so she has to change my diaper.”

Zack needed the laugh; he enjoyed his minute with Marc. He would never let any of them in again, not like he had before

Crista's death, but he would still allow himself these moments or there was little reason to go on. "Theo said she can come down in the morning. He'll be ready."

Marc scowled, but didn't protest. Angela had to go in and assign areas, though he had tried to convince her to let him do it. She'd refused, insisting it was part of her job. Marc agreed, but that didn't stop the concern. Not everyone was cut out for being underground. "He give you a time?"

"Said they're cleaning the first areas tonight, while the gatherers are still out. Estimated dawn."

"I'll let her know." Marc added it to his book. It was nearly half full; he would need another one soon.

"Is something wrong?" Zack frowned. "You want the defenses up, and she wants us in the cave ASAP. Is more trouble coming?"

Marc wasn't in the mood to lie or play Angela's games, but he knew better than to tell the truth. "You'll have to discuss that with the boss."

It was still an answer. Zack sighed resignedly. "I kinda knew when she made me head of security. She's trying hard to keep me here."

"Not just for the problems, though. We need you. You're good at what you do."

"So are you." Zack was happy with the praise. "Camp is almost fully running."

"Yeah, I thought it would make her happy to get up and see how much we'd accomplished overnight."

"It will. She's like Adrian. She's happiest when work is being done." Zack responded to an Eagle who called him over.

Marc stewed on the observation. Was Angie really happiest when everyone was working? Why?

*She knows building a future will take all our lives, the demon responded. Every day of toiling now is a day of living later.*

Marc headed for the QZ, where their new arrivals were being fed. Charlie and Tracy were there, handing trays to guards wearing protective suits. Marc approved. The refugees sounded sick. Coughing was a constant noise from their one tent.

Marc gave the doctor a lifted brow. Doctor Brooke waved him off, indicating it wasn't anything serious, but Marc didn't like or trust the man and sent his demon in to check them out.

As Marc walked by the activity row that Kenn had taped off before crashing, the demon returned. *Environmental effects, nothing more. No outbreaks there.*

"And morals? Ethics?"

*Little, the demon admitted. They've had a hard time of it. Reprogramming will be required.*

Marc wasn't overly concerned about that. Most of the people who'd joined Safe Haven needed some changing, including himself. The Marc who'd escorted Angela here could never have stayed while she led these people; he could never have followed her orders and shared this power.

Tonya's voice echoed over the radio, sounding tired. "Rookie Eagle signups have now ended for the night. A fresh sheet will be in the mess come dawn. Add your name and play our game. Whadda ya say, folks? We need Eagles. Think about it."

Marc was pleased with the messages that Tonya had been sending out. He agreed with Allan no longer being scheduled for that duty. When Tonya and Kenn were busy or sleeping, he and Angie would cover it. She said people liked hearing their voices, that it was a comfort.

Marc shifted toward the tent area, hoping to find Angela's guards still standing outside her tent.

He hadn't reached that zone yet when the ground under his feet trembled. Marc groaned at the timing. She wouldn't sleep through a tremor, no matter who had point.

The earth rumbled angrily, sending strong vibrations through the dirt and rock that brought people from their tents.

Marc hit his button, spotting a long black braid whipping around a jogging shadow. "Just a tremor, folks. Settle down."

Marc saw Angela pause to evaluate the reaction. Marc hit the button again as the ground quieted. "We'll get those off and on for a while. Try not to panic."

There was no distortion of his disapproving voice; people resumed their activities as the rumbling stopped.

Marc heaved a sigh of relief when Angela circled back toward their tent, guards at her side. She had to get more than two hours of sleep at a time or she was going to lose the baby before it grew too big to become an issue.

Marc detoured toward the main gate for a quick walk through to calm people further and check for damages and injuries. He didn't expect to find either. The tremor had only lasted a few seconds. Marc's thoughts went to the prediction of thousands of refugees. He needed to do more to get ready for that. There were some defenses that Angie might not think they needed, so Marc didn't intend to ask her first. The work

would be finished before she woke each morning. He doubted she would order any of it removed once she saw how effective his protections would be. With the right fences and guns, Safe Haven would be able to hold off a riot of refugees.

But Marc was already worried that she wouldn't want to hold them off. Like with the ants, she would kill herself to find a way to take them all in. It was a problem he didn't have a solution for, and he was pretty sure that Adrian hadn't either. That was why the blond man had hoped to be dead before now. He knew the things coming were so awful that no one could handle them all.

Marc refused to think about that issue any longer. He headed toward the QZ, taking the opposite path for the roundtrip to be confident he had it all covered. He spotted kids being escorted to the bathrooms, including the descendant children they'd been picking up along the way. There were now more than thirty children in Safe Haven. That was another reason for Marc to have hope.

As Marc went by, the group of kids turned to look at him. Many of the camp children waved and shouted hello, but the descendants nodded in unison, showing their respect for the male alpha in Safe Haven.

A bit shaken, Marc parroted the formal greeting and walked faster. There was a lot he still didn't understand.

The QZ was dark and quiet—a good sign as far as Marc was concerned, but he felt the tension as he neared the center tents. Tara's guards were rubbing each other the wrong way. Marc could tell from the glowers and crossed arms. Clearly, he'd just missed an argument.

Marc glanced at Kindle. "Things okay here?"

Kendle snorted. “Peachy.”

Marc lifted a brow at Daryl, but got a shrug in response.

Marc sighed. “If you two can’t learn to play nicely, Angela will stop by for a chat. Do either of you want that?”

Both of them reluctantly shook their heads. No one wanted to be on Angela’s shit list, no matter the reason.

“Good. Here’s an idea. Teach each other something on every shift.”

Dumbfounded silence met the suggestion. Marc’s tone lowered into warning, “Then consider it an order.” He left them glowering, aware that it was at him now. “Good. They’ll be too busy bitching about the order to piss each other off.”

Marc saw the poker game going on in one of the soldier QZ tents. The Indian side was now empty. Angela had cleared them this afternoon and spent an hour going over settling instructions with them and their partners. Marc wasn’t sure what she had planned, but he assumed it was building or gathering. She might have let the soldiers out first if it was a security or traveling chore.

Marc stopped at the guard station outside the QZ, aware of furious attention focused on his every move. Inside Safe Haven, Adrian’s visibility was severely limited, but out here, there was little blocking his view.

Marc, feeling calmer than usual when it came to Adrian, ignored the man and joined the small line of shooters waiting for a chance to hit the red Coke sign that had been hung exactly where Marc had instructed. The line was moving slowly, but the mood was good and Marc soaked it up. His thoughts were never nice and neat these days. It was a relief to be welcomed like one of the pack.

## 5

“He’s not asleep yet. Go get him.” Ozzie pointed.

“You got it.” Simon quickly made his way to the entrance of the tunnel. The two men had point in the caves during the evening shift, but Theo was in charge of the entire operation and they had something going on that had to be cleared by him. Neither of them had the experience to green light this one.

Ozzie left the small area they’d set up, not disturbing the sketching teenager. Jennifer had been at the table for hours, churning out the requested blueprints. Until Theo approved her work, they wouldn’t be using those drawings. Ozzie was positive that when she was finished, Jennifer would expect to implement them immediately. As fast as she was drawing, it wouldn’t be morning before that issue had to be handled. Ozzie believed in covering things before they were trouble.

“Poor planning prevents positive performance,” he repeated the saying backwards contentedly, fond of his time in the service. That was why the Eagles had appealed to him so much, even though he could have surrendered to the draft and been useful to the government.

“At least until Angie got to us.” Ozzie didn’t avoid the shadows or feel the claustrophobia that some of their crews were already reporting. Ozzie wasn’t afraid of being inside the earth. Being above it, however, terrified the hell out of him. If they had asked him to fly, there could have been chaos.

Theo wasn’t happy to be disturbed. He had just gotten settled into the builder tent he was sharing with his main crew.

He was on his cot with a full stomach, freshly showered, and boots off. He'd been about to read over the notes he'd made earlier, and then sleep for ten hours.

"Tell her I have to go over them. In the morning." Theo glared.

Simon knelt by Theo's cot, aware of their audience. "If the sketches are good, we can have it ready for the boss at dawn, instead of tomorrow night."

Theo understood their need to score points and gave in, rising. "Okay. I need coffee. I was already getting sleepy."

Simon rushed off to secure a fresh mug.

Theo pulled on his boots. "You guys get some rest. Even if the drawings are done, we can't roll on it until Angela approves it."

The rest of the crew went back to what they'd been doing, but Theo could tell Simon's words of scoring early points had sent fresh alertness into them. There was always a possibility the boss would rise early, sensing they might have something for her. Angela was spooky that way; Theo respected it. "I'll call if it's good, okay?"

That was welcomed with nods. Calm returned to the tent.

Theo stuffed his laces into his socks instead of tying them and stumbled toward the cave, almost hoping Jennifer did have something good. When she'd said she was supposed to help with the blueprints, Theo had assumed she was like Neil—a map maker—but she'd offered enough ideas and proof of her words that he'd put her on outlining locations of key components like air and power, as well as waste and food setups. He marched a bit faster, wishing he'd thought to grab his jacket. He'd forgotten how chilly midnight was.

Theo was entering the cave when Simon joined him, handing over the mug of coffee. Theo sipped it as he eased into the cave that had gaping holes and razor-sharp edges. There was a center gap that a horse could fall through. They had a lot of work to do to make this livable, but the addition of the hanging lanterns by the night shift was a start. They made it possible for Theo to see that a crew had come in and cleaned these first level areas. Small piles of garbage were in the corners of each cavern, waiting for retrieval.

The smell of bleach was strong. Theo took a mask from one of the many stacks that had been distributed throughout the areas they were exploring. There were also oxygen packs, for those who had trouble adjusting to being underground. Theo wasn't one of those, but he did hate the smell of bleach and increased his pace. He wasn't feeling good about living inside the earth, but he knew that he could. He was still hoping for a recount on that vote.

Theo stopped short of entering the area Jennifer was in, drawn by the hum of energy. They didn't have a source of power in here yet, but the sounds and vibrations were unmistakable. An engine was running. Theo advanced quietly, approaching the table from the side so she could see him coming.

“You shouldn't be up yet.”

Her voice didn't sound right. Theo carefully took the chair across from her, glancing over the blueprint she was laboring on. Her pencil flew across the sheet, adding details, notes.

Theo gaped in surprise at the nearly complete diagram of their air system. It was perfect, exactly as he'd envisioned it.

“I took it from your mind.” Jennifer’s hand didn’t pause. “I wouldn’t have insisted. I would have let you sleep.”

Theo didn’t tell her the others weren’t rooting against her. She obviously already knew that and didn’t approve of their competitions.

“I actually wanted those hours to go over it before I showed you.” Her hand slowed, then stopped. “It’s the first one I’ve done.” She gently placed her pencil on the table. “It’s finished, I think.”

Theo slid the draft around, confident he would have her do the rest of the blueprints. “It’s really, really good, Jenny. Honest.”

The teenager beamed at the praise, sending good energy throughout the cave.

In response, an odd howl filtered up to them, making both people tense.

“Is that something we should worry about?”

Jennifer studied the sound, and then shook her head. “No, but note it for the boss. The herd might stampede if she doesn’t give them a logical explanation.”

“Is there one?”

“Not one they’ll like. She’ll probably ask you to say its air in the pipes.”

Theo immediately told himself the same thing and felt that hair inside his brain lay down. He could deal with magic. Ghosts? No.

“Candy won’t be good for you.” Jennifer fell into that tone of the dead. “Known as the architect of Safe Haven, your legend will be far and long.”

“If I avoid her?” Theo already hated the message.

“Only if you avoid her.” Jennifer leaned away from his upset vibes. “I’m sorry. She’s not one of us.”

“What does that mean? She’s a traitor?”

“She hates men. She’ll worsen with time.”

“Does Angela know?”

Jennifer shrugged, coming back to herself. “I don’t know. Probably.”

“Then why would she put us together?”

“Because you like her and you’re lonely, and you’ll be content at times. Some days, especially since we all almost died, that’s a lot. You know?”

Theo felt his anger leave and nodded tiredly. “Yes, but tell her I don’t want that, will you? Even if I’m meant to be alone. I hate settling.”

Jennifer gave him a sympathetic smile. “Me too. Would you like me to search for you, to determine who else might be a match?”

It was a generous, rarely made offer and Theo knew it. “You shouldn’t waste it on me. The camp needs you.”

Warmed, Jennifer reached out.

Theo reluctantly placed his big hand over hers, thinking she had the bone structure of a delicate bird. He felt like a giant in comparison.

Jennifer jerked as the door opened in her mind; she grinned in delight as a pretty face appeared. “Nice!” She shoved the picture into Theo’s mind.

“Wow, that’s great! She’s, uh, wow. Not here yet. I don’t know her!”

Jennifer shut the door between them and returned to the paper, adding a few more details she’d just thought of.

Theo was busy memorizing the woman's profile so when he finally met her, he wouldn't miss her. Not only was she pretty and clearly the shot of wild that he liked, she was also a descendant. He'd been able to tell by her glowing red orbs.

"Thank you."

"Please don't mention it. Kyle won't like me doing it."

"My word." Theo hoped no one had overheard them.

"We're alone."

Theo heard the light tremor in her tone and didn't try to resist the urge to comfort her. "I wouldn't. Ever."

Jennifer forced herself to relax, waving at the entrance.  
"Shouldn't you be sleeping now?"

"With this ready?" Theo snorted. "Not a chance. I'll sleep next week."

"Well, give me another twenty minutes before everyone comes in. I have another idea for that power system and I think it'll only take about half the space."

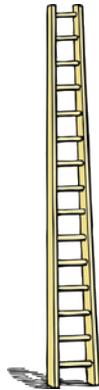
Theo didn't argue. He would keep the men at the mess for twice that, talking about the first load of gear they needed. They would also update Doug so he could add their progress to the board.

Jennifer wasn't aware of the time as she continued to work and the night passed. Food and drinks were put next to her and she consumed those items, but her mind was flying. She barely noticed when the evening faded into early morning. She loved being useful.

Chapter Six

# Flying High

Shortly Before Dawn



1

“**S**amantha? Honey? You have to wake up now.”

Samantha responded to the urgency, lids snapping open. Around her, papers, dishes, and gear dropped to the floor with a loud crash.

Neil rubbed a gentle hand over her furrowed brow. “It’s okay. Go back to sleep now.”

Samantha groaned, realizing what had happened. “I’m sorry.”

“No worries.” Jeremy had already begun to clean up. “Just get a little more sleep while you can.”

Samantha wanted to help take care of the mess, but her roiling stomach said she had more urgent needs. "I'll be back." She ducked from the tent, almost running to the bathroom.

Neil followed, waiting while she retched. He was hoping the disruption of the dream was all that had upset her stomach. He didn't understand much about descendants and even less about pregnancy.

Neil held out the wipes when she emerged; they walked to the smoldering fire can as she cleaned her face and hands. The towels flamed up the instant they hit the red wood in the bottom of the can, bathing them both in fire glow.

Samantha felt Neil's hot gaze, but all she wanted was to brush her teeth. She moved around him to take care of that. Afterward, she needed to eat so her stomach would settle down.

A sharp pain lanced through her side. Samantha winced, but kept going. She'd had a few of those, but she didn't want to alarm her men. The doctor had her scheduled for a visit and she would tell him everything.

Neil's lips disappeared into his scowl, but he managed to keep from nagging her when she vanished into the tent only to come right back out, kit in hand. He trailed her to the showers, annoyed with her and himself. He would have to figure out a better way to wake her from her nightmares. Flying objects were dangerous, but so was this sudden alertness.

Neil stayed outside the door, approving of the heavy security Marc was almost finished with. Not everyone would like the guns on the QZ tower, but Neil was betting the boss would be pleased.

Neil gazed through the shadowy flickers around them, not spotting any members up this early. He wondered if the mess had food going yet. If Samantha wasn't going to sleep, he could at least get her to eat.

Neil was pleased when Samantha came from the shower and headed exactly where he wanted her to go. He finally spotted someone else moving. The large shadow and limp said it was Doug. They exchanged greetings as they entered the mess.

"What are you doing out so early?"

Samantha laughed. "Was gonna ask you the same thing."

"Had to piss again." Doug grumbled. "And Peggy was up."

"Over here."

Peggy sounded annoyed.

Neil and Samantha joined the couple hesitantly. Neither of them were in the mood to listen to people arguing.

Peggy already had stacks of plates set out. She handed one to each of them. "Li's got a small buffet set up inside the truck for early risers. Go get something. Coffee's on the stove."

The trio followed orders without replying, aware of her bad vibes.

"What's she upset about?" Neil asked lowly when he thought they were out of earshot.

"I didn't go back to bed, I guess." Doug sighed. "I didn't want her wandering around alone."

Neil understood that. He didn't want Samantha alone either.

Samantha wasn't paying attention to the men or to the sweaty cook who greeted them happily. Her attention was on

the stacks of pancakes Li Sing was packaging for breakfasts for people who wouldn't be coming to the mess. "Can I?"

Li pouted. "You not wait four minutes?"

Samantha grinned. "For fresh?"

Li bobbed his head. "You get 'em hot and sweet."

"I wait!" Samantha groaned and took the stool in the corner, plate and cup still in hand. She loved watching people cook. She'd even enjoyed the shows on TV. That was how she'd found Kindle's program. Her cooking gals had been replaced by Survival Challenge. Samantha had been sucked in from episode one. She'd lost track because of her lack of free time.

Neil took a small plate of the muffins and fruit cups that had been chilled, and left the truck, not wanting anything as heavy as Li's pancakes. They went down light, but hit hard. It was perfect for a mother-to-be with too much acid in her guts.

Neil joined Doug at the table and noticed a small plastic device lying by the big man's plate. It looked like a pen with a needle in the end. Neil winced when he realized what it was for. It would suck to have to poke yourself multiple times a day.

"You gonna do it?" Peggy glared at Doug.

Doug scowled, fork stopping. "Geez, woman! Let me eat!"

"You're supposed to do it before you eat." Peggy picked up the tester. "Get it over with."

Doug's big arm pushed it away, fork coming up. "Later!"

Already pissed, Peggy leaned down and jabbed the needle into his hand. "There!"

"Ow! What the hell!"

*Beep!*

Peggy eyed the readout and tilted it toward Doug. “You’re okay. You can eat now.”

Doug cradled his hand, gaping at her. “You... You’re not... Ow!”

Neil quietly left the table. It was safer inside the truck. Samantha would protect him.

## 2

“Tell them air in the pipes causes it, that they’ll hear it regularly. Compare it to the way the corn stalks howl.”

Theo, tired, nodded at Angela’s instruction. The eerie howl would worry some of their people, but most of them would accept that explanation. In time, he would want the truth, but right now, all he could think about was sleep. Even his complaints seemed unimportant; he had accepted Angela’s comments on the impossible not always being so.

“Go on.” Angela waved him off. “I’m good on updates.”

“I should escort you in.” The bad vibes about her going in had lessened as the weariness caught up. “I don’t like not going over it all again when they’re finished.”

“A few hours yet on that?”

“Yes. They’re checking welds and ropes right now.”

“Just have them tell Marc, instead of me.” Angela was already sure Marc wouldn’t go to bed until after she was topside again. “He’ll stay within an arm’s length of me at all times.”

“Yeah, that’ll work.” Theo knew Marc would keep her safe no matter what happened. “Thanks.” Theo was in his bed in less than a minute, boots still on.

Waiting by the QZ gate, Angela observed the two guards who had just ended their shift over Tara and Missy.

“Boss.” Daryl smiled at her. “New shifts are on duty; QZ is clear.”

“Good.” She looked at Kindle. “Calm night?”

“Uh, mostly. Kid had a bad dream. Both went back to sleep without coming out.”

“What have you picked up?” Angela was trying hard to treat Kindle like any other Eagle.

Kindle frowned, though she’d been warned to be ready for this. “I tried a couple times and couldn’t get anything from either of them. Just...steel doors and bottomless pits. Creepy.”

Daryl’s expression said she should know, but he didn’t speak. He hadn’t said a single word to her during their shift and he planned to keep it that way.

“Why?” Angela demanded, upset with them both. “She’s an Eagle. She fought in our war. Do your duty.” Angela rotated to scold Kindle and found the Survival Challenge star cringing away. “What the hell?”

Daryl felt it too, though not as strongly. “Heat!”

Angela immediately forced a barrier around herself that wouldn’t let anything get through without notice. “Sorry.”

Both Eagles recovered, but kept their distance.

Angela wasn’t offended. “It’s an emotion thing.”

Uneasy, Kindle retreated further.

Angela pinned her in place. “If you can’t try, you can’t stay.”

“And I told you to teach her something on every shift.”

Marc's voice behind them held all the warmth of an iceberg.

Daryl scowled. "I waited until we weren't on duty because I knew we'd fight and be distracted."

"Fine." Marc approved of that. "What lesson?"

"We're going to the training tent to get her kai lessons going." Daryl grunted. "You know I wouldn't abuse my skills to hurt her."

Angela frowned a bit. "Does she know that?"

"Uh..." Daryl turned to Kindle. "I wouldn't, you know. No matter how mad you make me. I'm a good guy."

"There's no such thing." Kindle led the way. "But come try to convince me anyway. I won't be able to sleep yet. Maybe you can bore me into it."

Angela swallowed a snicker. She didn't want to like Kindle, but that spunk was hard to ignore. If Kindle ever settled down, she would be leadership and as much as Angela hated it personally, she also was looking forward to it. Kindle would be a vicious defender.

*Of the women*, her witch stated, still staying back and quietly taking energy from people to store.

*And those women will defend their men and children together. It will all work out in the end.* Kindle believed that, but she also knew it couldn't happen without pieces falling into place perfectly. She wasn't counting on that, but she wasn't going to interfere with however fate chose to handle that future either. She'd done her part. Now, others would attempt to do theirs.

*And when you end up on opposite sides?* the witch questioned. *Will you regret your actions then?*

*Never! Never.*

“Are you all right?” Daryl asked. Marc was scanning the foggy mountain cliffs and shadows, but Daryl had caught some of the emotions flashing across Angela’s face.

“Distracted.” She smiled wryly at the word. Distracted didn’t even come close to her mental state these days, but this was a vacation compared to what was coming.

“You know where I’ll be.” Daryl left them alone.

Marc took a moment to admire Angela’s hair in the sharp sunrays that were beginning to break through. It was like fire dancing on darkness.

Angela swept the defenses that Marc had handled overnight. She assumed he would keep going until she told him it was enough, which it wouldn’t ever be if the future didn’t change. She wanted him to be sure he understood her views on it. “Can we add another tower, with a few more guns?”

Marc’s expression was priceless. “Really? I love you so much!”

Angela let the laughter roll; it brought the bubble over them to life.

Those awake to witness it stared in approval and relief. The shield was brilliant blue, with streaks of green and gold—calm and happy. There were faint tinges of yellow and even orange here and there, but the majority of her people were safe and snug, so the small percentage didn’t dent her mood. It was much less than 17%.

Marc was unhappy but unable to protest. “Theo’s ready for you. They had a great night.”

“Sweet.” Angela didn’t have to be told that putting Jennifer with them had helped. It was why she’d assigned the girl there. Jennifer’s mind was a priceless resource and it would be used for the future. “Let’s go.”

### 3

“We’re all set.” Theo held out a rope.

Marc didn’t protest as Angela strode confidently to the cave entrance. She’d submitted to wearing his gear and the ropes, though none of the men were wearing them. There wasn’t anything else he could say to keep her from going inside that cave. Afterward, she was off duty and supposed to eat, then sleep. Still, he was unable to remain silent as he attached the final rope to his belt. “You stay close.”

“Yes, dear.” Angela understood his nervousness. She had a touch of it herself, but she didn’t want anyone to know.

“Clear room!” Kyle and a small crew came to provide her escort. They would be leaving camp afterwards.

Before she could protest, Kyle snapped a second line onto her caving belt, and then secured it to his own harness. “No offense.”

Marc laughed, aware of Angela’s displeasure. “None taken.”

Angela refused to get upset. She drew her personal bubble in tighter. Now that she knew it worked, she would teach the other pregnant women to do the same and cut down on awkward moments. She would also dedicate a new notebook to handling descendants.

The cave entrance was wide and littered with cords and equipment. Only a small path was cleared through the boxes and crates of equipment the building crews had requested first.

Angela walked around them carefully, hoping the teams were establishing a system of organization. Things would go quicker that way.

The cave floor was a nightmare. Angela understood Marc being so paranoid, but she wondered if Kyle had been this way with Jennifer while she worked in here.

Not seeing the damp patch on the sheet of metal that had recently been dragged in to cover part of the gap, Angela's boot slipped and sent her flailing toward the edge.

Marc snapped his rope and caught her as she was jerked away from the danger zone.

Angela clutched Marc's arm, stomach cramping. "Change the belt—now."

Marc realized where the pressure had been centered and swore furiously as he worked the harness links. He hadn't even thought about it.

Angela concentrated on breathing evenly and the drip of the water down the walls. When she was reasonably confident everything was okay, she pulled out of Marc's hands and headed for the next area.

Shaken, Marc motioned Kyle to take her side and tried to get his breathing under control. He and Kyle had agreed that Angela, more than anyone else here, was a target. She was clumsy at times and drew danger without meaning to, and she also had reckless moments they held little control over. Both males had agreed until the cave was safe, Angela would be harnessed to at least one of them, but preferably both. Their

caution had just been proven necessary. Marc was incredibly grateful for that decision. It all could have ended right there in front of him—a simple, agonizing arm's length too short.

Kyle's men patted Marc's shoulder as he caught up to the group, shortening the rope to Angela. They understood his near panic and respected him even more for roping her against her will.

"This will be a main living area. TVs, games, and that list." Angela refused to think about how near she'd just been to death. "This next one will be perfect for training."

The crew followed her through the first level of the cave, taking notes and staying close in case she slipped again. When they reached the second level, where a rope ladder waited to transport them to the next landing, Angela felt the tension increase. "If I can't do this, then the camp can't do this." Angela used Kyle's arm for balance as she put her boot on the first rung of the rope ladder.

Her point was hard to argue with. The males waited tensely for her to reach the bottom, where several Eagles were already standing guard. They had security set up throughout the caves, and all the exits would be on camera as soon as the power was on.

Angela climbed from the ladder, aware of Kyle waiting to drop down by the rope that had been put there for that reason. She got out of the way as his big body came through the hole.

Kyle made contact with the sentries who had come over at the noise, and then took up a nearby post to wait for the rest of the crew.

Angela, tethered to Kyle and Marc, also had to wait. She passed the time by studying what she could see of the caverns

around them. This second level held multiple areas, each with their own set of tunnels and caves. She saw the cleaners had been here too, but they hadn't been able to remove the odor. Angela didn't think there was enough bleach to accomplish that. Mildew and mold always lingered in caves.

Once everyone was down and in place, Marc nodded.

Angela went into the first cavern, taking a mining hat from the box before he could tell her to. She flipped on the light and adjusted the angle, then led the way. This wasn't something she needed to be scared of. It was something she needed to learn, to perfect, and then be able to pass to her camp. If they didn't get a chance to try living here, nowhere would satisfy them.

"We'll make this the sleeping side." Angela pointed to natural cuts and crevices in the walls that would eventually be shelving. "Same setup as usual, but I want Eagle stations in each area. One man, one female—one senior, one rookie."

Marc and Kyle were making notes, but the rest of their protection detail was paying attention to their surroundings and not caring for the shadows, the odd groans, and the moans of the earth. It was more than unsettling.

"I want the bathrooms for the sleeping area over here." Angela motioned as they entered an adjoining cavern and the smell of mold increased. "Once we reinforce that gap, it might be perfect for the composting toilets." She pointed at a small indent in the center. "Put a washing system there, something for hands and faces for half a dozen people at a time."

Angela moved to the cavern across from the sleeping side and immediately spotted a ledge they needed. "Use this room for the showers. Have the buffalos put on that ledge once it's

evaluated and supported. Place the showers in a six-cube around an Eagle station—use the same setup for sleep. One male, one female—one senior, one rookie.”

“That’s going to cause some problems.” Marc was thinking of their more prudish and shy members.

“I prefer they’re safe and not raped.” Angela grunted, stepping carefully. “The women will get over it after hearing you say that. Also, it allows the men to be in the next shower over, so they know their female or child is protected.”

“We’re using the new stalls, right?” Kyle scanned his notes. “The ones with the full doors?”

“Yes. The Eagles will be there to prevent problems and because of their presence, there shouldn’t be any.” Angela swept the walls for bugs. She didn’t see anything crawling, but she knew better than to assume insects weren’t down here. “We’ll need something for bugs. A gel maybe, so it won’t be ruined by the dampness.”

“I know the perfect stuff for spiders and centipedes.” Bobby didn’t take his attention from the cavern he was facing. He hadn’t seen anything, but he felt a disturbance. “It’s called Ever Green dust.”

“Great. Add it to the next run going out if we don’t already have it.” Angela assigned the other areas on the second level quickly, then moved to the rear of the widest tunnel, where another large hole and rope waited.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t go down there,” the guard on the hole stated, swallowing nervously. “We took a vote.”

Angela could have argued, but she knew they had counted on her reaction and then accounted for it. She held out a hand.

Kyle placed a small folder in it.

Angela examined the pictures, approving of the lamination. Cynthia was discovering ways to get them using office supplies again and it was wonderful.

“That’s our waste spot.” Angela pointed. “The notes I read earlier said that pit is hundreds of feet deep. As long as we add the right chemicals and exhaust, it’ll be perfect.”

“What about the garbage dump and recycling rooms?” Marc wanted her above the ground.

“Here for the garbage.” She pointed to a place on the picture. “Make that the kitchen area and we’ll put the animals in this corner.”

“That’s good.” Kyle wrote it down in his book. “We’ll have room for the butchering and classes without contamination.”

“Yes. We’ll need a shower or two down there. Use the same monitoring system, but this shower will be open at limited times, and only to the people who butcher and work with livestock.”

Kyle moved on to the next item on his list. “Medical bay goes on the first floor?”

“Second floor, in that cubby next to the communication room. The doctor won’t care for it, but he’ll spend most of his time topside at the QZ anyway, so talk him down when he finds out.” Angela had just given a hint for the future that even Marc missed. She still didn’t like the new doctor, and neither did any of the other women. He wasn’t gentle and the students working with him were starting to complain about his snide comments concerning the descendants and their pregnancies. He didn’t think the babies were human. Angela wasn’t looking forward to Marc discovering that.

“What about training?” Marc wanted to confirm his suggestion to leave that topside for now. He also wanted to be finished; he gently took Angela by the arm to steer them toward the ladder.

“Yes, topside, for now. Along with the center fire, the larger animals, and supply truck crates. We’ll bring it down as we need it.”

Marc didn’t stop when they got to the ladder. He took the pictures from her and tugged her toward the rope.

Angela caught his twitchy vibes and didn’t argue. She climbed, trying to go quickly, and felt him coming up right behind her.

They had to wait for Kyle because the ropes linking them weren’t long enough to reach between levels, but Marc didn’t pause any longer than he had to. The sense that Angie needed to get out of here was too strong to ignore.

Angela read Marc’s thoughts and became concerned, but she wasn’t picking up anything at all on her own and it was frustrating.

“Damn.” Marc led her around the hole she’d almost slipped into earlier. “Adrian spotted a group coming. Says they’re trouble.”

Angela understood why she hadn’t been able to pick up anything. She unlocked Kyle’s rope first. “Go check that out. I need to cover the camp if there’s shooting. They won’t take much of that so soon after what we just went through.”

Kyle headed for the QZ, hearing the revving engines of someone not driving calm and careful on these treacherous mountain roads. He paused and looked back. “How do you want it handled?”

Angela sighed, unhappy that her fears were already being proven. “Troublemakers go in paddock C.”

None of them were amused by the joke.

Angela pointed to the area that had been fenced in last night. It was near Adrian’s site; that wasn’t lost on any of them. “That’s Zone C. It’s for the people we’re not letting in or those we want to keep track of while we make up our minds.” That implied there would be other holding areas in the QZ.

Marc stayed by her side as she went to the mess to check in with Doug. He wanted to be around if Kyle had to handle the new arrivals. The senior Eagles were free to use their own judgment on issues like that.

Angela was confident Kyle wouldn’t take any lives that he didn’t have to. As for those who needed to be taken, Kyle was no longer the executioner. Someone else now held that terrible, soul-crushing job and he would be better at it than even the mobster had been.

“Once things are clear, I’d like the crews to get rolling on the blueprints.” Angela was aware that Marc’s concern hadn’t eased. “Actually, I’ll get Greg to cover that. Why don’t you go—”

Marc immediately followed Kyle.

Angela approved. Both of those men had loved ones inside these gates and their attitudes were *shoot first and question later*. It was exactly what an apocalypse called for.

Greg joined Angela.

She handed him a small envelope with a sticky note on the front.

Greg read it.

*Please deliver these notes quietly.*

“You got it.” He vanished.

Angela joined the small crowd around the board. Marc would handle the outside and she would cover the inside. Before she could add the totals of loads that had been brought in so far, Cynthia appeared.

Angela caught Cynthia’s expression. It said there was a problem she wouldn’t want everyone to hear. Angela read the reporter’s thoughts. It only took a moment, and then Angela yawned, showing that calm, almost bored façade again, but her mind buzzed. If Cynthia was right, there was yet another traitor in their midst and she had missed it.

“Getting old.” Angela nodded to Cynthia.

“What was that, lass?” Doug leaned down.

“I said I’m getting old,” Angela covered as the reporter left. “Letters are blurry to me.”

“We have an optometrist now.” Ray smiled at her. “Just have to find him the equipment.”

To Ray’s delight, Angela took out her notebook and wrote it down.

“Great. Now all I need is a count on crews.” Angela looked around. “Who hasn’t checked in yet?”

## 4

Marc didn’t like the new people even before he had his demon examine them. Reckless driving, tossing garbage out filthy windows, honking horns, shouting—they had none of the signs of civilization most of their new arrivals came with. Marc didn’t detect any gratitude that they’d found organized

people, but he did see greedy eyes casing the fences and estimating weaknesses.

“This should be fun.” Kyle’s hand dropped to the replacement Glock on his hip.

“Yeah, let’s get some help on this.” Marc signaled for two more teams to be called to the rafters on this gate, indicating they should open fire at the least provocation.

Kyle went with Marc as the gate opened.

Marc signaled for the gate to be locked; he waited with his hands on his Colts for the vehicles to reach them. The demon inside was whispering of all sorts of atrocities, but Marc didn’t need to hear it to know these people were trouble. The feel of them was bad. It only increased when the cars stopped and the people emerged.

“Oh, this is nice!” The leader came to Marc with a glad hand out. “I’m Benn.”

“No physical contact; stay back.” Marc studied the man with a hard expression. “How can we help you?”

Benn lowered his hand, sleazy grin widening. “Sure, sure. Makes sense.” His brown gaze went to the gate, to the Eagles pointing rifles and hostile glowers. “We want to join Safe Haven. Heard your fighting on the radio and knew this was where we should be.”

“The fighting is over.” Marc didn’t want to let these people in. “This is a settlement now and we don’t accept everyone.”

Benn’s bearded countenance expressed a light dismay. “But you guys called for survivors.” He gestured at the three dozen men and women waiting behind him. “We’re survivors.”

“And maybe trouble.” Marc sighed. Angie wouldn’t like it if he turned them away. “There’s one way to tell that now. You’ll have to stay in our quarantine zone so we can determine what type of people you are.”

“Sure.” Benn smiled eagerly. “Open those gates and we’ll do what you tell us.”

Feeling Angela surveying the new arrivals, Marc glanced up to verify what she wanted him to do.

Angela slowly pointed toward the large, double gated site. “Zone C.”

Benn’s expression dipped into something dangerous. “Up there? Away from you?”

Marc motioned Zack to open the electronic gate they’d finished installing this morning. “Yes. We’ll bring some supplies out, but we don’t have much to spare. You’ll need to do your own scavenging.”

“You won’t take care of us?”

“Survivors take care of themselves.”

“How will we get out?” Benn retreated as all the Eagles on the rafters suddenly aimed at him.

“We’ll open your gate twice a day so you can come and go. If you agree to leave this area, the gate will be opened at any time and we will try to send a few things with you.”

“Is this how you treat people who come here?” A woman behind Benn gestured angrily. “We need help!”

“And you’ll get it.” Marc felt bad for the bruised female. “The doctor needs to run tests; you can tell him about your...medical problems.”

“They do have a doctor!” The woman turned to those in the car next to her. “A real doctor!”

“When more refugees come, you may have to share your area.” Marc was already positive he wouldn’t put anyone in with them if he could help it. “We’ll expect you to share and get along while we evaluate and run tests.”

“What if you say no?” Benn eyed Marc’s guns.

“We’ll ask you to leave.” Marc’s tone hardened. “And you *will* go, one way or the other.”

“We don’t want trouble.” Benn backed up again. “We want in there with you, where it’s safe.”

“You’re safe up there, if you follow our code of conduct.” Marc motioned Kenn over. “These are our rules. The sooner you accept them as yours, the sooner we can let you all in.” Marc pointed. “That road leads to the site. Go there now or keep going. Your choice.”

Weapons cocked, enforcing Marc’s instructions.

Benn quickly stomped to his car. The others with him did the same; the angry people tried not to drive off the cliff as they turned around.

Everyone hoped the group would keep going as they neared the path for Zone C. Instead, Benn led them up the weedy street and drove straight into the gated area.

Kyle and Angela exchanged a glance.

She shook her head, denying him. “Someone else has that heavy chore now. Just take care of your run. Distractions are costly.”

Kyle stayed outside the gate even after Marc slipped in. Angela’s words were a warning, but he wasn’t worried for himself. *Is Jennifer in danger again?*

Uneasy, he paced the perimeter in place of his workout, searching for weak spots where an intruder might make it

through. He was about to leave on a run and he wanted to know those inside the gates were as safe as they assumed they were. If he found anything, he would take it straight to Marc.

Marc spoke to Kenn and to Zack. “I want people on Zone C at all times. It’s now a regular stop on all patrols. Make sure the stationary men don’t get bored and forget to watch the rear gate. If something stirs up there, I want it recorded.”

## 5

“Ready for food?”

“Sure.” Angela let Marc lead her to the mess that had been expanded. There were now two dining areas. One had the usual tables and buffet. The other had tables crammed together with both hot trays and packed lunches. One was for the camp and one was for the workers. Li Sing and his family were already busy filling and refilling each of the bins and trays on both sides.

Angela didn’t have them on a normal eating schedule right now. She couldn’t wait so many crews coming and going, but it was important to waste as little as possible. She hoped the pre-packed lunches and breakfasts would help. Marc’s numbers on food, water, and fuel had been discouraging. She was being forced to send out more crews for those things and now, instead of later. They couldn’t wait. Angela scanned the parking area by the QZ, noting teams preparing for their morning run. They would pack, eat, and then leave.

Seth and Becky were at his truck, along with Neil and Donald, who were helping load the leaving vehicles. The two groups would bring back supplies Safe Haven desperately

needed if they were going to make it inside the earth. Being underground would be bad enough. Without having lights and power, it would be a disaster.

The rookies on the two leaving teams were standing together, drawing strength and comfort from each other for their first trips out. These new people had just signed up and hadn't received a moment of training. Their nervous postures revealed their unease.

"Which is why I put them with strong Eagles. Stop it."

Marc didn't reply to her mutter or try to comfort her. He understood how the voices inside could get so adamant that an actual oral response was required to satisfy them. Demons didn't like to guess—about anything—and Marc agreed completely. Even if it was horrible, knowing was best.

Angela felt his mood shift; she felt that awful question coming. She spun around and kissed him.

Marc clutched her gratefully, letting the passion carry him away from the edge that he didn't want to peer over.

Angela made sure he was rock hard against her hip before she retreated. "You ready?"

"Oh, baby!" Marc crooned. "If only you knew."

They laughed and took the center table in the camp side of the mess that was being called the breakroom by the toiling shifts. Doug had even hung signs to let people know which side they should be on. The atmosphere here was relaxed. On the other side, busy bees were buzzing toward their chores. The noises carried.

"Damn! Ozzie has first place!"

"No!"

"Got the blueprints finished, didn't he?"

“Yep. Jennifer knocked them out last night.”

“Explains why Theo’s crew has second. Who has third and fourth?”

“Blank, on both. First loads haven’t come in yet.”

Angela’s head tilted. “That just changed.”

“We have a crew pulling in,” the mess speaker informed them all. “It’s Billy’s crew!”

Cheers and groans echoed. Those who were off duty hurried to the main dumpsite to determine how big a load Billy’s team had brought in.

“There are some items in that load that should be quietly removed and put up for later.” Angela cut into the steak. It was bloody. *Perfect.*

“Will I know it when I see it?” Marc slid the bowl of rolls toward her.

“Think winter and you’ll have it.” Angela dipped one of the rolls into the bloody juice.

Marc grimaced and focused on the moody sky. He liked a good steak, but blood in the morning wasn’t what he enjoyed.

*Liar!* the demon accused.

Marc hid his smile in his coffee cup. *Spilling is different than eating.*

Angela felt Marc’s good cheer and leaned against his heat as the chilly wind blew over them. It was light now, but that would also change. The storm Samantha had predicted wasn’t one to be taken lightly.

“Preparations are in place.” Marc’s mind had also gone to their next challenge, but he’d been busy last night and would be again tonight.

“Thank you.”

Marc leaned over and kissed her cheek. “We’ll be okay.”

“I know.” She let go of the worry and got back to her meal.  
“Anyone check in yet?”

“Quinn has. He liked the second spot, but he wanted to stay a night and make certain of it when he could get a better view of everything.”

“Good. They’ll come home light. Have rotating kits ready for them.”

“Guarding the area already?”

Angela nodded, not looking up. “Yes.”

Marc sighed. “Okay. I’ll make sure they’ve got what they need for intruders of any variety.”

“Great. Jerry has been seen to?”

“Yes. We dug the hole last night.”

“We’ll have the service after lunch. Have it announced on the radio.”

“There won’t be a large turnout. He didn’t have many friends.”

Neither of them stated the truth—no one liked him—but they were thinking it. Jerry had been too pushy, too know-it-all without compromise, and he hadn’t fit in.

“Is it wrong for me to feel like that’s a problem solved?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “And no. Death happens too much now for most people to get upset unless it’s someone dear to them. That’s the nature of an apocalypse.”

Marc agreed. He didn’t like losing people, but he had no desire to attend the funeral. “Anything else for me?”

“No. Go sleep. In my mind, I’m climbing in behind you.”

“Other way around.” Marc leaned over to kiss her.

Angela pushed a wave of light as they kissed, needing him to understand how happy she was with him. Marc had turned out to be her partner in every way. It was amazing.

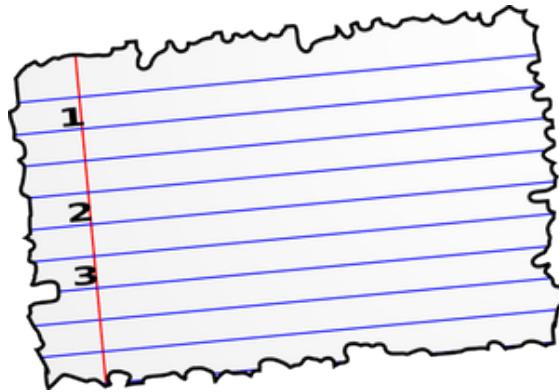
“Wow, is that truck full! Ozzie and Theo will have some competition!” Kenn gushed over the radio.

Angela and Marc parted as the updates continued and the camp began to fully wake. After a day in the mountains, surrounded by so much natural beauty and danger, people were finally taking note. They had their cameras around their necks. Some even had packs for hiking on their breaks. Angela controlled her concern as best she could. Leader or mother, it felt the same most days and it was often a struggle to figure out when to ease off the reins. Letting them grow on their own, even when she knew trouble would come from it, was incredibly hard.

She scanned the parking area again and reluctantly went that way.

## Chapter Seven

# In the Dark



1

“I don’t like it. You shouldn’t be leaving.”

Becky didn’t tell Seth the chain of command was grounded. He already knew. “I’ll be fine. Neil’s crew is one of the safest teams I could be on, right?”

“Yeah.” If she had to go, Neil could keep her alive. Seth knew that. He still didn’t want her to go.

“And we’re going to a lighting store. Hardly anyone uses that stuff now, so there shouldn’t be anyone around to cause trouble. Right?”

“Yeah.” Seth was unable to ignore the bad feeling in his gut. “Just stay with Neil, huh?”

Becky rolled her eyes, but nodded. “You got it.”

Seth pulled her in for a quick kiss and then forced himself to get into the passenger side of the truck that Donald was driving until they got to the golf course. After that, they would be gathering trucks to use for hauling. Angela's notes had said they would be passing a truck stop on the way, to pull their needs from there. Seth was eager to do well and help assist with their settlement. But he knew something was wrong.

Becky climbed into the next truck over, taking the backseat. She took out her notebook and scribbled, waiting for them to leave. Her kit was at her feet; her rifle was lying on top of it and she felt okay. This wasn't hard compared to surrendering herself to the enemy to lure them into a slaughter. She didn't expect problems, but it bothered her to have Seth upset. When she returned, safe and sound, he would be able to relax. Hopefully after each run that would get easier.

Becky glanced at the next truck over, where Kyle's team was prepping his vehicle. They'd lost men over the months, but they were still the strongest team, the one to fear and to beat, the one to be like.

Becky scribbled harder on the page. She wanted that some days, but most of the time, she just wanted to sleep and eat. She assumed it was because of the pregnancy. She was doing both of those as much as their rations and schedules would allow, but her mind also seemed to have a fog over it whenever she woke. She was one of the people Angela had mentioned, but resigning didn't feel right either, so she was going to do her duty and keep being an Eagle. At least, for a while. Once she got big, she would have to discover other ways to be useful.

*Why? that voice inside questioned without rancor. Why must you play their games? You have power beyond their narrow minds.*

Becky didn't like to listen to that voice. It pointed out ugly truths that she had no defense against. She didn't want to be evil. She liked being accepted and she loved being Seth's mate.

*Because he's like you, the voice stated. He has gifts like yours.*

Becky knew that. Not many people did, but in time, they would. They might resent Seth for not telling them. He would need her help with that.

Walking by the trucks, Angela paused as Becky's thoughts came to her. She examined the girl deeper, not caring for the depressed colors. Becky hadn't honestly recovered yet, but the time for the next stage in that was almost at hand. Becky would make a hard choice soon and then she would be free to recover, or she would be damned and pull others down with her.

Hoping to swing Becky toward the light, Angela went to the window and tapped lightly.

Becky rolled down the glass, face betraying her guilty thoughts.

“Remember to count the cost.”

Becky winced, but nodded, aware that she was being given the chance to do the right thing. The problem was...she didn't want to.

“That's a line we all walk, Rebecca. When you count the cost, the choices become easier.” Angela left the girl to consider the words, glad no one else had heard. It would be easy for someone to misunderstand. She hadn't given Becky

permission to make the wrong choice, but she had given her a chance to salvage her darkening soul by making the right one. Becky had witnessed Tonya's treatment for playing with the men, and the others who had come through here and tried to twist people against each other to satisfy their own desires were either gone or pariahs. If she took a moment to count the cost, she would be fine. If she didn't, it would force someone else to make the right choice, but Angela wasn't confident Neil was capable of it.

## 2

"We're ready now." Kenn stood up. "Tell her we've done everything we can."

Greg wrote it down and then lingered, waiting for a moment alone with Kenn. They were gathered in one of the huge tents Angela had Safe Haven sheltered in until the caves were ready. The heavy new roofs Marc had insisted on yesterday were perfect for the solar energy system Kenn had put in place. In fact, Greg now almost hoped the tent did get hit by lightning. Kenn's setup would steal some of that power and store it in their battery bank. They couldn't hold much of it without blowing up, but Kenn had installed an automatic cutoff switch and then a release line that would direct the energy into their garbage pile. Extinguishers would be standing by. It was a dangerous experiment. Greg was looking forward to seeing if it worked. So was Theo.

Kenn glanced around the tent, surveying the concrete supports they'd poured. It would take weeks for the pylons to fully dry and harden, but they had roughly thirty-six hours

before the storm hit. Kenn thought it would be enough. They'd already double-tied all ropes, driven vehicles up against the weakest side, and rechecked the stakes they'd driven in. Kenn estimated the tent could withstand 60mph winds without much trouble. Any higher than that and they would have to use the backup—the cave. The trucks around the tents would drive people to the entrance and the crews already laboring down there would help get everyone inside safely. Kenn knew that would be chaos. He spent an extra minute rechecking the support posts. *Maybe I can get them to take another 10 mph if I add a layer of gravel and enclose it.*

Greg cleared his throat. “Um, you got a minute?”

Kenn had forgotten he wasn't alone. He turned around in confusion. “What?”

“I need you for a minute.”

Kenn didn't like the tone or the expression. He joined Greg in the corner of the empty tent. “What?”

“The boss wants a message sent to Adrian.”

Kenn understood he was being asked to deliver it; he instantly worried over what that would mean for him if Marc or the Eagles found out. “So?” Kenn stalled while he ran it through his filters. How badly would it hurt his place if the camp found out? Would it hurt Tonya?

“She said he has work to do. She also said you're the only one who can get him to do it without creating more drama.”

Kenn relaxed. That, he could do. Adrian would accomplish any task that came straight from Angela and she knew it. “What is it?”

“Give him these instructions.” Greg held out a folded piece of paper. He had read it in surprise, but not shock. Angela always had an eye on their future.

Kenn read it. “When?”

“Now, would be best.” Angela was in the flap behind them. “And you don’t have to hide it. That part of your life is over.”

Kenn was glad to hear it. “I’ll go after I add a little more support to our supports.”

Angela left the flap.

Greg followed, glad to hear he didn’t have to lie to Marc. He was also relieved that it wasn’t a personal message, but it mattered even more to him that it wasn’t another grand secret. He’d had enough of those.

“So have I.” Angela spotted Kyle emerging from the canvas he now shared with Jennifer. She and the baby were currently sleeping in the builder’s common tent. Angela was sure the mobster wasn’t happy about it. Many of Safe Haven’s couples would spend the next ten days apart, but it would strengthen most of them.

“I’m ready for the next list.” Angela steered them toward the caves where teams with engineers, plumbers, and electricians were about to descend into the earth and begin the next phase of their settlement.

“I’m actually caught up.” Greg stayed next to her. “We had two loads come in, two crews left, and the bell for meals has been changed to a call on the radio. Other than the wind picking up from last night, I’ve got nothing new for you.”

Angela noted the slightly surprised men going into the caves. They’d assumed they had been forgotten all this time.

Now, they knew their time to be useful just hadn't come until now. In Safe Haven, there was work for everyone. "I have things for you. Ready?"

"Shoot." Greg took out his notebook.

"We need to get the water crew drafted and the gear for them separated. After that, the next fuel crew will be chosen and their locations picked. After that, have more cleaning supplies and tools brought up. Then, have Zack..."

Greg trailed behind her, taking notes. They were about to be living in those caves and that meant her lists were almost never-ending. When they got the caves ready to live in, then they had to get the people inside and that would be no easy feat. It would take long days, hard labor, and any remaining luck they might have.

### 3

Kenn kept the paper in his hand as he made his way through the crowds of people changing shifts. Angela said he didn't have to hide it and he wasn't going to.

Curiosity from the sentries became glares and frowns as Kenn neared the gate and then exited while a new crew was hauling a load inside. When he took the rough, trampled path toward Adrian's site, the mutters were audible. Kenn didn't let the comments goad him into a reaction. He also didn't respond to the shouted questions and complaints of those in Zone C, except to mentally disapprove of their attitudes.

"Lower, boy!"

Kenn followed the voices, recognizing a training session with those two words. Once you'd gone through it, you never forgot it.

Kenn took the next path to lead him into a small wooded area in an alcove of stone. It was so much like where Safe Haven was, just in miniature, that Kenn burst out laughing.

His hard, surprised brays alerted everyone to his presence and told Adrian he was being mocked.

Conner rose from the pushup position quickly, stepping back as his dad's face turned dark. They'd risen to a drillmaster today and Conner was glad for any break.

Adrian frowned. "She shouldn't send you again."

Kenn understood it wasn't because of the laughter. "I can handle the fallout."

"What do you want?"

"There's a storm coming tonight."

"I know. Why are you here? You shouldn't be here." Adrian didn't want anyone around right now. He had too many mistakes to ever atone for and being near Kenn, who he had been closest to, was salt in his wounds.

"Boss has a message." Kenn gave him Angela's note with angry amusement lining his words. "You have work to do, like the rest of us. Get on it."

Adrian's eyes misted over as he read the instructions.

*After the storm, have Conner and four good men meet a Safe Haven crew at the bottom of the road. Assist and provide security. This is not FND. It's survival.*

"Anything she needs." Adrian was grateful.

Kenn, repulsed again at Adrian's weakness for Angela, left without saying anything. How could he have idolized that man so much?

*That's not Adrian, his mind whispered hesitantly. That's a shell. She'll fill him back up in time.*

Kenn paused, hidden under the cover of a wildly growing tree. He hadn't heard that voice in a long time. He wasn't sure he wanted to now. The inside whisper had led him into mistakes that he would never be free of.

*I'm sorry. It's my nature.*

*You almost destroyed me and everything else,* Kenn responded, thinking clearly for the first time when dealing with his demon. *I won't ever trust you.*

*I can try to follow the light,* the demon offered apologetically. *You'll have to help me.*

The wind blew the leaves around aggressively. Kenn got moving. *No. Go back to sleep until you can do better than just try. I won't risk my place again.*

Relieved and disappointed, the demon faded away.

Kenn felt his soul lighten. He was a better person now, a stronger person, and he loved his new life. It had been good under Adrian and he missed that, but serving under Angela was quickly becoming necessary. She was good at it and she didn't hold a grudge anymore, as far as he could tell. The future had never looked better to the Marine. He entered the main gate with a tolerant nod to the guards who glowered at him. "We all have work to do. Get on it."

Behind Kenn, Conner stood under the same tree and gazed at the gates of Safe Haven in confused longing. A team had just come in with three large trucks. It was holding up a line

of people on their way to the supply vehicles. One of those people was Candy.

Conner stared, heart hurting. *I'm hers! Why can't she understand that?*

Adrian's hard hand settled onto his shoulder.

Conner accepted the comfort, fighting the need to rush the gates to be with her. At least his dad understood how that felt. They did have one thing in common.

"Come on. We need to get some things ready for our mission."

Conner allowed his father to lead him back to their site, not asking what they were being sent out to do. He was willing to go wherever Angela wanted if it meant he might have a chance to earn his way back in.

#### 4

"We're all set." Whitney handed Kyle a paper. "It's all in there."

Kyle had understood from their gear list that Angela was sending them out to a dangerous area. They needed the items on her list and he planned to return with them. "Good. Half hour after mess. Tell the others."

Whitney rushed off to get cleaned up and eat.

Kyle lingered, verifying that the guards were alert and the camp was calm. It was always hard to tell with so many people, especially when whining about sore muscles was so natural, but to his ear, everything was fine. "That's when this place is the most dangerous." Kyle wasn't looking forward to

being away from Jennifer for the next few days. Hell, he didn't like being away for a few hours.

"Then we should go have a nice meal." Jennifer came up behind him.

Kyle froze when she wrapped her arms around him from behind, pressing her breasts into his back.

Jennifer retreated, understanding and yet annoyed at the same time. "Or maybe I should go eat by myself."

Kyle, frustrated and tired, slid in front of her and delivered a kiss that promised she would never have to eat alone.

Jennifer giggled as Kyle pulled away and stared at her. His thoughts were now complete chaos. It was cute.

"It's not cute! It's frustrating."

Jennifer's demeanor became cold; she went to the mess without saying anything else.

Not sure what he'd done wrong, Kyle followed, replaying the scene.

Jennifer stopped at Peggy's table to collect Autumn.

Kyle went to get their trays, still confused. Why were women so hard to figure out?

Jennifer was busy blocking her thoughts from the baby. She missed Kyle's observation, but it wouldn't have mattered. She was having a hard night. Sleeping alone was hard. She'd had a bad dream and Kyle hadn't been there to comfort her. She didn't like this schedule at all.

"I'm sorry." Angela joined them at the center tables. "It does matter."

"It's okay." Jennifer smiled tiredly. "We'll be fine."

Angela waved at the sleepy baby. "Yes, you will."

Jennifer took hope from that and allowed Kyle to slide in without giving him the cold shoulder. All she'd wanted to do was share a good moment with him to replace her bad mood, but she needed to control her own emotions and not depend on her man to do it for her.

"Eagle signups are open folks, but there are only a few slots left," Tonya's voice told them over the radios. "Come see me. I have the sheet."

Angela was pleased with how that was going—both the rookies and the radio. She skimmed the board Doug was currently updating. Theo's team had been in the lead until Billy's crew got in today and dumped three semis of stuff in their site. No one knew how they'd managed to do so much in one day, but Angela was more than happy with their ingenuity. The coats and boots would keep them all alive. "You all set?"

"Yes." Kyle wasn't sure how much of his run he should talk about in front of other people. "We'll get in, get the stuff, and get home."

"Perfect." The run north wouldn't be pretty. Neither would a couple of the other missions she had crews leaving for in the morning, but without water and food, they were doomed. Fuel was also a necessity, though most people here wouldn't understand why for a while yet.

"Have we seen any movement?"

People at the table tensed. All of them knew she meant their old enemy.

"Nothing so far. From either source." Morgan was fresh off sniper duty with the teens; he felt as tired as Angela looked.

Angela was glad. She hadn't been able to view anything about the remaining government or the Mexicans. It was making her twitchy.

The crowd cackled and groaned as Billy's team was listed in first place.

Angela took the opportunity to inspect her people for problems. She found only the ailments she'd already known about and forced herself to try and enjoy the calm meal she'd stayed up for. If Marc came by and found her moping, there would be hell to pay.

Angela spotted Kindle coming through the crowd and waved her over. Around them, people grew wary.

Kindle joined her at the table with red cheeks. "Yes?"

"I have some things I need delivered. Would you like to take them or should I ask Kenn?"

"Depends on what it is, I guess." Kindle was glad when people resumed what they'd been doing.

"I need a problem handled. You're delivering a few items to make that job easier. I'd like them to arrive around midnight."

Kindle understood who the recipient was and the trouble it might cause between Marc and Angie. "I'll take it."

"Good." Angela drew a packet from her jacket and handed it over. "Thank you."

"No problem." Kindle went to the tray line after putting the package into her pocket, wondering why Angela had asked her. *Make work?* Kindle shrugged. She'd planned to visit Adrian later anyway.

Angela didn't reveal how important the delivery was. When Adrian received it, he wouldn't be happy. Neither

would Kindle when she met with Daryl for her shift later. They made a good team, despite the fact that they hated each other.

## 5

Evening fell over the mountains in a quick spread of darkness that had Eagles scrambling to light the cans and center fire. They didn't have the timing down yet and the shadows on the mountain cliffs were spooky.

Marc spent time with the huddling groups of people who weren't working, glad Angela had instructed the radio crew to play soft, soothing music. Marc chatted, calming fears as he slowly made his way toward the cave. The constant sound of work was echoing. Marc was curious how much progress had been made since this morning. As he approached the entrance, raised voices drew his attention.

"Don't ever do that again! Do you understand?"

Marc rounded the cliff wall and found Tara. Missy was at her side, crying. The two were clearly having a discipline moment.

Marc joined them, trying to read Tara's thoughts again.  
"Problem, ladies?"

Tara flinched.

Missy immediately came to Marc's side and wrapped her little arms around his waist.

Marc lifted a brow. "Well?"

Tara frowned, arms crossing over her chest. "She ran off and I found her inside the cave. She could have gotten hurt."

Marc looked down to tell Missy she couldn't be in there, and froze at the fear on her little profile. It instantly reminded him of Angie, as a child. "Are you okay?"

Missy nodded, burying her face against his hip.

Marc patted her soothingly.

Tara scowled. "That's not right. I'm not abusing her. I yelled."

Marc didn't reply, busy trying to dig into the child's mind this time. He hit a blank wall and found it impossible to penetrate.

"Please?"

Marc regarded Tara coolly. "Please, what?"

"Please don't interfere with my rules as Missy's parent. She has to learn to fit in."

Marc agreed, but he knew something was wrong. He just didn't know what it was. "As long as the child isn't being abused, we don't believe in interfering."

"Good." Tara carefully came forward and took Missy's hand.

The little girl smiled up at her.

Tara sighed in defeat. "Okay. I'm sorry I scared you, but the cave is dangerous. Don't do it again, okay?"

"Okay!" Missy shouted, jumping into Tara's arms.

Marc kept studying them as the woman struggled toward the tent area with the wild child. He'd figured out what it was that had bothered him about her shadow while in the QZ, but it didn't fit with this protective parental feeling. Whatever was going on with her, Marc was suddenly confident that Angela had plans based around it. To pull off anything in Safe Haven, you either had to have the boss lady's permission, or you had

to be smarter and more alert than Angela—something Marc wasn’t sure was possible at this point.

Marc spotted Tracy trailing the pair and nodded to her. He was confident she would have intervened if Tara had been abusing the girl. Eagles protected people in many ways, and it wasn’t always from outside enemies. Sometimes, people had to be protected from themselves.

Marc saw Kindle leaving by the rear gate, where there were no people in quarantine to shout at her. He frowned. Kindle was walking an ugly line and he was considering an intervention. He wasn’t happy about having to do it, but he’d brought her here; it was his duty to help her if he could.

## 6

Adrian was waiting for the rest of his instructions from Angela. Her coded message had said there was trouble. He assumed she didn’t want his pals to know, otherwise Kenn would be more than a delivery boy. “What did I miss this time?”

“I don’t know,” Kindle enjoyed his flinch as she ducked inside the tent. “But she has her own shit-storms brewing. I wouldn’t count on her for more help.”

Kindle tossed him a small package and then waited. She agreed with Adrian that Angela didn’t want some people to know they had more problems, but Kindle wasn’t one of those. She’d already read the note.

Adrian examined the items, wondering who the target was. He read the slip of paper.

*You are Safe Haven's guard dog until I can get them to let you back in. Use these things in hope of regaining your honor.*

“She gave me a silent message as well.” Kendle recalled the feeling of Angela in her mind with revulsion. “Another old friend is coming. Get ready for it.”

“Did she say who?”

“Vlad.”

Adrian rose in a blur, intimidating in his fury. “When?!”

Kendle was unable to stand her ground before his fury. She shrank away, taking up a spot by the open flap. “When I asked that, she said now is best.”

Adrian searched the package again and found nothing else, which said the threat was imminent. “Tell her I’m on it.”

Kendle pulled it from his mind. “Which one?”

“All of it. Anything else?”

Kendle swiped at a spider trying to make a web over the doorway. “She wants you to go out alone for whatever you do.”

“I intend to.” He pulled on a shirt. He’d spent the day out with all of his group, gathering supplies for the job Angela had given them. He was tired, but this had to be handled now. Jack and his men were more than a threat. They were gifted hunters who excelled in ambushes.

Kendle waited for him to get dressed and then trailed him toward the small fire, feeling left out. She pushed into his mind and saw their newest enemy as Adrian remembered him.

*Ten well-armed men lounged around a concrete room with a single window that marked it an underground structure. On the long center table was assorted piles of cash, guns, and*

*other needed items for the missions they often went on. The rest of the room was empty, with nothing to identify its purpose.*

*Some large and muscled, some average height and weight, the only thing these men had in common was a few pieces of gear. Unlike the military that many of them had spent time in, being a government hunter didn't require a uniform or strict conduct rules. It only mattered that they always accomplished their mission. It had earned them more fame and cash, promotions and honors than average fighters would ever have a chance at, but being out of work, even for a short time, wasn't something they cared for. They were between runs right now and supposed to take a long break; the team of bounty hunters were already bored and expressing their displeasure.*

*"That Canada run should have gone to us." Vlad paused in sharpening his knife. "Bravo team sucks."*

*The other men nodded and snickered.*

*"If I needed a break, I would have asked for one." Jack rotated to view their team leader. "You should have gotten our vote on it."*

*Adrian didn't respond. He was leafing through the latest booklet on capturing descendants, and waiting for a reason to reply. He had a lot of pent up anger.*

*Jack slammed his hand on the table. "Are you listening?!"*

*Kranten was also eager for entertainment. "He don't listen to anyone but the boss. Ass-kisser. That's our CO."*

*Adrian grinned, nodding. Good enough.*

*The brawl quickly got wild, with men being slammed through doors and into metal lockers that bent under the force.*

*No one from the adjoining rooms and halls interfered. Adrian's crew was lethal; they blew off steam like this every time they were forced to take a break. It had become a ritual everyone expected and dreaded, except those rough men.*

*Adrian let the team get as dirty as he thought they needed and then whistled loud enough to get attention. "We're done."*

*The men all resumed their positions of confinement, but now they had wounds to tend and punches to groan over.*

*Except for Jack, who glowered at Adrian in resentment as blood dripped from his nose. "I'm not done yet!"*

*Adrian shrugged, turning around. "Matchup?"*

*Jack nodded eagerly.*

*The other men formed a wide circle for the fight. This was another part of the ritual, but it didn't feel the same this time. Jack was truly angry and all of them wanted to know his underlying reason for it. Jack knew the orders for the break had come from higher than Adrian. So what was the problem?*

*Before the two men could duke it out, a loud siren blared through the compound, drawing them to their gear. A siren here only meant one thing—they were under attack.*

*Adrian let Jack shove by him, disappointed. He'd been looking forward to releasing more of his anger at being cooped up here. The government didn't like their hunters wandering, so breaks were spent underground.*

*Adrian was swallowed in running men as he emerged into the hallway; he went with the flow, not needing to check his weapons like some of the men around him were doing. He was always ready. He pushed ahead to find the threat.*

*The screens inside the lobby of the underground bunker flashed on, showing a topside view of the main entrance that*

*was disguised as a roadside diner. In the diner was a large group of people with glowing red orbs and guns in their hands.*

*“Looks like some of Canada came to us.” Vlad was on Adrian’s heels. “That’s their hunters—the ones Bravo team was sent after!”*

*“That’s Bravo team, being dragged behind their cars!” Jack pointed, voice stunned. “See the jackets? They killed Bravo team!”*

*As they watched, the group fired at the cameras and their view was gone.*

*“Line up!” an angry voice over a speaker ordered. “Kill them all!”*

*Around him, fighters and descendants raised their weapons eagerly, but Adrian slowly backed to the rear of the group. A few of his team did the same, following his lead, but most of them wanted the front lines of the battle. That wasn’t the best choice against their kind. Those eager men knew it, but the need for glory outweighed their caution.*

*Bamm!*

*The door to the hall exploded and flew into the room. It crushed the two men standing directly in front of it. Dust, screams, and bullets sprayed the front row of government fighters.*

*Adrian ducked, narrowing in on a shadow he didn’t recognize; his shot went through the man’s ankle.*

*Adrian aimed again as the man fell and found an unprotected kneecap. An attack like this was insane. Why would...*

*Adrian spun for a hallway and ran toward the rear of the bunker, where there was an emergency exit for the VIPs. He*

*hadn't made it to that long hall before another explosion split the air, tossing him into the wall. Dust scattered over him.*

*He coughed, looking up as a group of Canadian descendants came in through the now unprotected exit.*

*Adrian tried to hit the button on his radio, but the explosion had broken it, leaving uselessly dangling parts. He concentrated, intending to send a mental warning.*

*He arched as he was hit by a vicious bolt of electricity.*

*"Leave him!" a voice shouted. "The cells are down here."*

*Bleeding from one ear, Adrian waited until the footsteps were gone and then struggled to his feet and followed.*

*The heavy boots were easy to track through the dust. Adrian found the group in a cell where new descendants were held while being evaluated. Adrian followed, certain he wasn't recovered enough to call out mentally yet. That zap had drained him. The cells were just that—metal cages set into the rear of a lab. The invaders quickly opened these cages to grab people.*

*Rescue party, not an invasion, Adrian realized. Then he remembered the battle going on at the front of the complex and wondered why these few captives were worth all the lives of those front line people.*

*He hid behind the door, gun in hand, and watched the brief reunions. None of the captives looked that strong or unique, but one of them had to be.*

*The group reached the last cell, the one with three bodies of guards on the bloody floor in front of it, and Adrian knew instantly this was who they'd come for.*

*The young boy walked from the cell as if on a cloud, clearly drugged. His thin, bare body was covered in needle*

*marks and bruises from the tests that had been run on him. Adrian's heart clenched. Who is he?*

*One of the females in the group scooped the boy into her arms while another covered him in a long robe. They all fled toward the rear exit.*

*Adrian shrank behind the door to avoid being detected. He didn't know why the boy was here, but he suddenly wanted him gone and he didn't care if his boss got upset. They had no business treating children that way.*

*"But you were raised that way," the inside voice reminded Adrian. "You grew up in these same cells."*

*"Yes, and I hated it." Adrian carefully followed the fleeing group. "It was wrong."*

*"Says you."*

*"Yes, says me!" Losing Shannon had made him angry, bitter, and uncaring about the wrath of the government.*

*As Adrian emerged into the smoky hall, Jack and Vlad came running down a different corridor, both firing at the group.*

*Adrian knew better than to interfere, but he couldn't stop himself from throwing out a leg to send them both sprawling.*

*Ahead of them, the group turned around, but they didn't attack as Jack spun around and punched Adrian in the mouth.*

*Adrian didn't fight, trying to buy the boy's people time to get him away.*

*Jack hit him again.*

*Vlad gaped at them, not sure what had happened.*

*"Go!" Adrian shouted, ducking Jack's swing.*

*Jack realized Adrian was helping a prisoner escape and did the one thing Adrian hadn't considered. He drew his*

*secondary gun and fired a single shot that caught the cringing child in the forehead.*

“No!”

*Jack opened fire on the rest of the group; Vlad helped him. Behind them, Adrian slunk away. That’s it. I quit.*

“What a bastard.” Kindle brought them both back to the present.

Adrian nodded, strapping on his guns. “He should be. I taught him everything he knew back then. Should have advanced some on his own by now.”

“Another one like you. The boss’ll love that.”

“Yeah, my kind’s hard to resist.”

Kindle laughed.

Adrian stopped by her for a moment where all he did was stare.

Kindle felt her body respond; she blushed. His presence was attention getting, to say the least.

Adrian grinned and ducked out of the tent. Kindle needed time to adjust and he would give it to her, but for someone who hadn’t gone without sex for more than a week or two at a time, it was almost a real rush for Adrian. He missed physical contact—a lot.

“I’m out for an hour.” Adrian spoke to David, who was on duty over their small site. “Whistle if I’m needed.”

Conner glanced up from the fire briefly, and then resumed nursing his sore hands and arms. They’d spent a hard day gathering supplies. The teenager was too tired to ask where his dad was going or if he needed help with anything.

Adrian was glad. He didn't want to explain to his son that yet another mistake was coming back to haunt him. *I shouldn't have quit that day. I should have put a bullet through Jack's forehead.*

## 7

"You're kidding, right?" Kindle had just made it back, and had been met by Daryl and Marc. Above them, Shawn and a few of the other Eagles were strengthening their gate and creating platforms. "Is she insane?"

Daryl wasn't about to say yes, but he did agree. Putting him and Kindle on security together in the evenings sounded insane. She was an untrained rookie and they hated each other.

"Angie said you would work it out." Marc handed Daryl the clipboard. "So work it out. Zack's running a double right now, but he'll need a break soon."

Marc left them there to examine the packet and complain about how rough their lives were. He was amused. Angie was forever causing bitter enemies to become allies and then friends. Those two would be no different. At some point, Kindle might even come to care about the dreams and goals here.

Marc motioned to Charlie, who was escorting Tracy to her evening post.

The too-quiet couple joined him. Marc knew the problem without using his gift. "She has a job to do. Still. Like the rest of us."

Charlie glowered, but managed to control himself. He placed a kiss on Tracy's cheek and spun into the shadows.

Charlie had a post with the snipers right now. Marc had already told them to keep the boy occupied and make sure he understood his job wasn't just to protect his girlfriend.

Tracy waited nervously for Marc to direct her to her next assignment. Her stomach was upset and her throat was dry. She was scared.

"You're not alone this time." Marc hated her pain. "I've got you."

Those words did make her feel better. Tracy drew in a deep breath and pushed herself up straighter. "Where do you want me?"

*In your tent, recovering.* Marc grunted. "You have duty over Tara and Missy in the evenings. It should be easy, boring."

Tracy nodded. "I think I could use some boring right now."

"We all could. Come on. I'm your escort."

They made the walk to the tent area in silence, each deep in thoughts that had nothing to do with each other except for the need to respect her privacy and not ask if she was okay. If she wasn't, it would soon become clear.

The tent area was mostly empty. Angela had her entire camp working again. Marc approved of the alert Eagles in the center of the tents.

Marc led them to a canvas near that guard station and tapped on the flap. "Got a minute?"

Fresh from the QZ, Tara and Missy had only been in their new tent for a few minutes.

Marc caught a quick peek of a tent floor strewn with their goods and the child's new toys. It appeared normal. *But I know*

*it's not or Kindle and Cynthia wouldn't have been watching them for their first days here. They're trouble.* "This is Tracy. She'll be your settling partner at night."

"Hi! Happy to have you here." Tracy was trying hard to remember that person who had been happy and confident. "Welcome to Safe Haven."

Little Missy liked the words; she hugged Tracy's leg.

"Aww. Aren't you sweet?" Tracy crooned. "Bet we can find you a stuffed animal that sings or glows or something. Wanna go with me to the trucks and search?"

Missy nodded, still hugging Tracy.

Marc caught Tara's frown and assumed she was ready to have her tent settled down for the night. "Maybe that should wait for morning?"

Tracy realized it was late. "My bad. I can go find her one real quick."

Marc sighed, realizing Angela had put Tracy here to help, not to guard. Angie knew being around a child would be distracting. "I'll keep Tara company until you two are finished. Go on."

Tara was scowling now, but Marc and Tracy ignored her displeasure. Tracy held a hand out to Missy. "Are you coming?"

Missy didn't extend her hand; she jumped into Tracy's arms like a kangaroo.

Tracy, not ready, fell over and burst out laughing. "Well, that didn't go the way I planned."

Missy snuggled into her arms, smiling happily.

Marc pulled them both up, glad their snipers hadn't mistaken the action for aggression. He knew the senior men

wouldn't, but the three teenagers on duty with them right now would be eager to fire their first defensive rounds. The senior men needed to keep them on a short leash.

Marc turned around to discover Tara staring at her tent with longing.

"You can go on. I get the feeling you don't want to talk."

Tara flushed crimson and quickly ducked into the canvas.

Marc spent the next ten minutes trying to dig into her mind and failing.

## Chapter Eight

# Evening Blues



### 1

Sixty miles from Safe Haven, a long, dusty train chugged through the ash and debris on the tracks, moving steadily south. It had come from Pennsylvania and though most of the cars were empty, what cargo it did carry was lethal.

“We’re almost at the station.” Sitting in the front window seat, Vlad was keeping them all updated as they lounged in the refitted engine car. “Once we offload the horses, we’ll only be a couple hours from the mountain base.”

“Good.” Jack stretched, yawning. “We’ve waited a long time for a shot at Mitchel.”

“I thought he would show up before now.” Kranten thought of their last mission. “Canada finally got what was coming to them and he wasn’t there!”

“Mitchel did some gathering of his own and stayed with them.” Stephens had files open on the table in front of him, doing research for their team. “These files are all on descendants.”

“Not the last few.” Jack had already gone through those files. “They have trained military men in there. One of them is Kenn Harrison. Another is Marcus Brady. Don’t underestimate those two.”

“I’ve heard of them!” Kranten came over to snatch the paper from Stephens. “They took out that drug lord in South America before the war, right?”

“Among others.” Jack shrugged. “We also have reports of someone called the Ghost.”

The group of men frowned in unison. Ghost was a commonly used title for one of their kind who had turned against the government.

“Is Mitchel the Ghost?” Kranten skimmed the paper.

Jack stretched again, not concerned over the fight that was about to happen between Kranten and Stephens, who was slowly pulling his knife. “We’ll find out. For now, check your gear while I go over the plan again. Our boss expects this run to end with nearly four hundred bodies. Let’s not disappoint her.”

Angela froze as menace rushed over her mind. She felt as if giant hands were squeezing her brain. She concentrated, forcing it away. Someone had just reached her zone and they were strong.

Greg joined her at the rear gate. “Jeremy wants a word with you.”

“Send him to me. Quietly.”

Greg left, frowning.

Angela swept her toiling people. Marc was sleeping—all the night shift people were. Angela hoped the banging that was about to happen wouldn’t wake them up, but it had to be done. If things went wrong, they would need that wall. She already had rookies gathering more supplies from the dumpsites to bring up here. A storm was coming, in more ways than one.

Jeremy, who obviously hadn’t been far away, appeared at her side with his laptop in a bag over his shoulder.

“They pulled into the station with a light crew. I need to know when the train comes back.”

Jeremy would have protested, but Angela glared at him. “You can help me or get in my way. Pick wisely.”

Jeremy, getting used to Samantha’s moods, sighed. “Have you eaten yet?”

Angela was surprised into a snicker. The men here were getting smarter again. When that happened to the women, they would become unstoppable. “No, but I will. Can you track that station and the others around it?”

“Yes, and I will. What else can I do?”

“Watch the north. If something moves there, I need to know about it.”

“You will. You should go...hey!”

Angela spotted the line of ants and climbed down from the rear wall platform to meet them.

Jeremy observed in fascination. Since Dog left, only Jennifer and Angela were left to communicate with the insects. Jeremy wanted to learn how.

“I use pictures.” Angela knelt down in front of the line. “I send them images and they understand. Jennifer is different. She actually gets how they communicate and can replicate some of it.”

“How do you understand them?” He admired her nerve when she didn’t flinch from pinchers near her hands or beady eyes glaring into her own.

“They send images back to me.”

“Oh,” he choked out, wondering if the end of the world for him had already come. Maybe this was the afterlife, where anything could happen.

“Close... But you’ll want to sleep later, so we won’t discuss that.”

Jeremy shuddered and left before he could insist on hearing it anyway. There were just some things he didn’t need to know.

### 3

Marc staggered to the flap of the tent, drawn by the non-stop sound of hammering. If it was in the caves, it wouldn’t be as loud, and it had pulled him from slumber by never stopping. Angie had a new project going. He needed to know what it was.

He swiped the flap open and found Greg waiting for him.

“She said get a few more hours. You’ll need it.”

Marc grunted unhappily and stumbled out far enough to get a view of the work being done.

Crushingly loud to his tired ears, Marc saw the lines of men passing supplies at both the front and rear of camp and understood she was reinforcing their gates. He approved of the assembly lines and the dozen workers on each site, but he admired the fact that Angie once again had the entire camp working. Even the kids were being useful, carting drinks and small pails of nails.

“She has it covered.” Greg pointed at the tent. “She said you’ll need the sleep.”

Marc didn’t respond except to go back to bed, but he didn’t fall into the deep sleep he’d been in. There was trouble coming and it would be here soon or Angie wouldn’t have them all laboring like dying bees. The pace was almost frantic, despite the mood being calm; he stayed alert enough to respond if the threat arrived sooner than she had anticipated.

Across the camp, Angela sighed in relief and motioned the workers to keep going. Storm clouds were gathering and the wind was shoving in, meaning they wouldn’t be able to keep going for much longer. She wanted this finished before the rain forced them under cover.

She scanned the cliffs around them, but couldn’t feel the heat of Adrian’s gaze. She knew he was there, waiting for her to signal him, waiting to carry out any chore she assigned. It was impossible not to miss him. He’d done more for her, for these people, than he ever got credit for. He’d known it would go this way; he had planned to sacrifice himself to force his

camp off this continent so they would be safe. He didn't deserve this fate.

"Yes, Angie, he does."

Angela turned around to discover Jennifer standing behind her.

"I know you love him, and from your view, I guess I can even understand why. What I don't understand, is how you can be so strong and so smart, and not recognize him for what he is."

Angela glanced back toward the cliffs, letting her XO feel her pain for a brief moment. "He was taken from his mother, trained to kill, taught to betray our kind, and yet he created all of this. Evil can't build things, Jenny. It never creates. You know that."

"Half evil, then," Jennifer conceded. "He would have given us all up, if not for you. *You* know that."

Angela nodded. "Yes."

"Then you do see him for what he is!"

"Yes. I always have."

"And you followed him anyway, let him train you to..." Jennifer fell silent as she realized Angela had taken power, not been gifted with it, as they'd thought all along.

"It was the only solution I could come up with." Angela sighed miserably. "No one else was going to be able to cover everything. Because I'm a freak, I was the best choice."

"You're not—"

"Stop."

Jennifer did. The revelation didn't shock her, didn't change her opinion of Angela, but it did fill in some of the

unexplained parts. Falling for Adrian was a side effect of gaining leadership.

“I wanted it from the moment our eyes met.” Angela kept scanning the dark cliffs. “I knew he wasn’t worthy. And now that I have it, I hate being responsible for all these lives.”

“You’re good at it.”

“Yes, but it comes at a high price. You’ll find that out someday, I think. We’ll see what doors open for you in the future. I’m positive *you’ll* pick wisely.”

Jennifer was distracted by the thought of leading someday, as Angela had known she would be, and the teenager was easy to distract further with more light chores. Angela had let her in enough to start the bonding process. There would be time for more of those, providing things went well over the next month.

“Heading out!” Kyle waved.

Jennifer rushed over for a last goodbye.

Angela noted the other crews also leaving. Some of them were like Kyle’s group—going out to secure a location and wait for the storm to pass. Others would help crews that were already in place, but none of those would make it home before the storm. They would all hunker down where they went. The QZ of people who would be allowed in had been sent to a cave not far away, with a small group of rookie Eagles to provide protection. Those in Zone C had been sent to a cave below. None of them had been happy to be assigned to the bottom of the mountain, alone. The only people Angela hadn’t accounted for were those with Adrian. She didn’t know if they even had cover. It burned at her heart as the day advanced and the storm did the same.

Needing the distraction, Angela went to supervise the securing of the livestock trailers. she would help with the tents and vehicles next. The sooner everything was in place, the better.

As Kyle and his team rolled down the mountain, he caught a glimpse of a tall, thin man moving through the trees toward the bottom cave where the people from Zone C were resentfully crammed in. Kyle hoped it was the new assassin. The refugees from Zone C were trouble.

Kyle stewed on them as he drove. Some people had to die and some people had to do the killing. That never changed and thanks to Jennifer, he was beginning to accept his role in that grand scheme.

## 4

The storm came in loud, powerful waves that made Safe Haven cower.

Lightning cracked brutally, illuminating clouds of rain that swept over and drenched everything. Smaller tents were ripped from their stakes and slammed into larger canvas shelters where nervous people forced chortles and pretended they weren't scared.

Angela, who hadn't been to sleep yet, and Marc, who had slept late to make up for her deficit, stayed with their camp. Daryl and Kindle also stayed with their people, both curt with the repeated questions. Neither of them had handled this type of situation before. It was a learning experience.

Thunder rolled through the stone as if a quake was coming for them... Angela concentrated, bringing up the shield over the area. She wasn't positive how well it would fare against the lightning, but she wanted to try. This storm was a small preview of what they would deal with when winter came. This was summer and fall saying so long, and while thunderstorms were dangerous, the frozen landscape of snow and ice, combined with winds that could rip up trees, would make for very unpleasant moments. It would feel like they were being buried alive.

Angela lingered near the tied flaps of the tent, hoping the cave workers and those out on runs were okay. Her hair blew wildly from the wind getting through small tears and holes. Angela enjoyed the feel of nature that she was allowed to have. Going out there with all that flying debris wasn't a good idea. They had the animals in the trailers next to them, and the clucks and grunts were a constant noise that echoed each time the weather grew louder or slammed something against their shelter.

She had been getting sporadic reports from their people who were out on runs, but it didn't make her feel better. She wouldn't be able to sleep until the threat was over. Hearing from Jeff and Kevin had been good, though. It had eased some concerns over the two men, but their message of snow hadn't been received well. Most of the people here now were talking of working double shifts to get inside the caves. That was something she would have to fix later. Everything had to stay on schedule.

Nearby, a conversation drew Angela's attention.  
“It's not safe there.”

“She knows what she’s doing.”

“I’m telling you, she’s gonna get hurt.”

Before Angela could spot the people involved, Kindle was at her arm.

“Can you come away from the flap? Missy won’t quit harping on it.”

Angela allowed Kindle to lead her toward the center, and her usual crowd, clearly in a daze.

Sighing unhappily, Kindle put the boss next to Marc and resumed her post over Tara and Missy. Tara was a reader—always buried in a book—and it left too much time for her daughter to get into things. Like the bucket of white paint that Kenn had left out after marking lines to the trucks in case they needed to get these people to the caves in a hurry. The child had grabbed the bucket and tossed it in the air before Kindle had even realized she was going to pick it up. The paint had taken almost an hour to remove from both of them; two full sets of clothes had been tossed into the center fire right before Zack ordered it put out because of the high winds.

“We play now!” Missy shrieked, drawing attention. Hilda and Peggy had most of the kids in a far corner, playing with board games and Legos.

Kindle glared at Tara. “If you don’t do something with this kid, I will.”

Tara flinched, dropping her book; those around them stared in shocked disapproval.

“Fine.” Kindle picked the girl up and swung her around for a piggyback ride. “Let’s go see who we can bug, huh?”

Missy grabbed Kindle’s short spikes and tugged. “Go now, pony!”

Kendle hefted the girl into a more comfortable position.  
“Yes, Master Missy.”

The little girl giggled, tugging again.

Kendle trotted across the tent to please the kid. It was obvious that her mom didn’t give a shit.

Across the tent, people were gaping at the scene. Even Marc was staring, dumbfounded. The feeling slowly turned to awe for his mate. Angela could have hated Kindle, could have hurt her, but instead, she had found a way to bring the crazy island woman into the herd. Marc leaned over and kissed Angela’s chilly cheek softly. “Love you.”

Angela melted against him. “Mmm. You should do that more often.”

“What?” Marc asked, rubbing her arms.

“Realize what a perfect genius I am.”

Marc’s laughter was a balm to the nerves of everyone who heard it. He wouldn’t be laughing like that if they were all about to die.

“It’s going to be a long night. How about a padded chair, with a blanket and your notebooks?”

Angela wanted to say no, but she did need to go over a few things and now, while she couldn’t do anything else but wait, was an ideal time. “Okay.”

Marc blinked. “What?”

Snickering, Angela led them to the area where the other pregnant females had been stashed with comfortable chairs, snacks, and books. “I’d like the Eagle signup sheets.”

Marc veered toward Kenn as Angela joined her team, minus a couple, and their wary mates. Almost everyone had chosen to stay here and weather the storm together, but a few

people were in the caves. The new Indian members were all in the trailers with the livestock. Marc wasn't sure what Angela had them doing and he hadn't asked. She wouldn't put them on a dangerous post because of a bias or because they were new. Angela had proven repeatedly that she was fair, so that meant they were doing quiet work for her and that meant something for the future. Marc was already positive it wouldn't be pretty. He didn't want to know yet. He had enough on his plate. When he had room for more, he was sure Angela would fill him in. He had already figured out that she was breaking him in easy by not giving him too much to handle at once. He doubted that would hold for long. There was simply too much work and trouble to account for, to think he would ever be caught up.

*Bamm!*

Lightning struck close enough to rattle the ground under them and send awful vibrations rushing through the stone. All activity stopped; everyone in the canvas stared at the flaps.

Thunder rattled, booming and drawing noises from the animals next to them.

Angela stood up, feeling something coming.

"The door!" Missy screamed.

Kendle made the connection. "Get away from—"

The bolt of lightning slammed into the stone directly in front of the fastened flaps. Electricity sparked into every piece of metal nearby, causing tubes to explode in fiery shards that landed on the tent.

"Shit! Fire!"

The female team got up, all eager to use their gifts, but Angela shook her head. "We're not needed."

Her tone was an alpha command; the females sat down disappointedly as the members around them either panicked or ran for a fire extinguisher.

Marc saw the same chaos that Angela did and realized she was right. He dismissed the other Eagles, allowing only team leaders to give instructions to those who needed it.

The fire in the roof was small, with only a few smoldering holes, but extinguisher foam coated the tent front in thick layers as the men and women went overboard.

No one scolded them.

Angela didn't have to pass the word for the Eagles to congratulate or thank them. They already knew to do that. It was how most of the rookies were trained. Everyone needed to feel like they were contributing and eventually, that led to them actually doing it. The same was true of the camp. Because of this, a few of them might use it to bolster their courage and join the Eagles.

Marc directed the camp members through cleaning up the mess, but he didn't let them go outside the flap. The storm was having its way with everything out there and people were always a target now. Those in quarantine had been warned about the coming storm. Marc had suggested they take cover in the cave at the bottom of the mountain road. It was a wide, dead end space and it would even hold their vehicles. The new people hadn't been happy, but when the rain had come, they'd fled. Marc had insisted on getting them under cover, but Angela hadn't wanted him to. He'd felt that clearly. She hadn't protested aloud though, and he'd gone through with it, trying to convince himself that she didn't want them to be killed. Surely, she'd rather the wilder folks just left, right?

Marc made his way over to Kindle and Missy, who had chosen a stack of coloring books, a large blanket, and were trying to construct a fort over three chairs. He started to thank the child and then decided to do it in a way that she would enjoy. He put his back to them, arms crossing. “I’m the sentry for your fort.”

Missy clapped happily.

Kindle grinned. “Our own guard. Wow, kid. I might like you at some point.”

Angela sat down, not jealous or proud. She was too tired for either. Keeping the bubble over them during that strike had been draining, but it had also gained valuable information. She now knew that telling Adrian to run from the fire had been the right thing to do. Her shield didn’t keep it out. Wind and water were covered. Fire and lightning were not. Now, all she had left to test was earth and ice.

The temperature in the tent was chilly despite her shielding, and the rumbles of thunder actually stung when they went through her barrier. For all the power here, they still weren’t safe. That thought haunted Angela the entire time they waited for the storm to abate.

## 5

“This is the safest place we can be.” Theo’s team had voted to stay in the cave and work, but many of them were jumpy and no one was talking. “This cave has been here for a long time and it goes deep. We’re good.”

Most of his team relaxed a bit, but Jennifer’s tense shoulders didn’t.

Theo joined her at the folding table. “Is the baby sleeping?”

Jennifer nodded, glancing down at the pumpkin seat where Autumn was drooling with half a smile on her little face. “It doesn’t bother her.”

“She hasn’t been told to fear it.”

Jennifer’s face clouded over. “She’ll know if she wakes up.”

“Not a fan of storms?”

“No.” Jennifer put the pencil down. “This draft is done for now, but once people are using the caves every day, we may have to expand it a little. It will depend on traffic.”

Theo was impressed with the bathroom setup she’d drawn. Unless there was an epidemic or outbreak, there would be enough stalls and water to accommodate their waste needs. If there was an outbreak of some kind, Theo assumed the QZ would have to handle the overflow anyway, but Jennifer wasn’t finished with those prints yet.

“Thank you.”

Theo lifted a brow. “For?”

“Letting me do this without harping and shoulder-hunting. It’s nice.”

“I almost didn’t believe it.” Theo smiled. “But I’ve been in engineering for a long time. You’re good. It would be crazy not to have you doing these.”

“Still. It’s nice.”

Theo blushed a bit and cleared his throat. “You’re welcome. Ready for more coffee?”

Jennifer grimaced. “No. I want a Mountain Dew, a Twinkie, and a better eraser. This one keeps leaving crumbs.”

Theo chuckled, fishing in the kit on the stone floor under the table. “The can of pop and eraser I’ve got. The Twinkies all vanished. We’ll hope one of the teams bring some in.”

Jennifer nodded thanks for the can, but kept her hands away from his out of habit. Cesar hadn’t liked her to have physical contact with another male in any way.

That thought made her frown. She tried to shake it off, not sure why she would be thinking of that evil man right now. He was dead and that hell had ended. *But some days, I don’t believe it. I’m still waiting for his punishments.*

Theo glanced around the room they’d chosen, aware that everyone was listening. Most of them had promised to keep an eye on Jennifer, but they were also using each other to hold their demons at bay. Being inside the ground and listening to the groans and creaks of shifting rock above them was unsettling even for the senior men. The only miners in Safe Haven were the Miller family men.

An odd growl sounded from a lower level of the cave; all of them turned in that direction. That hadn’t been the storm or the stone settling.

“You want me to check it out?” one of their rookies asked.

“Nope.” Theo waved. “Stay alert.”

Brent sighed in bored disappointment. He wanted to be doing more than babysitting.

The storm increased in power, rumbling down to make the hair on their necks stand up.

“It’s getting bad up there.” Jennifer stiffened. “I think they’re going to come down here soon.”

Her voice was dazed. Theo got the team going on preparations for that. It would please the boss and fix their boredom issue.

Jennifer joined them in the work, but stayed in the same room so she could still watch Autumn. That cave-dwelling voice might be harmless right now, but Jennifer didn't want to test it on an innocent soul. It already hinted of too much power and too much time alone. When they finally confronted that obstacle, Angela had to be here.

"Everyone okay?" Zack appeared at the cave entrance. "Boss wants an update." He shook off the rain from his yellow slicker. "And I'd like to be able to say you're all alive at least."

Theo's crew snickered.

"We're good." Theo placed a crate of mats near Zack's feet. "Getting it set for the bugout."

Zack grinned. "She'll like that. Need a few hands? Lots of Eagles up there doin' nothin'"

"Can I give you a list?"

"Absolutely. We'll each bring down an armload."

"Perfect."

Jennifer wasn't paying attention to the conversation. She had Autumn's seat by her ankle and a handful of bags that held towels the workers usually used for wiping their hands. Tonight, the camp might need them for drying off. She turned around to put them on the table and froze at the sight of the nun in full habit. Jennifer blinked at the premonition, a little freaked out. "What do you want?"

Beth had lost her child at birth; she was paler than the parts of her habit. She lifted her head. Blood dripped from her dead eyes.

Jennifer shrieked.

The sound of it spun through the caves and brought everyone to her side.

“Get to Beth!” Jennifer sobbed, cowering. “She did it!”

The ghost smiled sadly, turning around to deny Jennifer the sight of the rope around her neck. She’d hung herself in the empty garden truck.

Jennifer continued to sob, but the storm prevented radio calls and there was no one who could comfort her. She hadn’t realized Beth’s depression had gotten so bad since she lost the baby.

Autumn also stared, not upset by her mother’s pain. She was distracted by glowing green orbs that bobbed and jumped in the darkest shadows behind Beth’s ghost. It was mesmerizing.

The infant was mostly ignored as two guards ran for help and the others tried to console Jennifer.

## 6

Angela grabbed Marc’s arm. “Get to the flap!”

Marc went immediately, convinced by the urgency in her tone. He marched into the pouring rain and found Zack, pale and panicked.

Marc led him away from the tent of curious people, taking him into the nearest truck. Full of turkeys that had been brought in, it was noisy and stank, but at least it was dry.

Zack filled him in quickly, glad to be away from the crying girl. With Kyle gone, they didn’t know what to do for Jennifer.

The wind increased again, shoving until the trailer wanted to roll. Marc could feel the hum, the vibration of being on the edge of movement. “We’re not staying here much longer.”

“Theo was already getting things set in case you needed to bring people down.” Zack grunted. “He could use a hand.”

“Good. I’ll draft a crew for it.” Marc’s mind stayed on Jennifer. He had promised to watch out for her.

“What about the...Beth?” Zack didn’t want that chore. At least not in the dark, during a storm.

Marc sympathized. “Just verify it and then leave it for morning. Put a quarantine notice on the truck so no one opens it before then.”

Zack ducked out, muttering. He didn’t want to look in that truck and see Beth’s body hanging there, but it was still better than having to cut it down right now, alone.

Marc took a moment to nod to the shadows in the truck. “Very nice. He never saw you.”

Marc left the truck as the Indians chuckled. Angela had asked them what they would like to do in Safe Haven; all of them had told her they wanted to be useful to Marc. The Ghost was their spirit guide in the flesh. They’d come here to live among the white man for him. Angela had seized that opportunity and placed them out here in the trucks to monitor things during the storm. The Indians didn’t mind. They didn’t view it as dirty work. They were honored to be trusted so quickly, to be given such an important post. It was good to be useful, but they also got a thrill from living on the edge that couldn’t be matched in any other way.

Marc returned to Angela’s side, signaling a few men to go help Zack. Only a few of the sleepy camp members paid

attention. Marc was in the middle of congratulating himself on handling their first issues quietly when lightning struck the tent directly and all chance at a peaceful night was lost.

## 7

It wasn't hard to get the scared members into the caves, but it was chaotic. The next hour was spent running loads of people and gear into the new shelter that had only gotten a few days of preparation.

Angela put guards on the entrances to the other levels and kept everyone on the first floor, aware of bad vibes coming from the bottom of the cave. Something would have to be done about that, but for now, she was busy trying to calm a camp that didn't want to be underground at all, let alone so soon.

"We'll be up and out in a few hours." Angela made sure her voice carried through the crowd. "Until then, it's good practice for when we move in here. Take this time to conquer your fears. And if you don't have a fear of this, reach out and help those who do."

Shawn carefully pushed his way through the tense crowd and leaned down to whisper in Angela's ear.

Marc saw her first glaze of terror. Then her cool façade fell into place and the leader of Safe Haven took over.

"Everyone! Pay attention! We're getting snow now and it's going to get cold. Please put on more clothes immediately. Eagles will be around with blankets and sleeping bags in a few minutes, and then I'm sending them out to get all our heaters. Be patient and stay out of the way while they get our heat flowing."

The camp all seemed to start shivering and noticing the cold at the announcement. Angela immediately wished she had another option, but the people would have spotted the snow on the workers anyway. It was best to have everyone prepared to get out of the way.

Standing outside the entrance now, Angela surveyed the sky.

Samantha appeared at her side, looking exhausted. “Sorry, I missed that one. Not sure how, but I assume nature doesn’t like me trying to predict her moves.”

“No worries. We’ve got gear to cover a day of cold.”

“And if its winter coming now?”

Angela grunted, letting that be her answer. Prepping these damp caves in freezing temperatures would be a nightmare that she hadn’t considered. Angela gave Marc point, then sat down to concentrate on searching the future. They shouldn’t have snow yet. *What did I miss?*

The descendants around her felt Angela probing those halls and doors that connected to their own. It was eerie when they also began searching, but for Angela, it was a boost of fresh energy that allowed her to pry the heaviest door open and peer inside.

Angela’s sigh of relief let everyone else relax. “Just flurries.”

Her words were missed in the tension break. Small conversation attempts began, kids shifted restlessly, and Eagles got busy carrying out their orders. It would be a long night, but they would be okay. They had magic on their side.

Angela didn’t like that common thought, but she didn’t dissuade them of the notion. A few of those here understood

how much danger they were all in at this moment. Angela was relieved those people were controlling themselves and not upsetting others. In this atmosphere, it wouldn't take much to spark the fuse of panic that always seemed to be with them since the war.

## 8

Zack appeared in the entrance. "The ants are coming in!"

Angela pointed at the clear area in the rear that Jennifer had suggested. The teenager was talking to people and caring for Autumn, but Beth's suicide was obviously weighing on her.

The ants, dusted in snow, marched into the cave without hesitating despite there being more than two hundred people inside. They went to the corner Angela had insisted be left clear and made a spectacle of themselves by curling their bodies into a large circle that their young and larvae were placed inside. More ants then covered their young and all of the insects slept, except for two huge ants that marched back and forth in front of the colony.

The arrival of the ants signaled the end of the evening; the camp settled down to sleep inside the cave for the first time. Burning cans near the entrance provided a little heat, but the light went a long way, as did the lamp glare and penlights people had around their necks. Piles of blankets made large cushions for kids who sprawled out on top of each other, much like the ants. Adults and off duty Eagles found a spot to sit and lean, and the final hours of waiting began.

Marc was wiped out. He knew Angela had to be feeling worse, but she strolled among the people, chatting and offering positive thoughts with little signs that it was bothering her. *Is she okay?*

*For now, came the foreboding reply from his demon. I wouldn't let her go much longer without a fill.*

Marc felt his body respond at that suggestion. *Yes, sir.*

The demon chuckled; Marc marveled at how quickly he'd become accustomed to that voice inside. It was almost as if it had always been there, helping and guiding.

*But I haven't. You locked me away.*

*You know why. Don't start shit with me.*

The demon fell silent.

Marc chose to worry over that later. If the demon was holding onto the past, that wasn't a good sign of things to come and he would need a clear head to deal with it.

Two hours after bugging into the caves, Angela leaned against Marc's big arm and fell asleep almost right away. She had time to think he smelled like she did—tired—and then she was flying west through the snowstorm with a shadowy figure following on her heels.

Angela knew who it was and allowed the breeze to carry her wherever it wanted. Marc had the camp protected and Adrian had her six. Both sides of the line were covered.

## 9

Late night changed into early morning with a shift in the winds that blew directly against the boards they had placed

over the entrance to the cave. It caused the temperatures inside to plummet and leadership to worry.

Marc woke Angela two hours after she'd fallen out, regretful but unsure what she wanted him to do. He wasn't going to step on her toes in any situation.

Angela sat up groggily, and pushed away the tea. "Coffee."

Marc handed her his mug and quickly lit her a smoke, aware of her morning habits.

Angela struggled to wake up, to return fully from the adventure she'd been on with Adrian. *The island is so clean! So green!*

"It's cold, Angie. I can do some things about that, but you need to pick."

Angela shook off the dream walking haze and focused on the paper Marc was holding out. She scanned it. "Tents."

Marc stuffed the paper in his pocket, glad he didn't have to leave the cave to go get their winter gear. Erecting a few tents and putting what heat sources they already had in here would hold them until dawn. "I've got it now. Lay back down."

Angela did, gratefully. Marc knew what he was doing. In the morning, when her brain and tongue were connected, she would let him know he had permission to go ahead and handle it as he saw fit next time. The calm people around her said he'd been doing a good job.

Angela slipped back into the darkness eagerly.

“Have you made a choice?”

Peggy nodded in response to Hilda’s lowly spoken question. They were standing at the entrance, pretending to observe the snow like many other people had been doing while Marc got the tents set up.

“So have I. Now we leave them alone, right?”

“Yes, we have to make sure our representatives are worthy.”

Not far away, Doug saw the women chatting and didn’t like the sense of wrongness. He was sitting with Maria’s sons, enjoying the cooler weather that fascinated the kids, but he knew Peggy was doing something that would get her in trouble. Why else would they be whispering?

Peggy rotated to inspect the area and found Doug’s disapproving gaze on them. She immediately left Hilda and came to his side. “You feeling okay?”

“No.” Doug glared. “I’ve got an ugly feeling and it’s your fault.”

Peggy flushed, looking down to find the kids staring at him in surprise. “Later?”

Doug nodded stiffly. “Absolutely, woman.”

Needing a distraction, Peggy put her hands on her hips. “Have you tested your sugar yet?”

## 11

Marc got the three large tents set up inside the cave and directed people inside them. They’d found two small space heaters and with the piping already in the cave for tomorrow’s work, they were venting with no trouble. They also had the

blankets and sleeping bags. The temperature difference was already noticeable.

Marc swept the slowly relocating crowd, aware of groggy mutters and complaints, but he didn't feel any true resentment. Everyone was a bit on edge from being forced into the caves before they were ready, but come dawn, they would be eager to get outside and play in the little bit of snow that had accumulated so far.

Marc nodded to Samantha, who had taken up a post near the entrance. She was obviously feeling guilty about missing this storm, but Marc knew she was also worrying over Neil and Jeremy. Neil's was the only crew they hadn't heard from yet. Jeremy had also remained topside, swearing he was more useful there. Several people had tried to talk him out of it, but Jeremy had walked into the storm with tense shoulders and none of them had followed. Samantha was now holding a vigil for both men.

Marc spotted Cynthia inside her personal pup tent with a flashlight illuminating the first edition of the newspaper she was working on. Angela hadn't given her a deadline, but Marc was confident the reporter would have a rough draft ready in the morning. Settled on a ledge slightly above them, Cynthia hadn't come out of her tent once.

Marc made his way through the people to get to the contest board that Angela had insisted on bringing. It held a sheet of paper with the names of those who had signed up for the Eagles, but Marc hadn't gotten to it yet. He wanted to know who the next soldiers in their army were.

Marc ignored the other men standing stiffly in front of the board and began reading. He skipped the females names,

positive Angela would weed through those; he frowned when he found Charlie's name. With all the chaos of their freedom fight, the Jr. Eagles had been broken, the same as many other teams. Charlie wanted to make sure his mom hadn't forgotten about them. Marc kept reading, happy the list was long. They needed all the new...

Marc burst out laughing as Kenn's name caught his attention. Kenn was about to be a rookie! Marc's amusement sent calm over the camp that was now getting comfortable. Marc assumed Kenn had finally gotten tired of hearing that he wasn't an Eagle.

The bottom of the sheet held names of the last minute people who weren't confident they had what it took. Marc snorted as he spotted Kindle's handwriting. She already had a slot on Angie's team, but she wanted to officially earn it, like the others had.

*Except Candy.* She'd also been given a place, to help ease her rage. Marc didn't think either of them should even have a gun. Kindle was doing better and if they were in another war, he would want Kindle with him then, but for this time and place, she was too dangerous to trust. As for Candy, Marc was still waiting for the snap. That cold attitude was a façade that held a pit of grief and anger that Marc didn't want to blow up on anyone.

Marc kept reading, almost at the bottom. The final name to catch his attention caused a disturbance in the force. Marc spun toward the nearest guard and made a curt motion.

*When was he here?*

Zack, tired and a bit annoyed over it himself, gestured angrily. *She did it while we bugged out.*

Marc wanted to cross the name off the list, but that would be exceeding his authority. If Angela wanted Conner among the rookies, he was in no position to argue. “But I don’t have to pass him. And I won’t, unless he proves to me that he’s not a threat like his father.”

“How could ya, when it’s been in my pocket?”

Peggy’s shout drew groans and grins. Marc waited for the inevitable with everyone else.

“No, it’s morning now. Do it!”

“No!”

“Fine!”

“Oww!”

Marc snickered, anger dimmed by amusement. If Doug didn’t test his sugar every morning, things could get ugly for him. Peggy was determined and when a woman set her mind to something, she usually got it.

Marc paused, mind clicking that into place. Angela wanted Conner to be an Eagle, to be away from Adrian and be saved.

*Can I do that? I would have with Matt, though I didn’t realize time was so short. Can I train the son without holding the sins of the father against him?*

Marc sighed. *No. I’ll have Kenn and Kyle do most of it. I don’t want to be that person.*

Satisfied with his own character, Marc headed for their small, quickly chosen bathroom area, hoping the port-o-lets were holding up. They didn’t have the pit ready yet and the odor was terrible.

Marc moved to allow Li Sing and his family to leave the bathroom, nodding and exchanging greetings. The nine men, women, and children did almost everything together, as if they

feared being alone. Marc made a mental note to make sure that wasn't the case. If they were having problems with someone, he would handle it. Li and his clan were a wonderful addition to Safe Haven. They obeyed the rules, helped even during their off time, and remained respectful of each other and those around them. They were model citizens here.

Marc wished the new soldiers were more like them. Those men were loud, crude, and often said the wrong things about people. If they weren't careful, Angela would put them on an Eagle team together and then tell the rest of her army to make them feel what it was like to be bullied. Marc didn't want that to happen; he decided to spend a few minutes with that poker-playing group of men. A few words of advice might save them a lot of bleeding and humiliation. After that, he planned to make certain the ants weren't being disturbed, and then do a complete round of the sleepy people. It suddenly seemed like he might have missed something and Marc didn't care for that feeling at all.

## 12

As the storm wound down, the shift change came. Those who'd been on duty overnight were too wound up to lie down and sleep right away. Many of them went topside to dig through the debris or find a tent that was still standing.

Kindle and Daryl were two of those. They joined Jeremy in the training tent that had survived the storm because it was along one of the cliff walls that surrounded them. Jeremy stayed in the hay room, occasionally letting out a moan that mirrored theirs as Daryl led her through a second kai lesson.

Kendle wasn't afraid to hit or to be hit. It made her a quick study. Daryl was already using level two lessons. She also hated the one-hour limit and had made him agree to double it so she would be tired enough to sleep.

Daryl didn't think she had it in her, but they were about to find out. After being cooped up in that cave for hours, Daryl was looking forward to the exercise. He hadn't admitted it would be good for him too. He didn't think it was a good time to show any weakness. He had too many plans to let something small like a reputation screw things up.

"Mind if we join?"

Shawn and Greg were by the flap.

Daryl waved them in eagerly. When Kendle got tired, he could advance to a real opponent and not have to hold back.

In the hay room, Jeremy quietly shut off the laptop and stowed it in his kit under his other gear. He'd spent the evening tracking the storm and trying to figure out how to activate the satellite links so he could see the western half of their country. When he got those, they would be able to view Yellowstone and determine how bad the damage was. It was information that he and Neil had agreed was worth hiding from the camp. They were worried if they reminded Angela about it before he found those links, she might shut it all down and then they would never know. However, if they could show her the internet would be useful, she might not ban it. For Jeremy, that mattered. He'd spent too many years on the net to ignore such a valuable source of knowledge. He'd planned his speech, but she'd cut him off today and revealed that she hadn't forgotten

about the Internet at all. The camp had though, and the boss clearly wanted it that way.

Jeremy joined the other four Eagles at the training mat, noticing small leaks and tears in the vinyl. The winds had been awful, but not as bad as hearing them from inside that stone tomb would have been. There was no way he could live in there, but he hadn't figured out how to tell Angela or Samantha that yet. He suspected Neil already knew, but the former state trooper wouldn't give him away. He might even try to help, though Jeremy wasn't sure there was anything anyone could do. If he went inside that mountain, he would die. It was that simple.

Outside, the sky began to lighten with the coming of dawn. Six foggy shadows slowly approached Safe Haven while there were no Eagles on duty along the gate.

## Chapter Nine

# Watch Your Six!



### 1

“Is everyone clear? I don’t want any screwups.” Jack twisted around on his horse, pausing to look at his men. “Not like last time. Canada got out of control. I know it was mostly Major Donner, but I also know you guys helped things along by not following my orders to the letter. That won’t happen again.”

The five men also stopped, each giving the expected nod without a comment. Jack didn’t like it when other people talked. Everyone knew that.

“Good. If there’s even one survivor, we’re done as a team. I’ll draft a new crew.”

Again, none of the men spoke. When a new crew was drafted, the old one was executed, and Jack had full authority to make such a switch whenever he felt like it.

Jack spent another moment studying his men, using his alpha gift to force his will on any rebellious thoughts he found lurking. Resisting was impossible.

Satisfied he had his men under control, Jack surveyed the area around the large camp. He would concentrate on Safe Haven itself when he reached those shiny gates, but out here was the more important area. Mountain terrains made for fun hunting grounds and he had brought his men in from the opposite side so they would have the advantage from the beginning. It had also toughened them up from their month of recovery at their base. Canada hadn't gone well.

"But Safe Haven will." Jack narrowed in on one of the many ledges surrounding his target. Roughly half a mile from where he now sat, the area was covered in tall, thick trees and light foliage that appeared undisturbed. But it felt like there might be someone spying from there and Jack didn't want the people in those gates to have any warning. Jack quickly blasted the area with his alpha power to capture the person. Only one in a million descendants was immune to him—a gift that had provided countless victims.

Traveling mentally with his power as it rushed out, Jack immediately sensed the presence of at least two descendants, though they weren't there now. They had been recently, he knew. Descendants always left bits of their light wherever they went. It faded after a few days or a week unless the person kept using the same area. After regular use, the trail would build up and become blindingly trackable.

Jack also found half a dozen soldiers sleeping inside snowy tents, but no one else; he slowly withdrew without disturbing the men. They were the least of all possible threats, but Jack was suddenly certain he would end up killing them too. Fate often worked that way.

Jack stored his gift and slapped his horse with his hand. The animal took off toward Safe Haven's main gate, shuddering heavily at the unexpected action.

Reminded of the animal's previous owner, Jack dug his spurs in as he viciously yanked on the reins. "Control your disgust or I'll slit your throat!"

The quarter horse forced himself to obey instead of attacking like he'd done upon capture. The evil human had already taken his balls. Life was all he had left to lose.

Behind him, Jack's men exchanged a dangerous glance and then followed their boss. They kept their thoughts carefully blank, but in their hearts, Jack's death replayed like a broken record. Each of them planned to participate. They had never made the mistake of speaking about it or exposing the goal through their occasional private thoughts, but it was in every look they shared. Big Jack Devine wouldn't be forgiven. He would be consumed.

Adrian shielded himself as the riders went by, able to scan lightly without drawing notice. An old enemy was here and Jack hadn't suffered from time. Power radiated from the riders in ominous waves that traveled outward and upset even the animals. Jack was a lethal force and it showed.

Adrian dug a little deeper into the rear rider, trying to figure out where Jack's usual bodyguards were, but the shields

around the riders were formidable. Adrian reluctantly withdrew to get ready for whatever Angela chose to do. His advantage was that Jack's alpha power didn't work on him; he would be careful with it.

"We have a shadow."

Jack answered their rear rider cheerfully. "Yes, old friends can pop up anywhere. We'll be covering that shortly."

Safe Haven's tall gates appeared. Jack grinned. "Let's see how fast we can get an audience with their alpha."

"Are we attacking now?" Kranten was eager to spill blood for any reason.

"Let's see what type of a hand they've gathered here first. We could use a few replacements to cover us from the last time we took a settlement. Our town is still a bit light on women."

"And if they're not like us, or if they're not weak enough to enslave?" The rear rider hated the thoughts of Canada that Jack's comments constantly brought up. The fire had been Donner's idea, but Jack had lit the fuse.

"We take them." Jack's orbs turned crimson. "I want my property!"

"You'll get it, boss." Vlad put a hand on his gun. "We'll do it right."

## 2

"What is that?" Kindle paused the long lesson. "I can't... That's screaming!"

The sound was coming from the cave where their people were; all of them ran for the flap. They emerged into a dreary dawn over thin slush and ran for the cave.

“Hey, there!”

The ugliness in that unknown voice said Daryl had just been marked for death. He instinctively grabbed Kindle’s arm and swung her around to stand by his side as the others went to help Angela.

The screams grew louder.

Kindle was able to make out the words. “*Daddy! Daddy’s here!*”

It was Missy, trying to warn them that her father had arrived.

“Sounds like trouble,” that ugly voice commented happily.  
“Maybe we can help.”

Daryl and Kindle stared at the group of riders outside their front gate, instantly on edge. If the glowing red orbs hadn’t given the strangers away, the fiery halos of their protective shields would have. These were descendants and unlike Safe Haven’s people, these were evil. It was obvious in the menace that struck Daryl and sent his heart into a terrified gallop. He didn’t know why he’d already been marked, but the feeling grew stronger as the men stared at him.

Kindle stepped in front of her weaker partner, drawing on her own reserves. She also felt the evil surrounding them, sampling their scents, her gifts. This was worse than trouble. Aware that she was alone in this fight for the moment, Kindle opened all of her mental doors to be ready. As soon as an aggressive act was made, she would open fire in every way.

“Ah, there’s no need for that, my friend.” The leader of the newcomers smiled pleasantly. “If you give me my property, I’ll even leave without anyone dying. That’s a better offer than I’ve made anyone else.”

Kendle didn’t doubt that, but she chuckled as if she had the upper hand. “Stand by for the boss, Mouth.”

The leader frowned at the insult, eyes glowing darker.

“You can’t use that on me!” Kendle sneered. “I’ll drown you in your own shield.”

The leader’s eyes returned to those pale orbs of death and devious pleasure; Kendle stopped gloating. His thoughts were open to her and the blood in them was tempting. He wanted everyone here dead. Kendle could almost agree with him and felt her rage rising. “Keep pushing those images. It’ll flip me and I’ll take us all out. Been on the edge of it for a while now anyway, but you’ll go first.”

The pictures disappeared. A large scowl placed itself across the man’s weathered countenance. “Who are you?”

“More than you can handle. And that’s just me. You’ll meet the real power any second now.”

An instant later, Angela came from the cave with Marc on her right and Jennifer on her left.

Other people peered out, but no one else left the den.

Kendle thought that was wise. If this got ugly, inside the stone was the safest place for their camp. Kendle was surprised at her longing to spill blood in defense of Safe Haven, but there was no time to ponder it as Angela approached the gates.

“Welcome to Safe Haven refugee camp.” Angela nodded politely, hands resting on her guns. “What can we do for you?”

The leader scanned Angela, as did the other five men.

Marc took the moment to return the favor. He found power and problems, but nothing they couldn't handle if they were careful. In fact, Angela's level one females could probably handle half of these guys on their own.

"Do you think so?" Angela asked Marc, intentionally interrupting the newcomer before he could answer her.

"Probably, but it'll cause damage." Marc lifted a brow. "Is this what you want?"

"No, but it may have to happen." Angela ignored Jack's growing anger at being treated this way.

Samantha had joined Jeremy topside, taking a place behind Angela. She swept the threats, lingering on the big man by the leader's side. He appeared more dangerous than the others. Samantha felt the man's leer go over her and knew she'd been claimed.

Jeremy flashed a glower of hatred toward the man. "Over my dead body."

Vlad laughed. "Exactly what I was thinking!"  
"This is that moment." Samantha finally understood what Angela had been trying to tell her all along. "And we have to let them go."

Jeremy wanted to know why, but waited. There was too much danger to be distracted right now.

Tara and Missy appeared in the cave entrance, but they didn't come closer. Tara hovered over the child, twitching in agitation as she stared at her ex.

Angela spoke to the leader silently. *You can't have them. I'll kill them both before I give that power to you.*

*You will return my daughter!* Jack growled. *The bitch, I don't care about.*

Angela shook her head. “Never.”

Jack leaned back on his tall mount, contemplating Angela and the others with her. There was a thick shield over the rest of the camp—to hide how weak they were, he assumed—but that wasn’t a guess that he was willing to risk his life on openly. Missy’s warning to avoid the Ghost at all costs had scared him and that mysterious man could be hidden under that shield. Even if he wasn’t, the four descendants in front of him were priceless and he was sure to lose them in a fight. His own crew was recognizing the gifts here and growing eager to consume them.

Jack dug deeper into the man at Angela’s side; he didn’t like the resistance he found there. He wasn’t any happier with the reaction of the teenager or the blonde woman flanking her. “I’m leaving, but we both know it’s temporary.”

Jennifer had the camp completely covered and Marc was busy digging into their evil minds for plans and weaknesses. Angela needed to draw this out a bit. “How about arranging visitation?”

Jack recognized the ploy, but played along. “I never considered that.”

“Will you now? We don’t have to destroy you.”

Jack laughed, denying the feel of death hovering on his shoulder. That was the image Angela was sending and he was loath to admit, even to himself, that she was intimidating while doing so little.

“I’m so much worse than intimidating.” Angela’s tone was matter-of-fact. “I’m as evil as you. Your death will come exactly like the nightmares you often cried about as a child in the labs—quick, painful, and unexpected.”

Jack paled; then the red bloom of anger came to his cheeks.  
“I’ll see you again, fire walker, and of course, your friends.  
Your *weak* friends.”

Jack wheeled his horse around.

His men followed with sharp jerks on the reins that filled the air with the protests of their horses. They were out of sight before the dust settled.

Angela looked at Marc, hating the order she had to give now, and found him already taking gear from the belts of those around them. “I’ll send a small team to catch up, if you want.”

“No, quicker now and alone.”

“Yeah.” Angela sighed. “Take Kindle.”

Marc realized how hard that was for her. He kissed her as if they were alone.

Kindle turned away, anger growing. She motioned the gates to be opened. She suddenly couldn’t wait to be out there killing someone.

Marc let go slowly, pulse rapid.

Angela chuckled. “Nice. Hurry, will ya?”

Marc rubbed her flat stomach. “Before you know it.”

He was gone a minute later, vanishing into the early morning drizzle with Kindle as if they were about to drop off the planet.

“And in a way, they are.” Angela also knew they wouldn’t be alone for long. Another descendant around here needed to know where Jack was going, which meant one of her men would have to compromise. Angela hoped Adrian would. Marc wouldn’t be in the mood for anything but blood after the images he’d witnessed in Jack’s thoughts. Big Jack Devine

had come for death and he was going to get it, one way or another.

“Thank you.” Tara and Missy came to Angela, both pale and uncomfortable.

Angela studied the woman harshly, letting the truth bleed through for a single moment. “If Marc gets hurt, you better watch your six!”

Those who heard it thought they understood Angela’s caution, her warning. People would blame the new woman if anything happened to Marc.

Tara, however, took the warning to heart and quickly got out of Angela’s sight. She had read more into it than that. If Marc was injured or killed, Angela would pay it forward.

“Why did we let them go?” Jeremy asked Samantha as they moved away from the others.

“So she can draw them back at the right time.” Samantha refused to say more. Angela might not want it known. “So what’s the snack today? I’m starving.”

### 3

Marc and Kendle hit the bottom of the main road less than five minutes later, loaded with the basic gear they’d both had on them and a few quick items taken from those nearby. Neither of them worried over it. Pulling their needs from the land wasn’t as hard as it used to be when they’d both been alone in their minds. Now, there was power as well. The need to catch up to Jack and his crew was hard to fight. It got Kendle ready to kill, to bathe in Jack’s blood to save Marc, who would now be Angela’s sword of justice. Kendle hated anyone

having that type of power over Marc, but it wasn't as if he was going to refuse. Being allowed to kill, being expected to kill, had to be freeing.

"It is, in ways." Marc was always scanning people now.  
"It's also heavy."

"Because you're not a killer. Unless it's called for."

Marc didn't answer that. He would murder several people if the opportunity presented itself the right way. And he wouldn't ever regret those deaths.

"Do they deserve it?"

"To me, they do."

Kindle tried to comfort him. "Then, they do. You're a good man. You won't kill randomly."

"Uh, Kindle, I need to tell you something."

"Yes, Marc?" Kindle simpered.

"You're making me sick with the hero worship, and you're giving Angie thoughts about removing you once you're no longer useful."

Kindle froze, a bit stunned at the abrupt topic change.

Marc looked over his shoulder at someone behind them.  
"Can you do something with her? Angie's patience has limits, even when she has plans running."

Kindle stared in surprise as Adrian emerged from the lightly wooded cliff directly above them. On foot, he wasn't out of breath yet despite running to stay caught up. *Marc's built that way too. Sexy.*

Marc sneered. "This should be a fun trip with you comparing us the entire time. Should we hold still next to each other so you can get some of it out of your system now?"

Furious with herself and him, Kendle swung down from her horse. She strode off angrily.

Adrian took her mount without commenting. Marc had blasted her out of the water and he might not be done firing yet.

Marc snorted. “The *boss* set it up so we’d have to do this together. She’s hoping we’ll work out our differences on this run.”

“We certainly didn’t on the last one.” Adrian didn’t think it was possible. Marc wasn’t the forgiving type.

Marc didn’t respond to the comment or the thought.

Adrian scowled. “Are we in for another Marc run through hell?”

“Her mind was closed, so I’d say yes to the hell.” Marc tried not to enjoy Adrian’s discomfort. “As for me, no. You’re not worth my time anymore.” Marc lightly snapped the reins to catch up with Kendle. He swung her up onto his horse, and then neatly slid to the ground.

It was so Indian-like that Adrian gaped. *Is Marc part Indian?* He got on with them amazingly well. Prying, Adrian caught a glimpse of a forlorn man on a shore as a boat sailed away and he quickly slipped out, hoping Marc hadn’t noticed the slight intrusion.

Adrian shut his mind down, storing the new thread for later. When he didn’t have to protect his thoughts, he would explore that. From a first peek, it said Marc wasn’t leaving with them. Adrian’s tiny heart thumped happily.

Marc knew what Adrian was thinking, but the blond traitor hadn’t stayed for the thought that always followed the image of remaining in America. Angie always jumped off the boat

and joined him on the shore. She wasn't going to let them be split up. If Adrian thought that was the final plan, he had a huge shock coming. Marc had considered telling Adrian that Angie had made a contingency plan. If he refused to leave, so would she. Marc had chosen to let her have that moment of revelation and enjoy knowing that no matter how Adrian plotted or schemed, nothing would work. *Angie and I can't be split up now. Neither of us will allow it.*

## 4

“More company!”

Angela turned toward the gate. Marc and Kindle had only been gone a short time.

As she walked, Eagles fell in step with her. Marc hadn't left any specific instructions, but he hadn't needed to. Jack and his red-eyed men had been enough to snap the sentries into full alert. Around the camp, the sense was the same.

Angela knew their unease wasn't good, but there were many types of descendants; her people had a right to know what they were up against this time.

Angela paused at the gate, just out of sight of the newest people, and scanned them mercilessly. Unlike the morning visitors, these ten men weren't descendants. The clue was their horses. Angela recognized the brands immediately—three small J's. Angela went to the gate, hands again resting on her guns. “Hello. Welcome to Safe Haven.”

The ten men all took their hats off at the sight of her. Their leader dismounted. He walked toward the gate, stopping as the

guard's guns followed him. "No need for that with us. We just want to talk."

He edged closer; rotating his hat in restless hands that were covered in thick callouses. "I'm Darian. I have some questions."

The leader was tall and thin, familiar to some of them. Angela placed him before he could reveal his identity. "You've come for justice. For Dari."

Darian paled a bit, head lowering. "Maybe, maybe not. We've heard you handle things fairly."

"We do. And your twin sister was no different."

Darian raised a face that was lined in grief. "You found her guilty."

Angela nodded again. "She wanted descendants to rule everyone else. She refused my offer to change her mind."

Darian sighed unhappily. "I can believe you, but my people will want more."

Angela waved a hand at the gate. "You may enter and file the complaint. The rest must leave. They cannot stay with us."

Darian waited for the gate to open. "I accuse you of murdering my sister. I demand a trial."

Gasps and mutters filled their small audience, but Angela smiled as if she'd been expecting it. "I grant your demand, Darian. Please leave your weapons outside the gate. You will not roam freely within my walls."

"But I will receive justice." The man removed his gun belts and gave them to an uneasy guy on a small, branded gelding. "If it isn't a fair trial, my people will come here and attack."

“All trials in Safe Haven are fair. But we don’t rush things. You’ll be here a while.”

Darian stepped through the gate and around angry, armed Eagles with no signs of fear. “Got nothing else to do now. She was my only family.”

Angela winced. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“You killed her!” Darian’s countenance blazed with the first emotion he’d shown. “Why do you care for my pain?”

“Because you’re not like your sister,” Angela signaled for the gates to be shut. “I can read that, you know. Your loyalty is misplaced.”

Darian took a deep breath and allowed Kenn to lead him into the smallest QZ. “A trial will tell.”

Jennifer joined Angela as Darian was taken to the farthest tent from the gate. “Is that another problem?”

Angela was studying their newest guest. “If I get enough time to prove it, no. If he makes up his mind too quickly, then it could become one.”

“How about I assign a personal guide?” Jennifer knew they had several people here who needed to be occupied.

“Agreed. Put a list together. I’ll pick from it tonight, if he passes the medical.”

“Yeah, about that. Should his first impression of you come from Doc Savage?”

“No, but he’ll understand that even people who hate me agree I’m fair. Let it go for now.”

“I’ll have the list ready.” Jennifer didn’t follow when Angela left. She hated the thought of Angela being seen as a coldblooded killer. Angela never did that without a reason and this new guy had to understand that.

## 5

“Let’s hear about our target.” Marc had spent the first hour of the ride deciding how best to handle the situation and the people. Now, he was ready for details.

Riding in the rear, Adrian caught up to be right behind Marc.

Still leading, Kindle fell back a bit to listen.

“He’s what I am.” Adrian lit his last stale cigarette. He didn’t plan to dig through the dead land for more. “We trained together, ran together, hunted, competed. They finally split us up when we started using our men in battles of will.”

Marc’s face tightened at the lie, but he didn’t interrupt.

“When you what?” Kindle didn’t have that self-control. She snapped her mouth shut when Marc glared at her.

“Give me his profile.” Marc wasn’t sure why Adrian was stalling. Because he didn’t want Kindle to know what a POS he was? Probably.

“It’s hard to talk about.” Adrian grunted. “You may think spilling your guts is easy, but you don’t have all these secrets.”

“No, I don’t.” Marc smiled gleefully. “I’m not slime.”

Adrian’s demeanor went from sullen to ice.

Marc let out a sound of annoyance. “Finally! Now get to it.”

With his emotions shut down, Adrian’s voice became the monotone of information that Angela was used to. “He’s an alpha with the ability to control others. He can kill you with his mind, like Becky, but he’s limited on range and strength. He can’t handle too many opponents at once and his focus can

be broken that way. He hates humans and has always wanted control over this world so that he doesn't have any rules. If that's his daughter, he won't stop coming until he gets her or he's dead."

"His crew?" Marc stored the underlying note of eagerness in Adrian's words. If Adrian wanted to be the fighter for this one, Marc would let him while studying that fight for his own coming moment with Safe Haven's former leader.

"They're the true power. Between them, they have his ass covered too well for an open attack. There are usually twelve of them. We need to split them up. If we can't, each of us will take one of his men and hope to duck his mental hits during the fight."

Marc didn't correct him on the plan, but he already had his own ideas.

"Vlad is the brute strength and their healer. He never leaves Jack's side. Kranten is the fighter. His spells are deadly. Stephens is the seer; he spends his free time scanning. He doesn't miss much."

"Any others?" Marc didn't like the admiration in Adrian's voice.

"He'll have a few people hidden at a base, but they'll be messengers and supply finders—not fighters."

"But they can fight." Marc was sure of it. "At least a little, or they wouldn't have made it onto his crew, right?"

"That's safe to assume." Adrian shrugged. "But Jack is careful to keep full control of anyone who has real power. Those he leaves behind will be the weakest."

"Tell me how he usually attacks in a large situation."

“Head-on, when I knew him. I doubt he’ll use any setup I’m familiar with.”

“He knows you’re here?”

“He didn’t see me when he came in, but he’ll figure it out. He’s not dumb and there aren’t any fresh rumors of my death.”

“Stay low until I tell you otherwise.”

“You got it.” Adrian didn’t want to confront Jack. He wanted to know the man’s goal for Safe Haven first. Even if they killed Jack and his crew, someone just as bad would be sent to replace them.

“You think so?”

“Yes. Angela removed a group of women that were well liked by their people. In fact, Dari may have even been in the chain of command among Jack’s camp.”

“Have you been to their site?”

“No. They were based in Pennsylvania after the war. Command didn’t want us in the same state during the apocalypse. Jack wouldn’t accomplish his mission if he knew where I was.”

“What was the Canada mission?”

“Gather all descendants, and eliminate witnesses that couldn’t be converted to a military frame of mind.”

“What went wrong?”

“They had survivors.” Adrian shifted for a more comfortable seat on the horse. “Tara and her daughter, maybe, but there could have been others according to the story we got out of Donner. It was sloppy work.”

“And you wouldn’t have handled it that way,” Marc guessed bitterly. “You would have cornered them like rabbits and opened fire.”

“Yes. And so would you, so stop the Mr. Perfect act or I’m not going to be able to work with you.”

Marc’s anger flared for a brief instant and then he surprised them both with a chuckle. “Fine. Just remember you asked for that.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, Adrian continued his profile of their targets. “They were scouting us. The next move will be to send for more men. They’ll surround the site and demand a surrender while waiting for his men, then attack.”

“Simple.” Kindle was proud of herself for staying quiet so far.

Marc didn’t stop her coming questions. Letting her go for a minute might give him new leads. She knew how to fight and to view a battle.

Adrian nodded. “It is simple. Jack can’t let his plans get too big because his men would have to be allowed to think for themselves.”

Kindle dropped back to ride next to Adrian. “He controls them at all times?”

“Yes, but it has limits. They have to be in range and when he’s asleep, the line is broken. He uses mental charms to bind them for those free hours.”

“Clever.” Kindle followed Marc down the path that held the visible tracks of Jack’s crew in the slush. “What about his attack methods?”

“Much like mine. Open and heavy.”

Marc snorted, but didn’t say anything.

Adrian flushed, waiting for Kindle’s next query; the sound of Safe Haven echoed down to them. Pounding, voices,

animals, kids—it sounded like a beautiful place for any person to be.

“We’ll always be a target. So we have to stay on offense.” Marc realized he was pondering aloud. “As you were!”

Kendle resumed gathering information at his growl. “Where should we be looking?”

“Behind him.” Adrian was a bit surprised at her insight. “He always thinks he has his ass covered.”

“How can we split them up?”

Adrian frowned in concentration. “We...pick them off from a distance.”

“Is he likely to fall for that?”

“No. We’ll need them to split up.”

“And that might happen if we each have something they want.” Kendle considered it. “What can they be bought with? Women? Girls? Whiskey?”

“They’re not as simple as a drunken pedophile!” Adrian was tiring of answering their questions. “Fear rules them. You’d have to eliminate Jack’s control.”

“Are any of his men willing?” Marc refused to let Adrian stop yet.

“Vlad wasn’t, even when the first teams were put together. Jack’s father had saved Vlad’s family during some ancient turf war and he’s been with him ever since. Rumor says Vlad’s father paid the debt with Vlad.”

“He paid for a debt with his child?” Kendle was stunned by the awful things these supposed powerhouses had done to each other.

“Vlad’s family had too many kids. It helped them more than paying the debt with money would have. Because of it,

the boy was able to go to school, be fed every day, and have friends.”

Kindle didn’t want to hear that lifestyle being defended. She shot one of her last few questions at him. “What will happen when he sees you?”

Marc gauged Adrian’s reaction. He’d wondered that too.

“He’ll stop at nothing to collect any bounty on me, I’d guess. But it’s been a long time and Donner is dead now. Jack liked Donner. They were together for a long time before the war. He may order me killed and take my body to base.”

“Why did Angela send you with us? What do you know about this run that Marc doesn’t?” Kindle asked what was on Marc’s mind. “And why didn’t she just kill them at our gates? Why let them reach their people?”

Adrian didn’t respond.

Marc sent a glower. “You said you wouldn’t withhold any information. It’s the reason we didn’t hang you.”

“I came up with two options. You won’t like them.” Adrian grunted resentfully. “I didn’t.”

“I’m listening.”

Adrian shook his head at Marc’s cold tone. He and Marc would never be able to spend time together. He’d ruined all chances of that. “The first is that she wants his men or some of his people. She wants us to judge them guilty or not, so she can try to add them to the camp.”

Though not awful, Marc didn’t like that option. “And the other?”

“Isn’t is obvious?” Adrian scowled. “She isn’t settling for a small team of killers. She sent us to judge them and draw in their entire camp.”

“We’re not capable...” Kindle fell silent. Yes, they were. The two men with her were lethal and she was a killer of a variety that even a descendant could be shocked by. Their people would easily conquer any others. “What the hell is wrong with that woman of yours?!”

Marc didn’t respond. He was too busy being impressed. When Angie made plans, she went all in. “What equipment did she send you?”

“A notebook, glasses, and a map.”

Marc recognized it. “Recon.”

“We’re letting them reach their people so they’ll call in backup?”

Marc nodded at Kindle’s question. “Unless the boss says otherwise, we’re doing exactly that.”

“When will we know if that’s the right choice?” Kindle wasn’t willing to trust Angela.

Marc hated the answer, but it was the truth. “Not until we get home and she tells me what the plan was.”

“So we won’t know.”

“We’ll know when we scan them,” Adrian sensed Marc running low on patience again. “If they’re good people trapped by Jack’s crew, we’ll rescue them. If they’re willing warriors on his side, we’ll kill them all.”

Kindle gave Marc a hard look. “Some loving wife you’ve got there.”

“She isn’t his wife!” Adrian barked.

Silence echoed among all of them for a long moment where Marc enjoyed the awkwardness. He shook his head at Kindle when she would have continued the questioning. “Track them. That’s it for now.”

Kendle did as she was told, mind flying with ideas for both possible situations.

Adrian also remained silent. Jack and his crew were deadly. So was Marc. It would be an interesting trip at the least; one that would distract him from his misery and might even allow a bit of rest, since he knew Angela would be alone at night right now.

Marc caught the thought and managed to keep himself under control. Adrian's wealth of information would eventually run out. *And then I'm gonna gut you like a fish.*

"We're close." Kendle stopped her horse. "I can feel the edge of a shield."

Marc sent his grid out and found their targets. They were traveling with their protective shields up. Marc stopped by Kendle. He turned to tell Adrian to go dim, and found the man gone. "Good. Stay that way, will ya? It does something for me."

Adrian grunted through his magic, letting them know he'd heard.

Marc was satisfied with the plan he'd put together. "We'll escort them out of here—openly. When we go back, you'll keep following and get their base location. Kendle and I will be waiting."

"You got it." Adrian swallowed the urge to pull his gun and shoot Marc now, while there was a tiny chance of success. Even if he managed to hit Marc, Kendle would heal him. Now wasn't the time. "Take the horse. It'll make noise and give me away."

Marc swung up onto the mount and caught up with Kendle, who had cleared the trees and was now staring at Jack

and his crew. That group was aware of her, but all their expressions darkened when Marc joined her. They clearly weren't happy that Marc was part of the escort.

Kendle didn't respond to the man in the rear who beckoned suggestively; neither did Marc. This wasn't a social call. Marc glowered with pale red orbs until the group picked up their pace a little. He wanted these men away from Safe Haven, away from his family. They were dangerous—more so than Donner or any of the troops that had been sent to capture Angela.

"They feel the same way about you." Kendle scanned deeper. "Their thoughts are full of the Ghost rumors they've been hearing."

"Good. Saves me time."

"Time for what?"

"To kill them all, of course. I have no doubts about Angela's wishes. These descendants are a threat—one that isn't supposed to come back and haunt us later."

"How do you know that? She didn't say it."

"Because she sent her pet killer." Marc jerked a thumb toward where he could feel Adrian. "If she wanted peace, she wouldn't have sent the three hardest people in camp. She could have sent Jennifer and Cynthia."

Kendle frowned. "But Jennifer's a killer."

"No, she's a defender," Marc corrected. "Jennifer still values life. We don't."

"I value some lives." Kendle's shoulders drooped. "I've healed people, you know."

“That’s another reason I think so. If this is a peaceful mission, why did she give me a killer that can heal and a ruthless traitor?”

Kendle couldn’t argue with that and didn’t try. Some people needed to be gone and Angela was wise enough to know that. It made Kindle grateful, but it also made her hate Angela more. *There has to be something that woman sucks at!*

## 6

“Don’t do anything. Let them think we’re going home.”

Jack’s men knew the ploy too well to make a mistake on this simple part, but no one reminded him of it. Jack’s tone said he was offended that these Safe Haven people thought he could be escorted out like a bag of trash. There would be a payment for that. Then to add insult to injury, they had two escorts for six men. Jack had expected triple that amount.

Jack studied the female, recognizing her as the one who had challenged him openly at the gates. . . . Kindle. He already had plans for that smart mouth. If her fighting skills were as good as appearances suggested, he would make a nice chunk of change from selling her to the men in their town. Their warriors needed women who could take a hit or two during the fun. It always improved their will to work.

Aware of being studied in the same manner, Jack delivered a charming smile to their escorts and then rode north. When he was ready, hell would break loose, but until then, this was just a quiet ride through a quiet area. “Maybe we’ll make this our base when it’s all over. That cave could be a good place to spend a winter.”

“Our people won’t like it.” Vlad wasn’t worried over Jack’s reaction to his comment. He knew the boss wasn’t furious right now, so it was safe for other people to talk.

“They will if we let these Safe Haven people finish it first.”

“True.” Vlad understood a fully outfitted cave was different from a hole in the ground. “Have to kill the rats already there.”

“Most of them are on the list anyway.” Jack shrugged. “We’ll keep a few to get us through the cold weather.”

“Good. I get my pick, like usual?”

“Of course.” Jack promised Vlad. “Any of them, except their leader. She’s mine.”

Vlad nodded. He didn’t like brunettes anyway. The tall, willowy blonde had stood with a guard on each side of her and he wanted that. If two men were protecting her, she had to be worth taking.

“What about their fighters and snipers?” Kranten was eager to have battle plans sorted.

“We’ll try to remove them all in the first control wave I send out.” Jack’s tone dropped into a mutter. “We’ll handle it like my little seer said to.”

Stephens held silent. His vision hadn’t matched Missy’s, but Jack was terrified of dying. He would only believe his daughter when it came to the time and place. Little Missy had told him there was one way to conquer Safe Haven. Stephens didn’t agree, but he knew better than to say so. Calling Jack’s daughter a liar was a death sentence that would be immediately carried out.

“Are you sure she’s wrong?” Jack drawled menacingly.

“No.” Stephens opened his thoughts so Jack wouldn’t think he was hiding anything. “Only worries.”

“Then keep it to yourself!”

Stephens pulled his thoughts in tight, and then found something else to dwell on. Jack’s mood wasn’t good, but it could always be made worse. None of them wanted that.

Annoyed, Jack slapped his horse with his spurs and got them moving faster. He wanted to be with the rest of his crew, where he felt safe. The glowing orbs of their two escorts were a warning and Jack intended to heed it. He wouldn’t be caught off guard. Safe Haven would.

## Chapter Ten

# Team Players



1

“Are we ready?”

Samantha’s question was met with nods and grunts as the rest of her team checked their lists against the supplies on their horses. Angela wasn’t sending many vehicles out. They were too low on fuel. Each of the females was looking forward to being on their animal and alone with their thoughts.

“Let’s ride.” Samantha led the team calmly through the gate and then gave in to the urge to kick her mount and fly away. Jennifer was staying here with Angela and that put Samantha in charge.

Grinning, her teammates did the same.

The sentries watched them in concern and pride. Wild women on the loose were a concern for the trouble that their recklessness may bring, but the pride was strong too. If their recklessness did bring trouble, those females were mostly capable of handling it now. The men had trained them well.

“Easy...” Samantha slowed her horse as soon as they were out of sight, not about to risk their mission with a slip in the melting snow.

The others followed her lead.

The four women spent the next fifteen minutes in a calm walk down the mountain. Angela was sending them to the opposite side to meet the rest of their crew, where it hadn’t been cleared yet. Samantha intended to get the job done and get home. Despite the excitement, she already felt uncomfortable being outside Safe Haven’s gates.

Samantha led the women without stopping or speaking, aware that her girls were confident she knew where she was going. There was no subtle crinkle of map checks like there would have been from male teammates by now, no glinting compass peeks. It was liberating.

Directly behind Samantha, Cynthia caught the thought and found herself agreeing. She liked working with the men, and there were always a hundred things to copy or learn, but there was something special about being alone in a group of women. Maybe it was the freedom, or maybe it was the opportunity to be more without the shadows of the men over them. The reporter wasn’t sure what it was, only that she was glad to be here.

Candy and Tracy paid no attention to their leader as they rode down the slippery path. The view was amazing and it held

the two rear females enrapt as the sun continued to rise and strike vivid colors. The mountain fog and sweeping vistas were a nice balm to their troubled minds.

Samantha took them around the final bend in the road and spotted a small group of vaguely familiar people waiting roughly half a mile ahead. She straightened in the saddle, giving the coded wave, and got the same in return from the smallest of the shadows.

Now frowning slightly, Samantha and her girls picked up speed and stayed together as they approached the other half of their team.

Conner gaped at the sight of the females riding toward them. His dad had sent him here with only a basic instruction to do what he was told; he was shocked that Angela had arranged this.

“What the hell is this?” Samantha demanded as soon as she was in range. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Conner held out the slip of paper his dad had said he would need.

Samantha snatched it from his fingers. The other females had stopped as soon as they saw who the workers were.

“She’s out of her mind.” Samantha gave the note to Cynthia, who read it, let out a curse, and then passed it. By the time the note got to Candy, they all knew who had arranged it.

“I didn’t know you guys were coming!” Conner blared when all their hostile gazes settled on him. “And neither did my dad.”

“Yeah. Right, kid.” Candy glowered at him resentfully. “Entire damn Mitchel family is a pocket of trouble.”

Conner flushed. His arms came up to wrap around his waist. "I'll leave and you guys can handle it."

"No." David's tone was reluctant as he interferred. "You heard your dad. He said to stay and do whatever you were told."

"They don't want me here." Conner stared at the ground. "And it'll get me in trouble. I'm not allowed to be around her."

Conner's concern for the future let the females relax a bit. Samantha gave Candy a lifted brow that asked what she wanted to do.

Candy was tired of the drama. "Let's just get the work done. If he comes near me, I'll shoot him."

"Sounds good to me." Samantha took out their envelope of instructions. "Let's see what the boss has planned for the peeping tom."

Conner spun toward their vehicles, face red. He took a seat on the hood and fought to keep his attention on the ground and off his fantasy woman.

Samantha read it aloud. *"I realize none of you are happy right now, and I understand this won't be easy for some of you. However, I'm giving you a job that matters even more than the duties being carried out in the cave. You're clearing our escape route from these mountains and it has to be finished in less than a month. No one can know what you're doing. Bring in supplies on each run to cover your mission. As you clear, recon the towns and surroundings, list items we need to gather, and try to build up some trust with your teammates. There's always hope—even for those who don't know how badly they need it."*

All eyes went to Conner.

The boy ducked his head. “I’ll do my part. I’m not my father.”

It was a good moment for him, but it wasn’t believed as deeply as he needed it to be for forgiveness. Conner pointed south, to where they could see the first wreck waiting to be cleared. “I can go find us a tow truck, and maybe some fuel to run it.”

Samantha considered and then nodded. “Yes. Take your bodyguard along and try to be back in an hour or two. We’ll be working on the wrecks.”

Conner and David left immediately.

Samantha waved at the remaining soldiers. “You can do guard duty first. When we get tired, we’ll switch out with you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Justin got his men into place. Laboring for these people would be a way into Safe Haven. When this escape route was finally used, those people would be grateful.

Samantha’s team was thinking the same thing, but they weren’t as pleased by it. Not only did that mean Conner would be allowed back in, it also meant there were more problems coming. Why else would Angela insist they clear a way out?

“All right. Put ‘em in neutral and push them aside,” Samantha instructed as the soldiers began climbing nearby trees and poles to have the vantage point. “We’ll come through later and collect fuel or anything else we can use, so don’t destroy any of it. We might need the parts.”

“They shouldn’t be doing that,” one of the soldiers grumbled. “Adrian said most of the women in Safe Haven are pregnant.”

Justin frowned. “We don’t make the rules. Women have been giving birth as long as the world’s been turning. Nothing new now either.”

“But they can’t do...”

The men stopped talking as the sound of a car rolling into the ditch came. Clearly, the women could do it and they were going to.

“These Safe Haven people sure are determined,” a third soldier remarked from his pole position. “We should have joined them sooner.”

“Yeah. Well, then, let’s keep these skirts alive, shall we, gentlemen?” Justin began scanning their surroundings.

It was a reminder to pay attention and each of the men did. Anyone could be lurking out here, hoping for a ticket into safety by grabbing a hostage.

Busy shoving the next vehicle off the road, only one of the females caught the thought and she didn’t feel the need to be upset over the words or the greedy thoughts behind them. People who hadn’t spent time in Safe Haven’s light couldn’t be expected to act as if they had been. Change would come when Angela was ready for them to experience it. Until then, Samantha planned to keep an eye on these hard men, as well as Conner. She considered the boy more of a threat than any of the soldiers. The only one worse was his traitorous father.

## 2

“She gave me a message with the supplies.” Adrian stayed out of Marc’s reach as he continued. “I’m the hostage.”

“I assumed it was something like that. You’ll get caught on your own.”

“She wants you guys to go back before dark.”

Marc didn’t have a problem with that part. What he hated was that Adrian and Angela were still communicating. “She used Kenn?”

“And me.” Kindle didn’t want lies between them. “She didn’t tell me to keep it quiet or anything.”

Marc scowled at her. “But you were happy enough to do it. Especially if it might drive a wedge, right?”

Kindle dropped her head without replying.

Marc didn’t let the anger take control. “She’s the boss and you’re both on her shit list. I’d follow her orders to the letter if I were you.”

Adrian was glad Marc had taken it so well. Now that the moment of his capture was closing in, Adrian wasn’t feeling snarky. Jack and his men had been waiting a long time to get their hands on him.

“Does she want us to hang around and rescue you?” Marc wasn’t sure if he would or not.

“No. She said if I die, I deserve to.”

Instantly soothed, Marc stopped, taking the reins of Adrian’s mount as he realized they were splitting up now. “Good luck.”

Adrian grunted as he went by, but he didn’t say anything else. Angela’s messages were hard and cruel, and he did deserve it, but the pain wasn’t taken lightly.

Marc motioned to Kindle. “Let’s make it obvious that we’re leaving. Give them the red eye.”

Kendle snickered, letting her rage bleed through. She immediately felt the shield around Jack grow stronger. She waited for Marc's cue. When he rotated, presenting his back, she did the same. It would appear as though they were headed home now that they'd escorted the bad men away. "Are we going straight home?"

"Yes, but we'll make stops along the way." Marc kneed his mount gently to increase speed. "We'll set up some disks and alarms. The next time they come through here, I want advance warning."

Kendle was looking forward to being alone with him, but she managed to avoid gushing. "Okay."

Walking by her, Adrian leaned in. "You haven't got a shot in hell. Best stick with me."

Angered, Kendle stuck a foot out and heard a satisfying thump as Adrian hit the ground. "Asshole."

Adrian grinned, picking himself up. "That's me, Sweetheart. And one day, you'll be glad of it."

Kendle kept going.

Adrian headed for Jack's camp. Jack's crew was getting set to spend the night out in the open and Adrian had recognized a good opportunity to sneak in. He was hoping to overhear a few tidbits before allowing himself to be taken hostage.

Adrian eased into the trees around where tents were going up and found the edge of a personal shield covering the area. He took a seat in the weeds and quietly sank down to wait for the right moment to act.

"Now!"

Adrian felt alpha power slide over him in a slimy flash and began resisting. He struggled for a moment, panting. Jack's power had grown stronger than he had expected. Adrian shuffled those thoughts to the rear of his mind, where they would be safer.

"Ah, who do we have?" Jack sucked on the person's power until the shield flickered and the man was revealed.

"Kneeling already." Jack leaned down to get a better view. "A good start. Maybe you'll—"

Jack leapt away as he recognized his captive and then hard laughter rang out. "This is a day for gifts. Gentlemen, we now hold Adrian Mitchel. Let's have that meal and drink."

"Do you want him darted" Vlad jerked Adrian to his feet.

"No." Jack waved at a spot across their small fire. "I want information first. He can fill us in on the two hardasses that were following."

Adrian yanked his arm from Vlad's harsh grip and sank down where he was told. "If you'll kill someone for me, I'll join your crew."

Jack cackled in surprise.

Adrian waited patiently for it to pass. Once Jack realized he was serious, he would make the deal, though Adrian expected to be killed when everything was over. Jack wasn't a forgiving master. Neither was Angela and a deal with this lunatic wasn't in her orders.

### 3

"Where are we stopping first?"

Marc pointed toward the distant light. “The lumberyard. After that, we’ll check on the other crews who are out. Then we’ll go back for our evening shift.”

“She’ll be happy that you checked in.”

“Not doing it to make her happy.” Marc kicked his horse faster. “I care about these people too.”

“Wish I could. It would make adjusting easier.” Kindle opened her mouth again. “She also gave him a ghillie suit and there was a big red question mark on the map.”

“Figures.”

Kindle couldn’t stop another peek over her shoulder.

Marc caught it. “You can go and babysit him if you’re that worried.”

Kindle twisted around, reddening. She didn’t want to be worried about Adrian. It was just hard not to.

Marc sighed, taking pity. “Lead the way and try to spot anything that will be of use.”

Grateful for the distraction, Kindle took the lead and tried to keep her mind on her new mission. Adrian was a traitor. Marc was the light. She needed to remember that or she’d never have peace.

## 4

“Everything’s calm and quiet.”

Angela took the sheet of paper from Greg and gestured toward the line. “Go get fed. I’ll be here when you’re through.”

Angela planned to be sitting here, resting, when Marc arrived. He would have questions and updates before she

could go to bed; she was looking forward to leaning against his heat the entire time. The chill in the wind said flurries again tonight weren't out of the question.

Greg headed for the food line.

Angela opened her notebook as others approached her. The rest of her evening would be spent this way, but her mind wasn't in it. Her thoughts were with the lone man in quarantine Zone A. The sentries thought Darian might be an assassin. The other descendants couldn't get a read on his thoughts. Angela knew that wasn't good, but she couldn't help the guilt. She had executed his sister. He had every right to demand a fair trial. He wasn't going to get one, but he had the right to it.

"Everyone is accounted for." Shawn joined her at the table. "Work is going on in all the places it should be and there's nothing new to report other than all the zones have people in them."

Angela took his sheet and put it with the others. "You eat yet?"

"Went back for seconds. That Li Sing can cook."

"Yes. Would you make a round of the QZ, please? See how all our guests are doing."

"You got it." Shawn stood up. "You letting any of them in here?"

"Not from Zone C. Keep the patrols heavy on them."

That was all Shawn needed to hear. He waved a few men to come with him as he left. The group in Zone C was loud, crude, and armed. None of the guards cared for that, but Angela hadn't ordered them disarmed yet. If she didn't plan to let them in, it made sense that she would let them keep their

weapons for when they were out in the wilderness again. They would need those weapons then.

Shawn wanted to feel sorry for them, but it was hard to when the men screamed obscenities at the females they saw and threatened the weaker sentries around the area. A few of the Eagles were already talking about removing a few of those problems. Shawn had it on his list of updates for Marc. At some point, those people would become a problem that had to be handled.

As Shawn neared the gate, he could hear the drunken shouts of Zone C. He motioned his backup to take a place along the gate. If Marc heard that, but didn't find a doubled watch, there would be hell to pay.

“Let us in there, you bastards!”

Shawn climbed the gate ladder to the top partition, joining the gate guards. He peered down at the troublemakers, frowning at the broken bottles and trash littering the area. Small fires burned moodily and drunken shadows fought and ran among the smoke. “Not good. Not good at all.”

“Yeah, the boss needs a plan for this area.” Zack had his rifle in hand. “If they storm our gate, we’ll kill them all.”

“Good.” Shawn was still scanning the refugees. “She already passed sentence on this group. They’re not coming in.”

“Glad to hear it.” Zack was watching the leader of Zone C. He was lurking in the shadows to study the Eagles on the gate, getting set to bite the hand that was feeding him. “That one has to go first or he’ll rile the others into attacking.”

“I’ll make sure she knows.” Shawn lingered. “I’ll also talk to Marc.”

Zack frowned. “If she wants Marc to know, she’ll tell him. Don’t forget who the boss is.”

Shawn scowled, but didn’t respond. If Angela didn’t get to rest soon, she would lose the baby and then nothing would be the same. Marc needed to be running Safe Haven until after she gave birth, and Shawn planned to mention it to him at some point. Then, they had to get Angie to agree.

## 5

“I’m sorry about Beth.”

Jennifer ignored Theo’s concern as she handed him the blueprint she’d just finished. “This is the last one.”

Theo understood she didn’t want to talk about it, but he also knew Kyle would have forced her to confront the emotions. “Jenny, you can talk to me.”

Jennifer didn’t like his pity. She tried again to get them onto business. “Do you need anything else?”

Theo sighed. “No. Thank you. These are great.”

Jennifer picked up the baby seat, aware of Autumn drooling in her sleep. If not for the feeling of doom, it would have been a good moment.

“I’ll walk you.” Theo’s set tone marked it an order and not an offer. He wasn’t giving her the chance to refuse. He had also instructed his men to escort the women and kids all the way to the gate.

Jennifer immediately understood his concern when they neared the QZ zones. The people in that top area were shouting, drunken, some fighting, and the ground was littered with trash. As they went by, Theo automatically placed

himself between them and Jennifer, and his hand rested on his gun.

“That’s a problem waiting to happen.” He hated how the men leered at Jennifer and the baby.

“She has it covered.” Jennifer didn’t like it either. From now on, she would take the longer route that wound around the rear of camp.

Theo waited until Jennifer was safely inside the gate and then returned to the tent outside the cave entrance. He needed to go over the blueprints and the numbers on the supplies for the day, but all he could think of right now was Jennifer’s prediction. He needed to talk to Candy and make sure she knew where they stood. He wasn’t looking forward to that conversation. When he heard the gates open again to admit the female team that had left earlier, Theo stayed in his tent, stewing.

## 6

Jennifer went to the crowded mess, forcing nods and the correct replies. She left the baby with Peggy and Hilda, noting Tonya was sitting between the den mothers, and then headed for the showers. She looked and sounded normal, but the glaze over her expression would have worried Kyle, who was gone on the run to the north.

She entered the camper and found it empty; Jennifer broke. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she stumbled into the farthest stall and sank to the floor to let her grief flow. Out there, she had to be strong or she could lose all the progress she’d made in gaining control of her life. In here, she could let

her pain out so it didn't fester inside like an open wound. She'd missed Beth's depression over the death of her child. It was awful.

Angela lingered outside, giving the teenager a minute of privacy. When she thought the sobs had gone on long enough, Angela climbed into the camper and slowly joined Jennifer on the floor. When the teenager peered at her with abject misery, Angela held her arms out.

Jennifer crawled into them like a baby needing the comfort of a parent.

"It's not your fault. You know that. And you know whose fault it is, don't you?"

"Yours!" Jennifer cried, sobbing harder. "You didn't warn anyone."

"No, I didn't. I hoped she wouldn't make that choice, but it was hers to make. I'm sorry."

"Sometimes, I hate you," Jennifer confessed, still clutching Angela tightly.

"I know, sweetheart." Angela rocked her. "So do I."

A bit later, Angela left Jennifer in her crowded tent with kids who needed to feel safe tonight. The loud men outside their gate were causing bad memories to haunt some of Safe Haven's members and it would provide a good distraction for Jennifer.

Angela shut the tent flap, signaling for the Eagle on duty in the center to monitor the girl. She got a nod in return and allowed her tired feet to carry her toward the front gate. Marc and Kindle would be arriving soon. Angela was eager to pass the shift. She was exhausted.

On the way, Angela detoured to check in with Tracy, who was on guard outside Tara's tent. As seemed to be her routine, Tara was already in her tent for the night, with her daughter at her side. "How did things go today?"

"Not bad once we all got over the surprise of Conner being there."

Angela didn't offer an apology, but she did wait for any complaints Tracy wanted to give.

Tracy was busy examining her own mind. She didn't give any. Samantha probably would and Candy definitely would, but Tracy didn't have a grudge against Conner. She wouldn't say it, but she thought being around such strong women was a good idea for Conner. Angela knew what she was doing.

"Thank you."

Tracy shrugged. "You've got enough on your plate."

"Yes, I do." Angela headed for the main gate. She didn't ask for an update on Tara and Missy, confident Tracy wouldn't have any information yet. She'd only been on duty over the pair for half an hour. The other three females from today's run had dropped their supplies and went to the showers. Angela expected a visit from each of them at any time.

The noise of drunken men grew louder as she neared the gates, but Angela swallowed her scowl. After tomorrow, they would quiet down. Fear had a way of doing that to people, even those who thought they were too hard for such an emotion.

Angela beckoned to one of the guards on the gate.

Doug came quickly, hoping for an order about the unruly QZ group.

"I want you to help someone settle in here. Interested?"

“Sure.” Doug hoped it wasn’t any of the troublemakers.  
“Who?”

Angela led him into the smallest QZ area and took him to Darian’s tent.

Darian came out as they approached.

“Sorry for the noise. We’ll let you in now and you can get a good night’s sleep.” Angela smiled at Doug. “This is one of my highest men, Douglas. He’ll show you around for the next few days. You’ll bunk with him, eat with him, and work together. It’s how we do things here.”

Darian didn’t respond.

Angela could tell the doctor hadn’t had anything good to say about her. Instead of defending herself, Angela left the two men alone. Doug would get through to him without even trying.

The sound of the main gate opening drew Angela. She was with the other welcoming Eagles as Kindle and Marc came in. They were covered in dirt. Angela understood Marc had done all that she’d asked, including leaving Adrian in the hands of the enemy.

Marc swung down from his horse and turned his glowering red orbs toward the noisy QZ.

Silence fell as he glared. “I’ll handle that soon.”

Angela didn’t argue as she went to him. She rested against his heat and let herself breathe again. She hated being apart.

Marc felt her weariness and led the way toward their tent. “You’re off duty, as of now. I’ll get the next lists while you get comfortable.”

Angela sighed gratefully. It had been a long day. “I have a couple people I need you to talk to and then we’re all set for tomorrow.”

“Good. After today, I have another list of my own to accomplish.”

Angela yawned. “Welcome back.”

Marc hugged her again and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Missed you.”

Angela blushed at the heat in his tone; the couple disappeared into their tent for a few minutes alone.

Hurt at being ignored, Kindle wheeled her horse toward the gate. “Let me out.”

No one argued. The camp liked Kindle well enough, but the Eagles didn’t trust her and they wouldn’t until she quit chasing Marc like a lost dog.

Darian observed it all without speaking.

Doug led him toward the main tent area, chatting lightly in an attempt at conversation. He didn’t know why Angela had put him with the new guy, but he planned to do a good job and stay alert. Troublemakers were everywhere these days.

## 7

An hour later, Marc keyed the com truck radio mike. “Mission people will move out now. Stay ahead of the storm.”

Shawn handed Marc the latest reports from their spies.

Marc skimmed them wearily. Angela was sleeping now, but she would be up soon to help him carry things through.

“We’re all set,” Shawn yawned as mike clicks came to confirm Marc’s order.

“Yeah. Let’s hit the mess for some hot chocolate.”

“That sounds good.” Shawn followed Marc. “It’s already been a long night and it’s only half over.”

“Tell me about it.” Marc hadn’t been to bed yet at all. When Angie had said he would need that extra sleep, she hadn’t been exaggerating one bit.

## 8

“Incoming!”

Adrian eyed the men coming into Jack’s camp with sympathy. Without gifts of their own, the nine males were basically slaves who had no choice but to carry out their master’s bidding.

“Sit down.” Jack pointed. “Tell me everything you saw and heard.”

The men took turns giving Jack all the details he asked for, including an update on Darian. It didn’t take long.

Jack was satisfied that he now had a man on the inside. “Not that it’s needed. But better safe than sorry.” Jack glanced at Adrian. “With the information you gave me earlier, things are good to go.”

Adrian didn’t reply or say that because of his banishment, those details were no longer accurate. He was busy wondering if he would be drugged tonight.

“I want Mitchel on the train before tomorrow’s sunset. Vlad will take him. The rest of us will stick to the plan.”

Kranten and Stephens said nothing, but Vlad frowned. “Are you sure you want to split up? The kid could be lying.”

“Missy’s predictions are never wrong!” Jack gestured angrily. “If we stay together, I’m dead. The reaper wants you guys, not me.”

Jack’s men didn’t like hearing that, but they couldn’t say much. Missy hadn’t been wrong before; it was terrifying to think they were death’s targets but Jack wasn’t.

“Have a few of the others escort him all the way. They should be at the station in time to meet you. Then join me for the final fight. You can have your pick of their women.”

Stephens spoke up. “I want the young brunette. Her gifts will add to mine when I consume her.”

“Other than the leader, it doesn’t matter to me,” Jack informed them disdainfully. “You guys divide the spoils, but make sure we win this one. Their leader doesn’t appear to be the type to forgive us if we lose.”

“She won’t.” Adrian smiled in pride. “I taught her to kill her rivals.”

“You trained her?” Jack was surprised Adrian had chosen a female successor.

“Well, all the males did.” Adrian shrugged. “But she’ll strike hard if you give her the chance.”

“I won’t.” Jack motioned to one of the guards. “I also won’t give *you* a chance.”

Adrian slapped at the dart Kranten fired into his neck; he dropped heavily to his knees as the drugs ran through his veins.

“Excellent.” Jack yawned. “Now we can all be well rested for the slaughter in the morning. We leave at dawn.”

Adrian pretended to fall over and sleep, but his dazed eyes followed Jack’s every action. He wouldn’t be the one to kill

the evil man, but it would happen and Adrian was glad. Jack was one of the few skeletons left in his closet. The former leader was suddenly grateful that fate was clearing his slate all at once. When this one was said and done, there would be no more surprise blasts from the past to interfere with his progress.

Jack sent a dream charm over his power people and then joined them in slumber, not worried about being taken off guard. The slaves he'd left on duty were loyal. He had their wives and children in their base town. They wouldn't risk a mutiny that would cost those precious lives.

As quiet settled over the camp, Adrian rolled onto his side and studied his enemy while he slept. There was no point in attacking now. There were too many of them and with his healer here, Jack couldn't be mortally wounded. Tomorrow, when he was split from his protection, death would come on swift wings.

Confident in Angela's plan, Adrian stopped fighting the drugs. Dawn would bring new headaches and solutions. He had to be ready for them.

Chapter Eleven

# Take the Shot

September 12th  
Midnight



1

“**S**eth isn’t going to like this.”

Becky didn’t answer Neil’s comment. She was busy packing her gear back into her kit—a kit that would remain here. “I’m supposed to be found walking, so keep these.” Becky tossed Neil the keys to their vehicle. She’d been the last driver.

Neil scowled but managed to keep quiet this time. They’d all settled down to spend the night here and then finish loading the stock they’d found. His papers hadn’t said anything about Becky taking off in the dark—alone—a few hours later.

“You can call and check if it will make you feel better.” Becky dropped her kit into the rear of the truck. “There are two others like me, so I won’t be alone for long.” Becky didn’t tell them she was going to be taken hostage before she met up with those other two people. Neil wouldn’t care for that.

“Aren’t you worried at all?” he asked quietly. “What happened to Tracy could happen to you.”

Becky’s profile darkened. “It already has or did you forget?”

Neil winced and clamped his lips together. She had a job to do and he would let her, but when he got to home, keeping quiet would be over. Angela would hear about this.

“I volunteered, so leave her alone.” Becky already knew who he was blaming. She didn’t need a gift to know that everyone would yell at Angela over this. “And make sure Seth knows that.”

Neil let out a tortured grunt and stomped to the opposite side of their camp so he couldn’t protest any more.

The others in their group had stopped arguing as soon as Becky told them she had a job to do for the boss. After all Angela’s deadly envelopes during the last battles, they were just glad not to be receiving one.

Becky took off walking into the darkness.

Neil slammed himself into a seat to keep from going after her. She was armed, she could fight, and she had a deadly gift of her own, but he still felt responsible for her.

Becky understood. Someday she would be grateful for that. Right now, she was happy to be escaping the oppression of Neil’s team. As the only female, she’d been over-watched and it had quickly become annoying. Becky didn’t expect to

be treated as an equal yet—her youth wouldn’t allow that—but today had been stifling. Neil hadn’t let her out of his sight even once.

Tim frowned. “You think she made it up?”

“No.” Neil sighed. “We heard the call earlier for mission crews to go out. Something’s happening and we won’t be there for it.”

Donald looked at Neil. “We could still go.”

Tim shook his head. “She specifically said for us not to. We’re the water team. Our message said for water and oil to keep going.”

“Oil is Kyle’s team?” Donald clarified.

Neil motioned. “We’re water, Kyle’s fuel. Don’t know who had salt.”

The group of five was quiet for a moment, contemplating how important all three of those items were. Of the three, water was tops.

“We’ll reach the plant in less than an hour once we’re rolling.” Donald was the map master for this run and proud of the assignment.

Neil sighed, finally offering what he’d wanted to give as soon as he found out there was action happening and they weren’t part of it. “We could leave early, grab the water, and try to be back in camp early for whatever’s going down.”

That was exactly what Donald had hoped Neil would say. The group immediately got set for bed. None of them wanted to be away from Safe Haven if something big was happening there, but going home without the water was against the rules. Water was life.

## 2

“Where are you going?”

Cynthia winced at Daryl’s loud voice, but she didn’t stop on her way through the gate. “Work. I’ll be back.”

Daryl got a head shake from the guards on the gate when he would have followed her into the sullen darkness. It was an hour before dawn and everyone on duty was grouchy.

“You gonna stop me?” Daryl was filled with fear for Cynthia.

“If I have to.” Zack came up behind him. “She has a pass. You don’t.”

“What is she doing? And why is she doing it alone?”

“She’s bait, of course.” Angela tiredly joined them. Her five hours of sleep hadn’t made her feel better, but time was winding down on this act. “She volunteered.”

Daryl let out a curse that Angela turned away from. She hadn’t expected any of the males to like it, but they would follow orders. It’s what they’d been trained to do.

“Will she be okay?”

Daryl’s question was met with a short nod from Angela and frowns from everyone else. That was a question they weren’t supposed to ask.

“I can’t keep supporting you if you keep putting our women in danger.”

Angela did stop at that; she rotated with a chilly expression that caused Daryl to retreat a pace.

“*Our* women.” Angela stared coldly. “Like you own them.”

“I didn’t say that!”

Those closest to him put space between them, muttering about people who had to learn the hard way.

“She asked me if she could help. I was going to give the role to you, Daryl. And she knew. She went in your place, to protect *you*.”

Angered and touched, Daryl’s mouth opened, but nothing came out.

Angela was furious. “Be careful how far you take that old world authority you were given. It came from Adrian and I’ve never agreed with it.”

Angela strode to the next ramp, the next ladder of men to check in with.

Daryl stayed where he was. Too confused and emotional to work it out now, Daryl ignored the Eagles who tried to explain his mistake. He’d known as soon as she used it against him, but he couldn’t help feeling as if women weren’t as capable as men and his mind wouldn’t change about that. It was something he and Cynthia would need to discuss.

“Any word from Seth yet?” Angela asked the man at her side.

Marc fought to keep his own thoughts clear. He agreed with Daryl too much and that bothered him. “He’s in place. I have him in my grid.”

Angela didn’t tell him she did too. Marc didn’t need to feel useless right now. Come dawn, he would be vital and she needed him confident.

“What else needs to be covered?” Marc sent her some of his energy.

“Mmm...” Angela leaned against him, protected a bit from the chill in the wind. The higher the gates went, the colder the

guards would be while on duty. “Let the tiger out of his cage when the time comes. We’ll need him.”

Marc didn’t like hearing that. He carefully guided her to the ground without replying. The information from Adrian had been vague. Marc was suddenly positive that had been intentional. “Why am I being sent in blind?”

“Damn, you’re smart.” Angela smiled. “That’s so sexy.”

Marc snorted his amusement, but he didn’t let her evade. “Why can’t I know anything?”

“You’re new to fighting this way. If we make a mistake and they get to you, they’ll crack your mind pretty quickly. I’m using your human side this time.”

“The killer, you mean.”

“Yes. We need him more than anyone else right now.”

From that, Marc understood she had kill orders out on Jack; his mental cage opened. “I’ll handle it.”

“You may have to.” Angela led the way to their command center. “As the alpha male, Jack will insist on consuming you if we lose. It’s how his power grows.”

Horrified, Marc opened *all* his mental doors. “This sick fuck’s goin’ down.”

Angela was satisfied she had her main fighters in the right frame of mind. She entered the small command tent without concern for the few people already inside, despite not having a personal guard right now. There was only one traitor inside these gates and that wouldn’t play out for a while yet. This was as safe as it got.

“Why are we stopping?” Adrian already had a bad feeling about being alone with Vlad, but he hadn’t expected the man to deviate from Jack’s orders.

“Shut up.” Vlad dismounted. “Heard too much of your voice last night.”

Adrian realized he might be in trouble, but it was too late to avoid the dart Vlad blew into his neck as he walked by.

Loaded with triple the normal amount of drugs, Adrian sank under the blackness without a last thought and then slumped over on the horse.

Vlad tossed a tarp over Adrian and weighed it down with a few rocks before mounting his horse and taking off after his boss. As he rode, Vlad went dim. He didn’t know what surprise was coming, but none of Jack’s other men were loyal to him and Vlad was the only healer in their group. He didn’t think it was coincidence that he’d been sent away. He wasn’t waiting for their backup, who should be arriving by train soon.

Vlad spurred his horse faster while gathering his power. He would miss the main fight, but in the aftermath, he might go unnoticed and be able to help. “Or I’ll kill that bitch. If Jack dies, so will she!”

#### 4

“It’s time.” Angela nodded to the guards. “Bring the girl.”

“I don’t have Adrian on my grid anymore.” Marc was on the next ramp up.

Angela didn’t answer. She focused on the main road beyond the gate, where a dust cloud was forming. “Shields up!”

Each of the descendants on the gate concentrated; the crimson bubble appeared over them.

“Now shrink it to the gate!” Angela showed them mentally how to do it. “The gate has to hold.”

“Everyone from the camp is in the cave.” Kenn joined her on the second ramp. “Jennifer, Doug, and Charlie are on it.”

“They won’t be able to keep our people in there for long. We need to get this over with as fast as we can.” Angela knew the people inside those caves weren’t ready to witness her throwing fire or being hit with it. They had mostly accepted magic now, but not happily or easily. They didn’t need these constant reminders that they were weak in comparison. It would drive wedges too deep and ruin the future.

“What’s going on!”

“Give us guns! Let us in and we’ll help you!”

The shouts from Zone C had been loud and annoying since the Eagles had begun carrying up guns and ammo, but Angela didn’t shut them down.

She shook her head when Kenn would have shouted at them. “Let them yell while they can.”

Kenn didn’t want to follow that thought. He took a place next to Tonya. “Surprised you’re here.”

Tonya didn’t take her attention from the foggy landscape she was sweeping with her glasses. “Dawn’s almost here.”

“You feeling okay?”

Kenn’s question was unexpected and Tonya burst out laughing.

Heads swiveled toward them. The sound of her laughter even silenced the drunken shouts from Zone C.

“That’s sweet,” she got out between laughs. “Fine, really.”

Kenn noticed the bandolier of knives stretched out in front of her and understood she was here because of her skill. “Can you get through their shields?”

“No.” Marc frowned. “Just like they can’t get through ours.”

“So why the guns and knives?” Kenn asked, spotting Eagles with extra mags and weapons at hand.

“Because we also can’t fire through our shields.” Angela remembered that Kenn had missed all of her descendant meetings while she was becoming an Eagle. “When they lower to fire, there’s an instant of opportunity. Make it count.” Angela regarded the little girl now climbing up to her, with Tara right behind.

Missy stopped as she met Angela’s questioning stare.

Tara frowned. “What’s going on here?”

“You can stop this.” Angela already knew that wouldn’t happen, but she had to try. “Will you change your mind and at least speak to him?”

Tara shook her head, paling.

Missy bared her fangs at Angela. “You promised!”

“And I’ll keep my word. But you have to help.”

“What do you want us to do?” Tara pulled Missy against her.

The little girl winced, but didn’t struggle.

“Tell me how to get him away from his men.”

“Mommy can.” Missy dropped her head when Tara’s hands became claws in her shoulders.

“No.” Tara backed up. “I can’t. You have to do it.”

Angela smiled coolly. “I promised to defend you, not to do your dirty work.”

“He’ll kill me!”

“If you want freedom, you’ll do it. Bring him toward us. As soon as he’s out of range of his pet killers, Missy will tell me and I’ll take it from there.”

Tara had been shaking her head the entire time Angela was talking. She stopped when she realized she didn’t have to kill him. “Just get him out of range?”

“Yes.”

“O-okay.”

“Great.” Angela grabbed her arm and led her toward the gate. “You can wait for him out there. I’ll watch over your daughter.”

Marc rested a gentle hand on Missy’s shoulder as Angela took her mother down to the gate, still giving instructions.

Missy was enjoying herself now. She leaned against him like she’d seen the boss lady do.

The humming resonated in Marc’s mind. *She’s cute.* Marc’s heart expanded. He swung the child up onto his hip.

Missy buried her head against Marc’s chest, little arms wrapping around his neck. “You smell good.”

Marc was saved a reply by the gate opening and he frowned as it shut behind two shadows. “Figures.”

Angela stayed with Tara as dawn lit up the mountainside and a group of riders appeared in the road.

“He’s here.” Missy squirmed out of Marc’s hold and took a spot behind the ladder.

Her fear angered Marc. He leapt from the top of the gate to land in front of the women. He clicked his radio twice and then drew both deadly Colts.

“He won’t give you a chance to use those.” Tara pressed back against the shut gate. “He’ll attack any second now.”

“Well, we can’t have that.” Angela was glad Marc had come out with them. “Send the signal.”

“We have your people!” Jack’s happy voice echoed up and down the mountain. “I will kill them.”

The three hostages exchanged glances that said to be ready. Becky and Seth had been found wandering, and Cynthia had been captured while trying to sneak into Vlad’s camp to spy on them. They’d done exactly what they were told to, minus the final moment. All three of them began to inch into the right positions. Their captors were occupied with the words being flung back and forth, and didn’t notice.

A bottle rocket exploded. Jack waited for it to fade before shouting. “I want my daughter!”

Angela nodded. “Come in alone and we can talk.”

Jack raised a hand to give the order to open fire.

“Coward!”

Marc’s shout was sent with the command of an alpha, demanding his surrender. Jack’s attention was snared.

Behind him, Seth and Cynthia exchanged a look. The bottle rocket was the signal. Both of them began struggling with their captors.

In the rear, Becky also fought, but her focus was on Jack and it was all mental.

Jack felt the pricks at his shield, but he had his hands full repelling Marc’s energy. In the battle, his hold over his own men slipped.

“Now!” Tara shouted from Angela’s side. “Do it now!”

Stunned, Jack forgot everything else and aimed for his betrayer.

Taking advantage of the moment, Jack's horse bucked him into the air.

Jack flailed, all concentration gone.

Gunshots echoed, a large knife flew through the air, and time slowed; Jack arched repeatedly.

Angela watched Jack's body fly to the ground, blood pouring from multiple wounds. She raised a hand.

Around her, the Eagles ceased fire.

Behind Jack's stunned men, the three Safe Haven hostages began backing out of the line of fire.

Angela and Marc walked toward the group, their shields bright and tight in the early morning. As they approached, they let their eyes glow red and their demon faces bleed through. They didn't look at each other.

No longer under Jack's evil control, each of his men made the safest choice and wheeled their mounts toward the road leading down the mountain.

Angela pointed. "Take the rear rider."

Marc fired once before remembering their shields wouldn't let anything through. Frustrated by the lack of physical fighting, Marc concentrated on capturing his first mental prey.

Stephens stiffened in his saddle, gaze going to Jack's corpse. He turned as if a puppet on strings. He met Marc's red eyes and broke out into a sweat as he tried to resist the order Marc was giving.

Becky came over, not shy around the horse, and placed a hand on the man's leg.

Stephens glanced down, concentration breaking. He didn't see Seth's knife coming as it slid across his throat.

Cynthia, assuming they were supposed to kill them all, sent a blast of icy wind toward the retreating figures. It shoved the closest rider hard enough to make the animal slip and take its rider over the edge.

"Enough!" Angela called it off. "That's enough."

Marc escorted their people back toward the gate. *We should leave the bodies for nature to clean up.* It would be a warning to all who came here thinking they could take over.

The carnage on the road was ugly, but little compared to their previous slaughters. Angela motioned the Eagles to leave it. Marc was right. They needed a caution sign outside their gates and bones were as good a sign as any.

As they reentered the gates, the Eagles let out a cheer.

The refugees in Zone C kept their mouths shut, stunned from everything they'd witnessed.

Angela ignored the large group as she passed them, not sure why they were still alive. In her vision, one of Jack's men had gotten off a single shot that had lit the entire zone on fire. "Something went wrong." She ignored the celebrating men and women around her. "What did I miss?"

Tara grabbed Missy and scurried toward the caves.

"Someone get Jeremy in my tent and do it now!"

Angela's order ended the cheers. Her tone said they had another problem. Everyone resumed the watchful alertness they'd started with.

“Don’t do it, boy. We don’t have orders for this fight.”

“Well, we should!” Charlie snarled, but he forced his finger away from the rifle’s touchy trigger. “We should be doing something!”

“We are.” Morgan tried to be kind. “We’re making sure those gates aren’t breached. We’re tending the camp. It’s a more important job than even Angela has.”

Charlie didn’t believe that, but a rocket in the air stopped his protest; he watched with the other snipers as the fight started. He’d been happy to be assigned as a sniper, until now. Now, he wanted to be at Tracy’s side. He hadn’t seen her yet today, but he knew she was down there, ready to fight and die on his mom’s command.

The battle below was over quickly.

Charlie was forced to admit that the snipers hadn’t been needed. The Eagles on the ground had been more than enough. Charlie tried to control his frustration, turning to survey another part of the camp. He hated this feeling of being left out, and he still hadn’t found an outlet for his anger over Tracy being hurt. These days, he spent his time away from his mom and dad because he couldn’t stand to be around them. They didn’t care that Tracy had nightmares, that she jumped when touched, that all the progress he’d made with her had been wiped out in a single night.

“What’s moving behind us?” Morgan directed the sullen teenager to a new path, hoping Charlie would let himself be distracted. He was handling a man’s life and doing a good job so far, but it would get harder from here. Morgan had a soft spot for Charlie. He often reminded Morgan of his own son,

who probably would have been in the same classes here, had he survived the war.

“The movement is Samantha’s team coming in.” Charlie turned to look at him. “I didn’t know you had kids.”

Morgan was glad for the opening and took it. “George was a good boy. A little hotheaded when he found a cause, but good. He was shot by draft soldiers who were stripping our garden.” Morgan sighed. “I was at work when they came. After I buried my family, I set out to kill every soldier I could find.”

Completely distracted now, Charlie frowned. “I’m sorry. I guess we’ve all lost someone.”

“And managed to survive. Some of us had rougher days or nights than the others, but we haven’t given up. Like your Tracy. She’s a good girl.”

Charlie waited for more, realizing this conversation was preplanned. He could tell by the way Morgan kept judging his reaction.

“You blame her? Mad at her?”

“No, I’m not...” Charlie realized that he was. “Well, maybe a little, but she has to tell my mom no. She should have said no.”

Morgan studied the boy, trying to remember what it had been like to be so young and full of fire. “None of us will do that. Your mom is why we’re here, why we’re alive and free. We need you to understand that.”

“I can’t! And I won’t forgive her, so don’t ask me to.”

“What does Tracy tell you when you say that to her?”

Charlie grunted. “She says I’m wrong, that my mom didn’t know it would happen. She’s covering for a liar.”

“You should listen to her. She went through it. She probably relives it every night. If she doesn’t blame your mom, you shouldn’t either.” Morgan wanted to add more, but he knew it wouldn’t sink in. Charlie would have to keep sorting through this one until he concluded what everyone else already had. Tracy’s abuse had served a purpose and Angela hadn’t let it happen lightly. Despite her hard shell, they all remembered the Angela who cared deeply about them, enough to give her life if it was called for. “In time, you’ll see her the way we do. Until then, at least try not to hate her. It solves nothing.”

Charlie refused to answer. He went back to scanning, but in his mind and heart, a battle was still happening that concerned his own desires. He loved and wanted Tracy, but after what she’d been through, he had no right to ask her for more than friendship. It was heartbreaking because he still wanted a future with her and that wasn’t possible now.

## 6

“Oh, you traitorous bitch!” Vlad watched the gate from the cover of thick trees. “You killed Jack!”

There was no way that Vlad could go to the body and try to heal him without drawing attention. He was forced to retreat after the remaining members of Jack’s crew, with vengeance burning brightly in his heart. “I’m gonna make you pay!” He rode his horse north. “The rest of our men are on the way and you’ll die a horrible death!” Vlad’s thoughts went to Adrian. “But I’ll have a taste of your pain now!”

## 7

“There’s the signal. Move in!” Kyle and his team had been watching Jack’s camp since dawn. They rushed in with weapons drawn, even though Adrian was the only one there.

It only took a moment to swing the unconscious man up onto a horse and ride away, but Kyle didn’t like it. He didn’t want to save Adrian. The traitor didn’t deserve it.

The team was quickly out of sight.

Kyle shifted so he could dig a syringe from his kit. He spurred his mount to reach Adrian’s and jabbed the medication into the former leader’s leg. He then dropped back to watch the effects. If fate was kind, Adrian would wake up off balance and fall under the hooves of his horse.

Adrian jerked into alertness and instinctively held onto the fast running mount he was lying over. Pain squeezed his head; he retched as he hung on, stomach protesting.

“Figures.”

The angry voice clued Adrian in to who his rescuers were. He shut his eyes as the ground flew by. When he thought he could, Adrian carefully lifted a leg and straddled his horse, sitting up. Dizziness assaulted him.

He allowed Whitney to keep the reins while he tried to recover. Being hit with triple juice and jerked out of it with a counter drug was rough. Adrian’s heart gave a nasty thump in agreement. He fumbled for a nitro pill from the hidden pocket that he’d sewn into every shirt he owned.

Kyle hardened his emotions, not wanting to feel sympathy for Adrian’s weak heart or the abrupt waking. For all he knew, it was just another trick.

Adrian waited for his heart to settle into a normal rhythm and then began rooting through the saddlebags of the thundering horse, holding on tightly with his right hand. If he had an episode, the left hand would go numb. He knew that from experience.

Kyle watched Adrian, letting Whitney and the others lead the way. Angela's message had said they would have a short time to grab their target and then reach their destination before the rest of Jack's men arrived. Kyle didn't intend to be late. He urged his mount faster, forcing the others to keep up. Every second saved now was a second that could be used later.

As they rode, Adrian felt his strength slowly returning. He found a moment to be grateful that Angela had provided for him again. She could have left him there to face Vlad's wrath or be picked off by a predator while unconscious. He owed her more than he could ever repay.

Kyle felt Adrian's thoughts go to the boss. "She has orders for you, if this goes well."

Adrian knew from Kyle's tone that it wasn't good, but he didn't waste his mental energy trying to puzzle it out. "What?"

"She wants Zone C thinned out—regularly."

Adrian blanched. *How low I've been placed.*

Kyle understood the feeling, the awful contempt it would give Adrian to do such things, and let it go for now. He wanted to enjoy this hit before he delivered any others.

Adrian pointed to a long, rusting building coming up on their right. "That's it. Give me the bag."

Whitney passed a heavy duffle bag to Adrian and then split off to the left to allow Adrian room to go by. Kyle's team wasn't staying to help, but each of them rotated on their

mounts to watch the former leader jump the gate to the rail yard. If he was successful, they would hear it. If there was silence, Kyle planned to turn around despite his orders not to. Jennifer and Autumn were in Safe Haven. These new descendants couldn't be allowed to get that far.

## 8

Adrian was placing the final charge when he felt the first vibration through the rails. Hurrying, he left the explosive area and hoped he was dimmed enough to those on board. Instead of stopping to watch the show, Adrian kept running for the horse now grazing in the small thicket across from the rail yard's main building.

As he jumped on the horse, a new sound came. His heart thumped unhappily. Someone else on horse was flying toward him. Adrian was forced to go west. He disappeared into the thicker woods as Vlad topped the final rise.

Drawn to the approaching train, Vlad dismissed the shadow and headed for the waving men and women.

Out of thought range, the noise of his horse was covered by the squealing of the train's brakes.

Adrian urged his mount faster.

The passengers on the train had no warning as the C-4 was triggered and exploded. The engine rose into the air, flames engulfing it. The fireball raced through the terminal.

Another brick of the explosive detonated, tearing through the passenger car. Bodies flew like screams.

A third explosion rocked the train, causing it to roll slowly backwards. The heavy noise of grinding and ripping metal

drowned out everything else. When it finally stopped, there was only the sound of hot debris burning, cracking, and shifting.

Vlad gaped at the destruction. He'd jerked his horse to a stop at the first explosion and now he examined the wreckage for any signs of survivors. He was a healer, but there had to be at least a little life left for him to help.

Vlad eased closer to the inferno, noting the main terminal was on fire and burning hotly. It wouldn't stay up long.

Vlad dismounted and ran toward the passenger car, swiping at flaming wires and wood that showered him in hot sparks.

“Help!”

Vlad rushed toward the voice. He shoved his way through the flaming boxes to discover a familiar face.

“Vlad! Heal me!”

Vlad did as Jack's son, Jay, commanded while sweeping the area for other survivors.

The boy's wounds weren't bad. Vlad left him coughing to get closer to the flaming passenger car. Thick smoke blinded him. Vlad brought up his shield as it got hotter.

“There!” Jay ran by him to grab the shaking body of a thin woman. Her hair was on fire. The boy slapped at it while Vlad sent a light current of healing power through her to calm the seizure.

The roof over the area was in full blazing glory; pieces began to fall on them.

“Get her out of here!”

Jay threw her arm over his shoulder and stayed with Vlad as he approached the passenger car that was on its side.

“Get in there!” a voice called. “Help them!”

Vlad recognized Kranten’s voice and kept going into the burning car. He found one other survivor. He had to drag the bald man outside before he could heal him. As he passed under the archway, the entire roof collapsed in a hot shower of fire, covering the passenger car. Blankets of smoke rolled over them as Vlad used the last of his energy to heal the man he’d brought out.

The survivors gathered around Vlad and kept watch for another attack. They didn’t speak or cry, or show any emotion except for the rage-filled orbs that stayed crimson.

## Chapter Twelve

# One of Three



### 1

Loud cheers echoed through Safe Haven as those in the small tent watched the train being destroyed. The Eagles that were around Jeremy and his laptop passed the word that Jack's friends weren't coming. The camp slowly resumed the work of getting everyone settled in the cave.

After being attacked, the camp was okay with sleeping underground while the labor continued. Angela was happy to have them there. It was the safest place they could be, even with constant construction that brought moans and creaks in equal measures.

"Is that it for them?" Marc asked her when they had a moment alone. "Or is just part one finished?"

Angela sighed, loving his sharp mind. “One of three.”

Marc grunted his unhappiness, but he didn’t give her static over it. Keeping Safe Haven alive and together would always be a full time job. If it weren’t these ass-hats, it would be some other group trying to make a name for themselves. “Is it something I can take care of?”

“It’ll have to play out this time, Marc.” Angela yawned tiredly. “But we now have a break, so that’s something, right?”

Marc nodded. “I can accomplish a lot in a short time.”

“Good. I have lists.”

“I kinda figured that. When will I get them?”

Angela gestured to Greg, who handed Marc a thin notebook. “It’s all in there—all the details on what’s coming and my suggestions for handling it. Do the best you can.”

Marc watched her go to their tent and hoped she would be able to sleep now. The bags under her eyes were more pronounced than after her rescue from Donner.

Eager to chase down whatever it was that she had missed, Angela collapsed on her bed without removing her boots and fell into a thin sleep a few minutes later. When Greg took up his post outside the flap, she didn’t notice. There were train stations to be scanned and survivors to be trailed.

## 2

“We’re not getting any water from there.”

Neil didn’t answer Tim’s comment. The water plant below was the scene of an ongoing battle and Neil was busy trying to estimate the threat. Safe Haven needed that precious liquid.

“There’s another plant a few miles from here.” Donald was checking the map. “We could try there and leave these idiots to their fighting.”

Gunshots echoed, along with shouts for surrender.

Neil studied the area. These people were on the edge of Safe Haven’s site. Eventually, their battle might spread and Neil didn’t think Angela would be happy with them for letting it sneak up unmonitored.

As they observed, the group outside the plant tried to ram a jeep through the reinforced main gates. It slammed into the sturdy barrier and came to a sudden halt without doing much damage to anything but the jeep. Smoke billowed from the wreck as men stumbled out, bleeding.

Tim snorted. “That wasn’t smart.”

Neil agreed. It helped him make the choice. “These people aren’t intelligent enough for us to leave them alone. How long before they try to charge our gates the same way?”

“But we don’t know who’s in the right here.” Donald didn’t want to get involved. “What if those on the outside are the good guys?”

Neil shrugged. “There’s a lot of brass on the ground. We can’t leave armed combatants on Safe Haven’s hearth. There’s only one way for us to know who has to go. We’ll make contact.”

None of the men cared for that, but they didn’t argue. Being Eagles meant making the hard choices and Neil was right about armed groups roaming unmonitored. It didn’t provide a comforting feeling.

Neil motioned his team to stay close as he led them down the winding road. Thin sunlight glinted off the small town.

Neil lowered his shades, wondering if the smoke rising from the west was related to Becky's mission. He wasn't as concerned now. The radio signal for all crews within two miles to quietly come in and surround their camp had calmed him. Angela had found a problem coming and covered it. That was her job.

*And this is mine.* Neil eased his horse into a slightly faster walk as they reached flat ground.

As Neil's team neared the intersection, the group outside the water plant noticed them and reacted by pointing their weapons.

Neil stopped, hand coming up. His Eagles neatly flanked him.

The tension thickened; Neil gave the expected order. "One shot and we wipe them out."

"Go away! This is our water!"

"We'll shoot you! Get out of here!"

Despite the hard words, the voices were full of dismayed nervousness.

Neil was glad to hear it. He hoped it meant they weren't ready to have a third party enter their struggle. "We're from Safe Haven. Send someone to talk. Now."

The faces of the two-dozen men fell. They muttered to each other. It was clear they'd heard of Safe Haven.

Neil slowly dismounted and walked toward the group, spotting faces behind the fences. "Tell the people inside who we are. If they shoot, we'll end up killing you anyway."

"Hey! Inside!" one of the outer men shouted. "They're Eagles. Don't fire!"

"Fuck you, man! Liar!"

“Great.” Neil grunted, coming to a stop out of range of the handguns he could see. He hadn’t spotted any rifles yet, but there was a sense of being in a scope. “Inside the gate! Send someone out to talk!”

“No way!” came the reply. “They’ll shoot us!”

“I’ll come and get you!” Neil shouted as his men muttered unhappily.

“Are you really Eagles?”

“Tell your sniper to check out our clothes.” Neil waved at the outside man to pass the word. He was done shouting. “I’m Neil, a level seven Eagle with the authority to order all of you killed.”

The men in and outside tensed, hands tightening on their guns, eyes darting for a safe place to fight from.

“We can all die right here.” Neil spoke calmly. “Or you can send two people out here to talk to me.”

“We’re sending someone out!” the inside man called. “If anything happens to him, we’ll come out shooting!”

Neil gestured for his team to stay put and went forward as the fence inched open.

A thin man wearing a white coat was shoved out; the gate slammed shut.

Neil raised a brow at the outside men and wasn’t surprised when the translating man came forward.

“Let’s go over here and chat.” Neil led the two glowering men to the base of a large tree. His team moved to be between Neil and the rest of the strangers, and they stayed alert. Now would be a bad time to let anyone sneak up on them.

Neil studied the two angry men for a brief moment. He couldn’t let them argue or the information would be too

confusing. Instead, he used his police training and took the upper hand from the first sentence. “Safe Haven wants this water.” Neil let their mouths open and then cut them off. “We’ll take it if we need to. In three hours, this place will crawl with Eagles. In five hours, we’ll be loading the water and the birds will be eating your eyes.”

“Hey! You guys aren’t thieves!”

“Yeah,” the inside man agreed. “You’re supposed to be fair!”

Neil sighed heavily. “Damn. I knew that was going to be a problem.”

Confused, the two men stared.

Neil hunkered down between them to clear a line of fire if it was needed. “You can agree to split the water and go your own way, or I’m calling my boss. Any guess what she’ll say?”

Neither man spoke.

Neil frowned at them. “She’ll say to kill all of you and bring the water home. She has no patience left for people who can’t get along.”

“We were here first!” inside man argued. “We don’t have to share.”

“We just wanted enough to get to the next town,” outside man explained. “Why won’t they help us?”

Neil sighed, lifting his glasses. He pinned the inside man with a dark glare. “You told them no?”

Inside man winced, nodding. “There isn’t much and we have sick people to care for.”

“So, you turned them away?” Neil shook his head in disgust. “Your fellow man was thirsty and you told them no.”

Before the inside man could protest, Neil scrutinized the other combatant. “So you decided to take it?”

Outside man, feeling guilt now, dropped his head in shame. “Yes. Our vehicles were overheating. We would not have made it to the next town.”

“You could have walked. You chose to kill.”

“We haven’t hit anyone.”

“Neither have we!”

“Okay.” Neil rose. “Give me a tour of the plant. I’ll divide it and send both of you on your way. Safe Haven doesn’t need people like you living here.”

“We have sick people! We can’t leave.”

Neil stood up and went to the gate. “Give me the tour. I’ll decide if you get a house call from our doctor.”

Those words got the inside man on his feet to lead the way. Medical help was rare.

Neil signaled to his team and then looked at the outside man. “I suggest you leave while I’m in there. While I don’t agree with their choice, they were here first and that makes you the offender. In the old world, the law would not be on your side and it’s definitely not now. Walking is great exercise.”

Neil entered the gates without worrying over reactions. Knowing who they were had solved the problem of who had authority. Angela’s master plan against the government had given Safe Haven more than freedom. They were now the reigning power in the country. These two small groups of refugees would likely be in one of their quarantine zones in the next few days.

Neil caught an odor of damp rot and detoured toward it.  
“Did anyone test the water?”

Inside man was busy talking to his people in low mutters.

Neil dug through his kit for the pack of testing strips that all the Eagles were required to carry. “Wouldn’t it be ironic if you idiots were fighting over bad water?”

### 3

“He’s been in there for a while.” Tim scanned the sullen men outside the gate again. “Maybe we should go in.”

“Not yet.” Donald checked his watch again. “He has three minutes left and then we’ll call him.”

Content that Donald was keeping track of things, the others fell silent, waiting. They didn’t like their team leader being out of sight for so long. It went against their training.

“There he is.” Allan pointed at the opening gate.

Neil stopped to talk to the outside men, handing them something his team couldn’t identify from where they stood, and then he marched toward his men, expression disgusted.

“What is it?”

“Are you okay?”

Neil held out his hand to show them three water test strips. “All of its contaminated and the idiots have been drinking it. I think they have a Cholera outbreak in there. Call the boss.”

### 4

“It’ll take about two weeks to get them all through it.” Doctor Brooke was picking through his supplies to fill a duffle bag. “They need a lot of clean water and food.”

“Doctor.”

Angela was ignored as the man continued to gather supplies and think aloud.

“We’ll have to have a burial crew if they have as many bodies as Neil hinted. We can’t use—”

“Yo, Savage!”

The doctor was snapped into alertness.

Angela didn’t waste time with niceties. “They’re not getting our doctor for two weeks. Not even a full day. Get in, evaluate, then tell them how to medicate themselves and get back here. The limit is ten hours. If you can’t do it in that time, you might as well stay here and pass messages.”

“What? It’s an outbreak. I-I can’t...” He peered at her with squinted eyes. “You pissed at me or something?”

Angela left, indicating Marc to handle it. She didn’t like the new doctor. He would never handle her medical care.

“If we leave you down there, those people will take you hostage.” Marc frowned deeper. “You won’t make it back in one piece. Try listening to the boss. She knows what she’s doing.”

“So I can be a captive here or down there. Is that it?” The doctor’s protests grew louder. “I’m not your prisoner!”

“No, you’re not.” Marc leaned in. “If you were, I’d punch you in the throat right now and this conversation would be over.”

Marc enjoyed the man’s sudden fear, but he didn’t take it any further. Instead, he repeated Angela’s instructions.

“You’ll get in, verify that it’s Cholera, tell them how to dispose of the bad water and the bodies, and how to use the supplies we’re delivering. The Eagles will set up a quarantine area. When they leave, you can come back with them or stay there—permanently.” Marc went to the flap. “You know how I feel about you, so if you don’t come back with my men, and then change your mind later, I’m not likely to order a rescue.”

Marc left the man thinking about how ugly that could get.

Angela was satisfied the doctor would follow orders and return when the Eagles did. He didn’t understand how dangerous the situation could become if the people inside the water plant decided they wanted their own medical man.

Their radios crackled. “New arrivals at the gate. Bring a doctor.”

Angela and Marc went that way without speaking. If Adrian’s notebook was correct, this was the lightest part of the flow of survivors coming from the west and their only chance to get ahead of it.

Angela surveyed the small group of five men, seeing runny noses and rashes. “Ash effects. Get them showered and fed, and then Hilda will go in to run the tests. Have her take a student in case she needs the extra hand.”

“Add to the security?” Marc swept Zone C, where the drinking and shouting had resumed with dusk.

“Not yet. These new people aren’t a threat.”

Marc didn’t question her decision. It was easy to figure out the group of five was just ill and tired, searching for sanctuary.

“Zone A?” That was the area where she was putting people who would eventually become members.

Angela scanned them again, digging deeper, and was glad they cleared. “Yes.”

“We don’t care about no magic!”

“We just want in!”

The shouts from the large refugee group drew attention.

“What about Zone C?” Marc wanted to know her plans. She’d said something went wrong during the fight with Jack, and implied those people should already be gone.

Angela swept the ledge next to the drunken refugees, where Adrian’s cold camp couldn’t be viewed through the trees. “It’ll be handled. Keep the Eagles away tonight.”

Marc understood from that. He didn’t argue. Adrian being reduced to secret killer was another blow the former leader would have to deal with and it wouldn’t be easy. Adrian was a traitor, but not a true killer. He’d always had other people to do it for him. “In the morning, I need to take supplies in there, while the doctor is out.” The boxes they’d tossed into Zone C today had been destroyed in the scramble. Only small pieces of the gear had actually been received. As they listened, a wail rose—one of hunger and grief.

“They didn’t share any of it, right?” Angela was now furious. “The leader kept it all?”

“Yeah. We thought about going in and handling it, but you were asleep and I assumed you didn’t want our guys in there without you.”

“I won’t be going in. They’ll take me hostage and I’ll end up killing them all, in open view of our people.”

“That wouldn’t be good.” Greg joined them. “The camp’s a bit uneasy after today. They thought this camp had all the

descendants. Jennifer is helping calm them, but it wouldn't be a good time for another demonstration.”

“Everyone chose to stay in the caves tonight?”

Greg nodded at Marc. “All but a crew of Eagles. They said they want to be topside, no matter the threat. Jeremy's with them.”

“Our Indian friends are staying topside too, along with doubled security. It's fine.” Angela went to the mess, where Li Sing had a light crew keeping drinks and snacks available. She took a mug of hot chocolate, ignoring the upset stomach. As she sat down, her wrinkled arm skin drew her attention. *His light is fading.*

Moans and muttered curses came from the tents as Eagles worked off the day's stress in the training area. Marc expected to find Kindle and Daryl in there after this shift was over. From the reports he'd been getting, it appeared that routine was helping her control the rage. Marc also thought Angela had given Kindle her fill during the final battles to hold her while she adjusted to being around people again.

“Damn.” Angela rested her head on her arms. “In about a minute, there's going to be a fight near the pharmacy tent. If it wakes Kenn up, Tonya's gonna shout and the entire camp will come running. Head it off, will you?”

Marc rushed toward the pharmacy tent, not sure what he would discover.

Angela took the opportunity to relax her stomach and evaluate her condition.

*Not good, the witch warned. A few more days of this and there will be no hope.*

*I need a week. It can't be done any faster.*

*There's one way.*

*I won't go to him.*

*Then the child will die, so that these people may live.*

Angela let the single tear spill over her cheek and then quickly wiped it away as Li Sing approached.

“Please, eat.”

Angela caught a whiff of the stew and pushed herself up, running for the nearest garbage can.

Marc found the new man at the pharmacy tent, without Doug. Not supposed to be roaming without his settling partner, Darian was surrounded by Eagles. Only Marc’s arrival stopped the violent beating the sentries wanted to deliver.

The camp was now aware of why Darian had come here and few people had a welcome for him. Accusing their leader of murder, after the awful battle they’d all survived, was like a new war cry. Darian had been shunned.

Even Doug wasn’t as friendly as Angela had hoped, but she hadn’t interfered. Time would tell on Darian and on herself. People expected a moral board vote to decide his claim. Darian expected a full trial like Adrian had received. Angela didn’t plan on either, as far as Marc knew.

“He’s one of them!” Logan pointed. “We saw his men with the others who came here today!”

“Boss said this one’s okay, so let him be.”

“We’re watching you!” Howard told Darian. “Don’t prove her wrong. You won’t like it.”

Marc led Darian back to his tent, not bothering to tell him to stay inside. The man was shaking lightly. He understood.

“Thank you.” Darian lifted the flap. “I just wanted some fresh air. I shouldn’t have gotten so far from the tents.”

Marc knew Angela had plans for this man. “You should be careful. Traitors are hung.” Marc left him with that thought and returned to the mess. He didn’t like any of the new people. *Is it them or me?*

Li Sing hurried out and told him what had happened with Angela.

Marc listened in anger. *Why can’t she just say she isn’t feeling well?*

*It’s more than that, his demon spoke up. She’s going to lose the child and she knows it. She’s sparing you the details and the pain.*

“I hate it when she does that!”

Marc’s growl caused Li to flee for the safety of the truck.

Marc went to their tent, but he didn’t have the heart to yell at her when he saw the shivering form under the blankets. Compassion and concern rose. He sent a blast of energy into her. *I’ll be pissed later.*

## 5

On the ledge above Safe Haven, a cloaked figure was waiting for the right moment to act. The large, drunken group he was studying hadn’t noticed him; the man slowly inched closer, using the weeds and darkness for cover.

When he was near enough, the man removed a blowgun from his pocket and loaded a tiny dart into it. The drugs were powerful. When the man blew it, the dart stuck in the folds of the target’s stomach while he had his shirt lifted to urinate.

The man staggered. He managed to get his pants fastened before the lethal cocktail took full effect and then the leader of Zone C fell forward.

Adrian carefully retreated back the way he'd come, making sure not even the Eagles saw him. The feeling was thick and ugly. The former leader resented every second of it. He'd been reduced to a garbage disposer.

Adrian entered his own camp, removing his cloak and dark makeup. He ignored the tired son and soldiers who observed him in interest, staggering to his tent. It had been a long day and he wanted to eat, drink, and then sleep—in that order.

Adrian froze at the sight of the man in his tent. “What do you want?”

Marc leaned back on Adrian's bed, grinning widely. “Everything you've got.”

Adrian slung his kit down, doubting any of the people right outside even knew he had a visitor. “I'm tired. Speak your piece and get lost.”

Marc chortled at the bravado.

Adrian knelt down to untie his boots, grimacing at the humiliation. Marc knew he wasn't a physical threat anymore.

“No, but you are a mental one, aren't you?” Marc sat up. “I want you gone. How do I make that happen?”

“Shoot me and then kill Kendle before she can heal me.” Adrian glowered resentfully. “Don't know why you haven't already.”

“Yes, you do, you piece of shit.” Marc's bitterness resurfaced. “She's the reason I'm here.”

Adrian read Marc's mind and lifted a brow. "What do you want me to do about it? I'm not even allowed to speak to her, remember?"

"You're a banished traitor who is lucky to be alive."

"Yeah, lucky. That's me." Adrian began removing his clothes, forcing Marc to view the new bruises and cuts, and the old scars. "I'm a tough old man, Marc. A tough, cursed old man. Go away and let me be. You have it all now."

"I'm going to bring her here. You'll heal her, fully."

Adrian gaped. "What?"

"She's not doing well." Marc looked away. "She needs help."

"Whatever she needs." Adrian regained his composure. "I'll get ready."

Marc left through the rear of the tent, like he'd come in, without responding. He couldn't without attacking. Angela needed Adrian for her health, for the information in his brain, and a few other things. Marc understood why the man was alive and at times like this, he could even be grateful, but it didn't stop the nearly uncontrollable rage. Adrian deserved to die. The possibility that Marc might go first was hard to swallow.

## 6

Late night found a large crew of Eagles coming down the mountain to relieve them. Neil was glad. Babysitting a quarantined camp wasn't going to get the water. "Let's go. We're not needed now."

The team gathered their gear, watching the fresh crew of Eagles roll into the water plant lot and scatter the men who were surrounding it. Those on the outside had refused to believe Neil's words of an outbreak, but armed Eagles in protective gear would quickly change their minds.

As Neil watched, the outside group finally got the hint and fled on foot. He had no doubt they would be begging at Safe Haven's gates in the next few days. Their kind wasn't capable of fending for themselves. They would always try to take what others had, through force or pity.

Neil led his team three miles down the cracked, weedy road to their alternate water location. As soon as they entered the lot, the feeling of it being empty was clear. "Three miles further and they could have had clean water, without a fight." Neil sighed. "What the hell is wrong with people?"

The team quickly secured the plant and hooked up power so they would have lights, then got to work on collecting the water. Thanks to Samantha's idea about getting water from treatment plants, they now had a routine down—one that included testing and then adding chemicals to sanitize the water. By the time the trucks in the rear of this plant were driven home, the water would already be clean enough to drink. When it reached Safe Haven, it would be tested again and then put into their reserves. Before any of it was used, it would be tested yet again. Angela didn't take any chances with their water supply. Neil approved. One bad barrel getting through would reduce them to bodies littering the ground, like inside the now quarantined plant he'd toured.

As soon as he'd been able, Neil had stripped and scrubbed, not wanting to bring any of the contagious bacteria along.

He'd even burned his boots, worried the muddy ground inside might have contaminated them. The good thing about Cholera was that it wasn't transmitted from person to person. As long as none of the infected water got out, the outbreak could be easily contained. Neil didn't envy the doctor or the Eagles on that duty. He made a mental note to shower a few times before he saw Samantha.

"We'll be a few hours here." Tim was unwinding the hoses.

"I'll make the call. Dusk, you think?"

Tim estimated, and then shrugged. "Maybe a bit before. That last tank is cloudy. Like something fell into it and wasn't fished out."

They both thought of a body.

Neil grimaced. "Fine, leave that one for the end and we'll see what we can do about making sure this isn't the next area we have to quarantine."

"This is happening all over the country, right?"

"Yes. Food and water have gained the value of gold in trading now. In six months, you won't be able to get anyone to trade for those things. They'll mean life or death for all of us."

"Unless we go south." Allan had been working and listening. He paused by them, wiping sweat from his brow. "One island, with one happy group of people. It could work." Allan went inside to attach the hoses to the truck that Jake was pulling around.

Neil stared thoughtfully. Pitcairn Island sounded like a paradise to hear Kindle talk about it, and people were listening to her stories now, including the Eagles. When winter finally

came and sealed them in the cave, Neil expected her following to grow instead of dying out. Some people might even want to try the trip before winter set in. Neil had begun to wonder what plan Angela had in place for that. She wouldn't let Safe Haven be split up...would she? Neil keyed his radio. "Water team for a check in."

Tonya's calm voice echoed right back. "Go ahead, water team."

"It's good at the alternate site. We'll be in around dusk with a full load."

"Very nice, Neil. I'll tell the boss."

"Copy." Neil put his radio and jumbled thoughts away, then went to help his team collect the water. Tonya sounded good; the noises had been good. Neil wanted to get done and get home. He needed to see Becky and *know* that she hadn't been hurt again.

## 7

"Is that everything?" Shane surveyed the last trucks that were overloaded.

"I think so. Unless you want to take the roof."

Shane laughed, slapping Jax on the shoulder. "Let's get going."

Shane's team had been away from Safe Haven for five days, sending truck after truck from the lumberyard. The site was now barren and all of the men were proud of what they'd accomplished. They now had enough lumber to build a small town.

“Hey, is that one of ours?” Ben pointed to a small group of trucks rolling toward the mountain road that they would be on shortly.

Shane used his binoculars to zoom in. “Yep. It’s Billy, and they’re fully loaded too.”

“Come on.” Jax led the way. “Let’s get in their line and make it a convoy.”

His men hurried, but Shane spent a moment examining the area to the east of this lumberyard. They hadn’t felt the need to recon that valley, but Shane was suddenly sure they should have. With dusk coming, he thought he could see the faint glow of a fire. He added it to his notes. As far as he knew, they didn’t have anyone that far east.

Shane joined Billy’s line of trucks, exchanging chatter over a free line on the radio as the teams waited to be admitted to the dumping areas below the cave.

It was a good moment for these men. Marc told Tonya to let the chatter go without comment. All of these people were doing hard work to prepare for their future. They needed every bonding moment they could find.

Marc turned toward the main gate, where the loud refugees had fallen silent. They’d gone quiet an hour ago and it was making him nervous. Come dawn, he was going into Zone C. When he came out, they might be a few less in number and he would be able to sleep.

Marc swept the cave and then the tent area, finding things calm. That also worried him; he headed toward the cave to do rounds there. It had been his experience that when Safe Haven was quiet and peaceful, it was because new trouble was brewing.

## 8

“Why are we letting them go?” Jay paced in front of the small fire. “We need their gear.”

Vlad frowned. “Go on and attack them. You can heal yourself this time.”

Jay wanted to shout at him, but Vlad’s shivering was hard to ignore. Healing three people had taken its toll.

“This sucks!” Vlad wasn’t used to feeling these aftereffects. Jack had always tossed him a life when the battle was done, to refill him.

Jay frowned impatiently. “How long do you need?”

“It’s been a while since I did this on my own. Might be a couple of weeks. Getting some food will speed it up.”

“We’ll bring you one of their men.” Jay pointed. “They’re all over this mountain right now.”

“It’s not the same as a descendant life.” Vlad glared. “You’d know that if you came out with us more often.”

Jay sank down by the fire, not offended. “I’ll have to now that dad’s dead.”

The pleased tone sent Vlad to his feet. “Disloyal child! Have some respect.”

Jay cackled cruelly. “For Big Jack Devine? Not a chance. I could respect you, though, if you can kill them.”

Vlad snapped his mouth shut. After witnessing these Safe Haven people in action, Vlad wasn’t confident anyone could beat them. They had their bases covered and then some.

“He wants to run!” the bald man observed. His mind reading gift was strong, though none of his other gifts were.

Vlad shrugged. “But I won’t. I have a plan.” He stared at the lights of Safe Haven that were giving off a glow anyone could travel by, even in the gloom. “We have to get above them.”

“How do we do that?”

“*We*, don’t,” Vlad told Jay. “The rest of us will. You’ll be going to their front gates to beg for sanctuary. We need an inside man we can trust.”

“But the girl—”

“Isn’t on our side or Jack would be here right now.” Vlad was still furious over that betrayal. “Get inside, discover a weakness, and be ready to exploit it. I’ll be in touch.”

## 9

A few miles away, Angela came from her tent early and went behind it.

Kenn was waiting for her. “The bodies are gone. It happened overnight, so the Eagles think predators dragged them off.” Kenn handed her a note he’d been given in a quick pass as Adrian and Conner left their site to go hunting.

*I burned the bodies. Jack’s was missing. Everything is on schedule.*

Angela casually dropped the note into the burning trashcan, pleased. “Tell him no one needs to know.”

Meaning Kendle and Conner. Kenn nodded and left without promising the same. He didn’t need to. Angela already knew he would keep it to himself and do anything else she said to if there was a chance she could get Adrian allowed back into Safe Haven.

Angela sighed, going to the mess. She wasn't positive that was possible, but if it was, she would make it happen.

Chapter Thirteen

# Dangerous Distraction

Midnight



1

“Is everyone okay back there?” The terrain and wind had been bouncing the truck all over the road for the last hour. “Surviving.”

Kyle and Whitney exchanged grins at the answer from the three nervous members in the back of their truck. Being in the rear of the vehicle on a run wasn’t fun and often left the men with roiling stomachs and rough attitudes. The doctor had told them it was because they didn’t spend as many hours on the road anymore, but Kyle didn’t think that was true. In fact, he was under the impression that they were spending more time traveling because they were having to go farther on each trip

to find what they needed. It gave the men too many hours to worry. That was causing the queasy guts. *We all need a real break. The stress is catching up.*

They'd spent the day at an electric company, securing it and waiting for their relief to arrive. Once the stripping team had shown up, Kyle's team had come north for the second half of their mission.

"We have another five hours before we'll reach our target." Whitney had the map spread over his knees. "You want to switch?"

"Not yet." Kyle was enjoying driving instead of riding a horse. His ass had ached for days. "We'll sleep when we get there and start fresh in the morning."

"Sounds good."

Thanks to Angela, they were expecting problems; being well rested was a good idea. If there were already people at the refinery, they had orders to keep going to the alternate site. If the second refinery also had people, they were supposed to detour east and check a third site. Either way, they were on a long run. Whitney put the map away and leaned against the seat. "Wake me when you're ready."

"You got it." Kyle was certain he wouldn't need to switch before they arrived. He was too wound up to sleep. His mind was split between Jennifer and Adrian.

He chose to dwell on the former leader in place of pining for Jenny. Dropping Adrian off on their way to the refinery hadn't taken any extra time, but it had stolen his concentration. Did Angela plan to keep using Adrian until he did something big enough to be forgiven? There was a small chance that it would succeed with most of the camp, but Kyle didn't think

the Eagles would ever go for it. They'd given up everything to follow him and his ways, only to discover they were being led to a slaughter. If Angela hadn't joined Safe Haven, Adrian would have handed all of them over to the government. Distracted, Kyle missed the furry shapes in the road until he was right on them.

"Shit!" Kyle jerked the wheel, swerving around the coyotes.

The truck hit a large pothole. It bounced violently, lifting into the air. Kyle fought to straighten it out, heart pounding.

He regained control as cries of surprise filled the truck, sighing in relief. "That was—"

The tree across the road was hidden by an old wreck. There was no time for brakes or evasive maneuvers. The front of the truck hit the tree. The vehicle of shouting men flipped into the air.

When the mangled truck finally came to a stop, there was silence in place of screams.

Sally peered through her black curtains, observing the accident. She'd already doused her lights and gotten her gun out, but the wreck was ugly and she hadn't seen any movement. Had anyone survived? *Do I care?*

Sally sighed unhappily. She didn't trust people. She had waited, hoping they would crawl out and disappear. She didn't want to have contact with strangers. Strangers were always a danger.

Sally reluctantly donned her boots and kept her gun in hand as she eased outside. The night was quiet, still, and cold.

She could hear the moans clearly. Someone had survived. It sounded like a man.

Sally circled the truck in a wide path, using her penlight to view through the windows. She counted five men. At least three of them were dead. Being impaled was a particularly nasty way to go, but at least the trio in the rear hadn't suffered long.

Sally moved toward the front and shined the light on the passenger. He was banged up, but only his awkwardly bent arm seemed serious. As she shined her light on the driver, Sally realized she could smell gas. She peered at the ground, hoping to find it dry.

The puddle was slowly coming her way.

Sally hurried to the driver, not sure yet what she would do.

Kyle moaned as the light hit his face. Hanging upside down and dazed from the impacts, he groaned at the pain. "Please. Help my men!"

Impressed that he would care for his people even though he was obviously injured, Sally tried to open his door.

It swung wide after a few tugs.

Kyle hit the seatbelt button and tumbled out onto the icy pavement.

Sally went to the passenger door and dragged the other man from the wreck, trying to avoid pulling him through the fuel. Quickly out of breath, Sally knew neither man was out of range if that gas caught fire, but she didn't think she could move them further by herself.

*Pop!*

Sally jumped at the loud bang from the truck. Fear of a spark got her to her feet. She began to tug the passenger a few inches at a time. At least one of them might survive.

Kyle groaned louder, pain everywhere. He screamed as he was grabbed by the arm. More pain flared and he passed out, unaware of being jerked across the rough road.

Dog whined in pain as he strained on his casted leg, causing the plaster to crack. He was sorry for the teeth punched into Kyle's arm, but it seemed like the only safe place to get a hold of him.

Dog lunged backward. The skin ripped; the cast shattered. Kyle's body slid to the edge of the ditch and then rolled down the small hill.

Dog followed him just as the truck exploded.

Sally spotted Dog dragging the driver, and then the gas flamed up and threw herself over the passenger she had gotten into the opposite gulley. She stayed covering the man as debris rained over them.

A second explosion sent more flaming pieces of the truck into the sky.

Sally slowly sat up. She saw Dog limping toward her and forced her shaky knees to hold her as she stood.

“Good boy.” She rubbed the wolf’s ears. She had lost all fear of him during the week they’d been together. “Let’s go get the sled, huh? Neither of us should be trying to move these men on our own.”

Dog followed the woman to the shed, worried. What if she decided to chop them up and feed them to her pets?

Sally retrieved the passenger first; he was closest. She ignored the wolf’s low growl when she headed for the barn.

She tugged the sled to the rear and slid open a wall panel that Dog hadn't noticed.

The panel hid a small room where she put the man, easing Dog's concern. He had no issues with her locking Kyle and Whitney up, only with her killing them.

Sally rolled the passenger onto the pallet and clamped a dusty leg iron around his ankle, and then went back outside for the driver. That man was bigger.

It took all of Sally's strength to get him onto the sled. As she dragged the sled across the smoldering debris, she noticed the myriad of injuries and assumed she would end up feeding the animals with this one. He'd already lost a lot of blood and she didn't have that here.

Sally put the driver by his friend, but didn't bother to handcuff him. He was too hurt to be a threat. Sally strode toward the house for her bag of medical supplies.

Dog stayed in the doorway, golden orbs shifting between the Eagles. Dog whined. *They smell like Marc. I miss him.*

## 2

Whitney came alert all at once. He held in a scream at the pain in his arm. It was clearly broken. He looked around and found Kyle by his side, obviously injured.

Whitney didn't hear the other men. He struggled to sit up. The chain around his ankle clanked, and then held him in place. Whitney opened his mouth to shout.

"Don't."

Kyle sounded bad. Whitney scooted over to him. "You okay?"

“No.” Kyle coughed, spitting blood onto the pallet. “She saved us. Truck exploded.”

Whitney leaned away as Kyle sprayed more red drops. “Where are the others?”

“Dead, I’d guess.” Kyle gasped for air. “Truck was full of pipes.”

“What happened?”

“My fault!” Kyle groaned. “Hope I die.”

“Damn,” Whitney swore. “Don’t say that, man.”

Kyle’s eyes rolled backward. He slumped to his side, swallowed by the blackness.

Whitney heard the light steps of a woman. “Hey! He needs help!” He heard a gun cock.

“I’ll do what I can. You stay where you are.”

Whitney slid up against the wall as the woman came into the tiny room, followed by a furry figure that made him gape. “Dog?”

Dog whined uneasily, but he didn’t approach his old teammate. He’d served many shifts with Kyle and Whitney, but his loyalties had changed.

“You know the wolf?” Sally knelt by Kyle.

“Yeah.” Whitney watched her, hoping she had medical training. If not, Kyle could die. “He was in our camp for a while.”

Sally frowned as she examined Kyle’s injuries. “Your camp?”

“We’re Eagles, from Safe Haven.”

Sally’s scowl deepened. “Never heard of it.”

“Can you help him?”

Sally found the biggest problem and blew out a breath. “Maybe, but be quiet so I can think. I’ll do your arm after I get this piece of metal out of his stomach.”

Whitney blanched. “How can I help?”

Sally didn’t want to trust him, but she did need the extra hands. “Move over here and hold these towels. It’s gonna bleed a lot.”

Whitney awkwardly got up, but he froze when he realized her gun was now aimed at him and she had a finger on the trigger.

“I won’t want to, but I will. You be careful.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Whitney thought fast. “And thank you for saving us.”

“Remember that when I set your arm.” Sally lowered the weapon so she could help the driver. “It’ll mess up your recovery if I have to add a bullet wound.”

### 3

“Damn! That hurt!”

Sally quickly finished setting the arm. “You think?”

Whitney wasn’t sure why their host was so hostile, but he didn’t intend to ask.

“Here, slip this around your neck and then put your arm through it. I have to make up the cast strips.”

Whitney watched her mix the plaster, wincing as he put his arm in the sling. The awful throbbing had dropped into a moderate ache that he assumed would flare up shortly to remind him that it was broken. *Still better than the others.*

Holding Kyle still so the woman could remove the metal and then stitch him up had been ugly. Kyle had screamed repeatedly, for Jennifer *and* for Adrian. It had been haunting. Whitney had been grateful when the woman shot him full of morphine. Listening to Kyle's ranting was hard. He'd still been confessing his sins when the medicine knocked him out.

"Is he a killer?" Sally looked toward the small room where Kyle was resting. She'd had Whitney come into the barn and sit on a stool for his treatment.

"Aren't we all at some point?" Whitney answered vaguely.

Sally didn't want to answer that, but she also didn't want a killer here. "I shouldn't have saved him."

"He's a good man."

"Doesn't sound like it. He kills people, as a job."

"Do you think executioners at prisons are killers?"

"Yes, but even if I didn't, those people were sentenced to that punishment."

"So were Kyle's kills. Safe Haven doesn't execute innocent people."

Sally didn't respond to that. She was happy the apocalypse had come, happy that society had fallen. They'd been marked for destruction and it had happened. Who was Safe Haven to try to reverse that decision?

Whitney examined his watch, but it had broken in the wreck. "Any idea how long we've been here?"

Sally frowned. "Why? You got someplace to be?"

"Yes, actually, but it's rather important that you answer me."

Sally heard the tone and felt old hatred rise in response. She clamped down on it as best she could. He wasn't her

father. No beating was coming. “About six hours, I’d think. Sun’s up.”

“Then I guess I should tell you to expect company soon. We were eight hours away from home when I fell asleep, so you may have another hour, but I doubt it.”

“Company? Who did you call?”

“Not me. Him. Every scream he let out was heard. Jennifer should be arriving soon.”

Sally relaxed at the female name. “Good. She can care for him. I have stuff to do.” Sally again considered what it meant to let the Italian leave here, eyes going to the gun that she was keeping close. She could shoot both men and dispose of their bodies, in much less than an hour.

“I can guess what you’re thinking.” Whitney stayed still, not making any sudden movement that might trigger the wildness he read in their host. “And I’ll even assume you have good reasons for feeling that way.”

Sally was held by the compassion she heard in his voice.

“I’m sorry you were treated badly, but not all men are evil. Not all men need to die.”

Sally flushed as Whitney swept the bones in the cages, the animals that were staring at him and drooling. It hadn’t taken him long to figure out what happened to unwanted company.

“I don’t blame you for your reactions. We all survived and it changed us. Kyle is a good man. When Jennifer gets here, she’ll help him and we’ll go. If he dies before she gets here...” Whitney was unable to voice that. “Please, make sure he doesn’t.”

Sally felt afraid then and she hated that. “This Jennifer’s a descendant?”

Whitney nodded.

“Shoulda killed you both!” Sally shoved the pan of plaster toward him, taking up her gun. “Get started wrapping it around. I’ll help with one hand.”

Whitney sighed, relieved and disappointed. “Okay.”

A tense silence filled the next ten minutes, broken only by her terse instructions. She didn’t put the gun down, though it wasn’t pointed at him.

Whitney began to realize she had experience with descendants, otherwise she wouldn’t know to be so scared.

“She won’t hurt you.” Whitney sighed in relief as they finished and the woman hastily retreated to a better position to view the open barn doors where a lantern hung. “She’ll be grateful.”

“I’m going in the house now. I’m not coming out until you’re all gone.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Whitney let her flee, feeling a coldness coming through the doors that had little to do with the weather.

Jennifer was here.

Sally fastened the door to her home and ran to the window as a bike screeched to a halt in the middle of her yard. Mud flew against the house.

Sally held still as a small figure dropped the bike and ran into the barn. She couldn’t see anything else and though she kept listening, there wasn’t any noise.

After half an hour of the same tense silence, Sally forced herself to clean up and settle in her bed with her gun. *If they come in here, I’ll shoot them. I don’t want anything from those freaks!*

“He can’t be moved.”

“I figured that, but our host isn’t going to like it.”

Jennifer continued to send healing energy into Kyle’s feverish body. “I’ll handle her.”

She’d gotten a good sense of the woman in the small house as soon as she’d arrived, but out here in the barn, where the animals were unhappily chittering, it was clear what the woman was.

Kyle began to thrash around.

Jennifer dug through her kit for the medicine Angela had shoved into her hands. They’d both been woken by Kyle’s screams.

Jennifer injected Kyle’s arm and then his hip, not letting her mind go to bad places. Angela had told her he would survive. Jennifer planned to hang onto that promise.

“You gonna live?” It was a wonder any of them had. The wreckage out front was stunning.

“I think so. Broken in a couple places, light concussion.” Whitney studied the doors. “I’ll clean up the road later.”

“Good. We’ll say something over them.”

Whitney had thought to take the bodies home, but he didn’t argue. A long ride with corpses wouldn’t be pleasant.

“Not much left to stink. Hell of a fire.”

Whitney winced. He hadn’t been that close to the three men—they’d been chosen from the members list—but he had liked each of them. “I’ll handle it.”

Jennifer sat back, almost panting from the effort. She’d given him all she could spare. Now, she needed to sleep.

Whitney watched her lean her head against the wooden wall and fall asleep. She did love him. It was hard to miss.

Whitney slowly got up and moved to the barn, giving them privacy and getting some fresh air to clear his mind. He didn't know exactly what had happened to cause the accident, but he was certain it hadn't all been Kyle's fault. "I should have stayed awake and helped him navigate."

Dog appeared at his side, Kyle's blood still in his muzzle fur. Whitney carefully rubbed the wolf's ears. "Hi."

Dog didn't linger or answer. He padded toward the house, where he curled up under the woman's rocker and laid his head down.

"Guess you aren't ready to leave yet." Whitney scanned the small farm, approving of the setup. "Can't say I blame ya. Safe Haven is all work some days."

Whitney stared at the house, wondering if the woman was doing the same at her barn. He also wondered how she would react to finding them still here come evening. Jennifer wasn't going to move Kyle until he could survive it and if that meant taking the woman captive, Whitney was positive Jennifer would. "If she doesn't kill you. Do us all a favor and make the right choice."

## 4

Jennifer spent the next six hours at Kyle's side, medicating and comforting him. The drugs had a positive effect right away; by the time evening came, she felt confident enough of his recovery to leave him alone. She exited the barn just as the woman came from her house.

The two females stared at each other—one in dislike, the other in gratitude. The moment was broken by Dog whining.

Sally glanced down and realized his cast had broken off. “Poor baby. Let me get you a painkiller and we’ll get a new one on.”

Jennifer watched the woman tend to the wolf. She seemed to have forgotten her human company. Jennifer moved closer. She’d planned to leave Sally alone, but the need to say thank you was too strong.

“Stay back!”

Jennifer stopped at the near panic in the woman’s voice. “I just wanted to thank you for helping them.”

Sally didn’t answer. The sense of evil was all over the teenager.

“I’m sorry you feel that way about us.” Jennifer headed back to the barn. “We’ll leave as soon as he’s able.”

“Good.” Sally wasn’t going to demand they leave yet. She wanted to, but after viewing the girl, feeling her, she’d chosen to keep her mouth shut. “There’s food in the freezer. Use what you need.”

“We will. We’ll also feed your animals so you don’t have to come in here.”

“They all get the same bagged food.”

“I’ll see what I can *chop* up.”

Sally blanched, but she didn’t rise to the bait. She knew what she was, but she also knew pure evil when she was faced with it. The sooner these killers were off her property, the better.

Jennifer was careful not to be bitten or scratched as she fed the variety of animals in the barn. Each one had an injury that had been lovingly tended. The teenager tried not to resent their

care. So the woman didn't like people. Many of them sucked. It was understandable.

After she finished with the feeding, Jennifer watered them from the barrel in the corner, but that was it. The animals didn't like her, snapping and hissing. She left the cage cleaning for their sullen host.

Jennifer spent a few minutes removing the signs of humans being in the barn, including a finger that had rolled off the chopping area. She quickly tossed it into the garbage can, unable to deliver it to any of the angry animals. She'd bathed in the blood of the soldiers and enjoyed it, but that had been in the heat of war. This felt like a personal vendetta and Jennifer wanted no part of it.

Jennifer gazed out the window and noticed a garden along the barn's rear wall. It was surrounded by chicken wire and appeared well tended. Curious, she went outside and did a slow walk of the property. What else did the woman have? Was there some way to help her? It was obvious that the woman wouldn't be going to Safe Haven with them, but the need to repay the debt before they left was strong.

As she studied the property, Jennifer quickly became convinced that the best thing she could do was leave the woman alone. From the generator and well, to the multiple garden patches, the woman was covered indefinitely.

She was also insane.

## 5

Jennifer ducked into the small rear area where both men were sleeping. Whitney was comfortable, breathing evenly,

but Kyle was tossing, and occasionally gasping at some mental pain. If not for Angela's words, Jennifer would be panicking. "Time for your meds, Baby. And maybe a little more morphine so you can rest."

"He should be able to take it. He's a large man."

Jennifer spun around to find their host in the narrow doorway.

Sally was staring at Kyle as if he was about to lunge at her.

Jennifer let out a sound of annoyance that drew her attention. "You're making a judgment without knowing him." Jennifer injected Kyle's thigh. "It's not fair."

"Life isn't fair."

"No argument from me on that one. I spent the first half of the war in a Mexican camp. Kyle saved me." Jennifer ran a tender hand over his hot brow.

Sally frowned. "You two are a couple?"

Already tired of the woman, Jennifer rested her head on Kyle's uninjured arm. "He loves me. He would do anything for me. And I feel the same."

Sally's scowl grew. "Stockholm."

"Kyle isn't my captor. He's my hero."

Sally left the barn. So far, she didn't like anything about the man she'd saved.

"She's been hurt or something," Whitney stated from his pallet. "I tried a little, but she's twitchy."

"She's dangerous." Jennifer carefully lay down next to Kyle and wrapped her arm around him. "I'm surprised she helped you guys."

"Me too. We need to get out of here before she flips on us."

Jennifer stretched out gently, lending Kyle her warmth. “I’m already listening for it. If she attacks, kill her. That came from the boss. Angela doesn’t like the idea of leaving the woman out here alone to decide life and death. She wants those people gone or in our army.”

## 6

Kyle didn’t want to wake up. He knew he hadn’t died, but horrible guilt was waiting for him to surface. He tried hard to stay below the murkiness; he didn’t want to face what he’d done.

*Kyle.*

He turned away from the gentle voice, refusing her comfort.

*Kyle.*

*No. No.*

*Reece!*

Kyle’s lids shot open. He found Jennifer’s face inches from his.

“Coward.”

Pain hit him in thick slaps. “Yes.”

Jennifer’s heart broke for him as she read his thoughts of the accident. He’d gotten distracted and lost three men. His pain was hers. She allowed her tears to flow over his arm. “I’m sorry.”

Kyle didn’t want her comfort or to enjoy her embrace, but it was Jennifer against him. He slowly raised his good arm to tangle it in her long braid. “Get out of here!”

“Okay.” Jennifer sat up. “Bet Whitney needs my heat.”

Kyle growled, hand tightening in her hair.

Jennifer let him pull her back down. “That’s better. Keep fighting, Kyle. I can’t handle you being sorry for yourself.”

Kyle winced. “I’m resigning. No Eagle would ever—”

Jennifer pushed her lips against his, unable to listen to him. Later this probably wouldn’t succeed, but for now, the man under her froze, like he always did. Jennifer lingered, making sure she had his attention. Angela had also hinted about how to handle this. “Kyle?”

“What?” he ground out against her sweet lips. Even in his misery, he wouldn’t pull away.

“Do you love me?”

Kyle groaned. “You know I do!”

“Then don’t do this to me.” Jennifer moved back enough to meet his tortured gaze. “I need you.”

Whitney listened with tears burning. *Will someone ever love me that way?*

Kyle swallowed his thoughts, trying to rise through the guilt. He nodded stiffly. Jennifer hadn’t asked him for anything. Keeping himself together was the least he could do.

Jennifer kissed him again. This wouldn’t be the end of it, but she had to get him home, where Angela could work on him. People made mistakes. Kyle would have to accept that he was no different from anyone else who’d screwed up on the job.

Kyle knew what she was thinking. He would try because she’d asked him to, but he didn’t expect to forgive himself. He wasn’t even certain he wanted to survive anymore. Their host was right. *No matter what I do, I’m always a killer.*

Dog held still for the woman to strengthen the new cast on his leg, but he refused the painkiller by pulling away from her gentle hands each time she tried to stick him with the needle. Having Safe Haven people around had reminded him of the female he was chasing. The coyotes were in the vicinity and Dog was thinking about leaving with them when Sally released their healing female. He would have to be careful with his paw, but it was almost time to go.

Dog also thought about asking how Marc was. He wanted to let his former master know he was alive, but he also didn't want to rekindle his affection for humans. He was supposed to be living like an animal.

Sally put an extra layer on the cast, smoothing it down distractedly. She didn't want those people here. *They shouldn't be here!*

Dog caught the thought and agreed. If they didn't go soon, she would.

Sally entered the house as Dog curled up under the rocker, golden gaze staying on the barn. At some point, one of them would try to talk to him and he had no idea how to tell them he wasn't coming. They wouldn't understand the call he was receiving.

As if his thought had conjured it, a pale blue light appeared in the weeds by the shed. It spread over the grass as it came toward him, covering the land in a vivid carpet of color. As it reached the porch, it vanished, unable to coat the fabricated object.

Dog got up and moved to the dirt at the foot of the stairs, eager to feel that refreshing power swarming over him. It was a pulse of life from the earth. Addicting and wild, the energy was sent to replenish lifeforms. Dog had never felt it before, even when he'd been living with the wolves. Nature was trying to heal things; the feel of it was amazing.

"Have to leave. They have to!" Pacing in front of the door now, Sally continued to mutter, gun in her hand.

## 8

"Here she comes!" Whitney whispered frantically from behind the door. She'd saved his life; he couldn't kill her.

"I've got it." Jennifer was ready. Dusk had come with the feel of death. They'd gathered their weapons and ammunition to make a stand, but she'd known Whitney couldn't handle this one.

"Come out of there!" Sally banged on the barn door with her gun. "I want you gone!"

"He can't move yet! One more day."

"No! Get out!"

"Okay! Get out of the way so we can!"

"Get out right now!" Sally was screaming every word.

Jennifer approached the door reluctantly. "I don't want to do this to you."

"This is my place! Get out!"

"I'm going." Jennifer was at the door now. "Get back."

Sally had frozen, anger and mental condition not allowing a rapid thought process.

Jennifer kicked the door open.

The door hit Sally in the face and knocked her to the ground, bleeding and nearly unconscious.

Jennifer raised her gun. She'd made her choice and it was Kyle's life, no matter what she owed this crazy stranger.

A heavy, furry body slammed into Jennifer, stopping her from firing. She hit the ground hard enough to gasp.

Dog took up a place in front of Sally, growling. *Get out!*

Stunned by Dog's action, Jennifer raised her gun again. "He. Is. Not. Moving!" Jennifer screamed the last word.

Dog shrank back. For a brief instant, rage was there and he could have leapt at the girl. But she was the one who'd rubbed his belly. Dog slowly lowered his head.

Jennifer cautiously retreated toward the barn, kicking the woman's gun inside. "In one day, we will be gone. If either of you come in the barn, I *will* kill you."

Whitney helped her fasten the doors. They each took up a place near a window.

"I can't believe he did that." Whitney had expected Dog to be on their side.

"He's gone wild, like her. We won't tell Marc that part."

Whitney agreed. Marc would be happy to know that Dog was alive. They didn't need to tell him the rest. "I don't know what happened. I should have stayed awake. It's my fault too."

"You know he doesn't feel that way." Jennifer wiped Dog's saliva from her arm. "And neither do I. Accidents happen. You both have to understand that. No one can be perfect all the time."

"You descendants seem to be."

Jennifer snorted. "Not even close. Angela loves Kyle too. They have a special bond from the rest stop battle with Cesar.

If she had known this was coming, she would have interfered. She missed it.”

“Do you blame her for that?”

“Not at all. The power comes in handy, but it’s unpredictable, uncontrollable. It has a will of its own and we never get to see everything. It’s actually rather annoying.”

Whitney smiled. Kyle was lucky to have her. “Thank you.”

“My honor.” She sighed. “Now, I need to take my own advice.” Jennifer filled him in on Beth’s suicide and was finally able to forgive herself for not catching it. They weren’t meant to prevent every death. In time, Kyle would accept that, as well. She would help him.

## 9

“She got up and went inside.”

“Still talking to herself?” Jennifer was busy changing Kyle’s bandage. Whitney was still watching the door.

“Didn’t look like it. Dog’s in there with her.”

“Hopefully they’ll stay in. I almost like her, you know?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Whitney understood, as much as he could. Their host wasn’t all there mentally, but she was strong enough to survive on her own, which gave her an advantage over most of the people they’d met.

“How’s he doing?”

“Better than I hoped for. No infection now. We might be able to go in the morning if we can give him a gentle ride.”

“I’ll do some scouting in a bit.”

Jennifer finished and then rejoined Whitney near the front doors. The medicine was keeping Kyle asleep and she was glad.

“He’s lucky to have you.”

Jennifer discovered Whitney smiling at her and rolled her eyes. “You sure your head’s okay?”

Whitney chuckled. He hadn’t been along for any of Jennifer’s battles, but he’d heard the stories of her being dependable and scoffed. Clearly, it was true. He’d expected a crying teenager to console.

Jennifer snickered at the image. “Thanks.”

“He’s scared of you.”

Jennifer’s amusement faded to concern. “I know. I’m working on it, but I’m scared of him too.”

“We know. It’s why we wouldn’t let him push you.”

“There’s no need for that anymore.”

“Yeah, things will change when we get back.” This accident would bring the couple closer.

“Sooner than that, actually. We’re not going home yet. I passed a beautiful cabin on the way here and the boss gave us permission. We’re taking a few days off.”

Whitney frowned. “Dropping me off on the way?”

“Not unless you want it. Angela said you can be our chaperone.”

“To appease the camp.” Whitney was certain he wouldn’t spend any of his time monitoring their behavior even after Kyle was up on his feet.

“I assume so, yes. But you don’t have to if you’d rather not. We may be able to get *one* of the hot tubs going and its mine.”

Whitney enjoyed the teasing, suddenly feeling better than he had in a while. “I’ll take the night patrol so I can watch the sun coming up from the hot tub, with a cigar and a scotch.”

Jennifer laughed. “Deal.”

Kyle listened to their easy banter with gratitude. Whitney was getting to see what Kyle had realized from the beginning. Jennifer was special.

Pain lanced through his side.

Kyle swallowed the groan, not wanting to interrupt their moment. Whitney had been on Kevin’s team and done well. He was respected. Kyle hoped he continued to earn it. The man was easy to like.

“Temperature keeps dropping.”

“We’ll bundle up.”

Kyle listened to them cover the basics, wrist throbbing. If they were taking time off, he needed to make a stop along the way. Kyle worked on a mental list as the shadows grew longer and the pain stretched into his guts.

“Will we have trouble leaving?”

“I hope not.” Jennifer studied the house where dim lights had come on a short time ago. “I’m getting too tired to be nice.”

## 10

Whitney eased out of the barn a few hours later to take care of their fallen men and locate new wheels.

He returned driving an old station wagon. It had enough room to slide Kyle inside once they put the seat down. Jennifer rode next to him, fastening belts and covering him while

Whitney tossed their kits in the front and then got them rolling. There was no movement from inside the house, but they could feel attention on them. It wasn't safe here.

As they pulled out of the yard, Sally and Dog came from the house. When the sound of the engine faded, Sally strode into the barn.

Dog expected her to put her property back the way it had been, but she surprised him by opening the cages of the upset animals she had been helping. Even those not ready to be on their own yet were opened, freed.

Dog stayed clear as the raccoon and the coyote ran from the barn first.

"Free to be with my boys!" the coyote howled happily.  
"Farewell, strange wolf."

Dog waited for the snakes to clear out and then joined the woman in the barn, curious.

Sally was in the corner, pulling tarps away from a vehicle Dog recognized. It was an ATV. When Sally got in and brought the engine to life, Dog understood she was leaving.

Sally drove the Gator outside and got busy filling the fluids. When she finished, she began bringing bags from the house and loading them onto the back and sides. The vehicle also had a small trailer, but Dog wasn't positive about staying with her. However, his leg was still too injured for long travel on it and he needed to get north.

"I've got another place. And once the snow comes, *no one* will get in there." Sally stormed into the house for more gear.

Dog slowly climbed into the trailer and lay down. He hoped she was going in the right direction. If not, he would get out the first time she stopped.

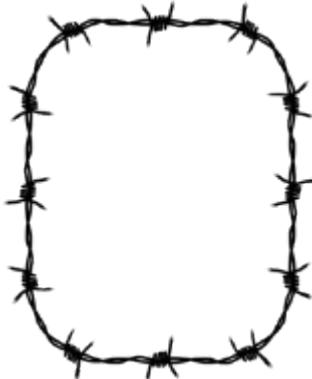
Sally didn't blink at the sight of the wolf, who had obviously decided to go with her. She was glad of the company, though he would have to make room for her two inside mutts. There hadn't been any fighting among them so far and Sally didn't expect there to be any now. Animals made more sense to her than people; she was going where the beasts could barely roam, let alone man.

Dog tolerated the heat of the small animals that the woman thrust into the trailer, ignoring their excited, yapping descriptions of the place they were headed to. Dog didn't care if there was land to wander or ponds to swim. He was following the winds in search of his mate. He wouldn't stay with Sally much longer. As soon as his leg healed, he would vanish.

## Chapter Fourteen

# Healing

September 15<sup>th</sup>



### 1

“**Y**ou guys did a good job.” Marc kept scanning the newly gated stairs leading up to Zone C. With the sun sinking, it was perfect timing for a visibility test. “Very good.”

They’d been driving up to deliver supplies and medical care to the sullen refugees, but now the Eagles could go up the stairs in protection. The gate was electronic. There were multiple doors for people to go through so they would be separated from everyone else. It wouldn’t stop a bullet, but it would prevent a riot from easily entering Safe Haven. Intruders would have to go over top of the ten-foot, barbed wire fence that was being patrolled day and night. Marc was

satisfied that they now had a basic defensive setup in place, but there would soon be more. The towers were going up, aided by all the lumber that Shane's team had collected. Marc planned to put small bunkers in next, stocked with water and weapons.

“When will we tell them?” Zack studied the Zone C people as they scurried through the open gate and vanished down the hill in the loud gas-guzzlers. They had no schedule, no organization. The refugees came and went during both gate opening times.

“Soon, I think. They should have been gone already, but plans changed.” Becoming aware that he was discussing a magic issue with someone who wasn’t a descendant, Marc chose not to close off. He dug into Zack’s mind instead, searching for trouble.

“No need for that.” Zack didn’t resist. “I’m not happy with her. I may never be, but I know she didn’t want Crista to die. I’m trying to accept the rest.”

Marc was relieved to discover that was the truth. He gestured toward the training tent. “Want to go spend a few minutes making the rookies look bad?”

Zack chuckled. The new men and women were easy to rile and slow to think, like most of them had been upon first joining Adrian or the service. “Sure.”

The two men headed for the noisy tent.

Angela approved. She was on her way to the mess to have a snack, get updates, and then go to bed. Marc had things covered. Angela grabbed a cold coke from the barrel, remembering to fasten the lid to keep it that way. She took a seat at the empty center table.

“Can I get you a tray?”

Angela shook her head at Tara, frowning. “Li brings them out. Thank you.”

Tara shrugged awkwardly. “Sorry. I didn’t know that.”

Angela scanned the woman and then Missy, who was humming happily at a rear table with crayons and a coloring book. “You guys okay?”

Tara took a breath. “As much as we can be. She didn’t need to see her father die.”

“She said she did.”

“She’s just a baby! She needs her mother to make those choices.”

Angela shrugged.

Li Sing sat a foil covered tray in front of her, frowning at Tara.

Angela stared at the woman. “Are you on duty right now?”

Tara lifted her broom resignedly. “Sweeping, getting trays for the old people, helping with the kiddies.”

Angela recognized the tones, but she didn’t comment on the unhappiness. If Tara wanted a different job, she would have to ask for it.

“Let me know if I can get something for you.” Tara returned to her halfhearted sweeping.

“Uh-huh.” Angela wanted to talk with Tara, to dig down and figure out what her problem was, but she didn’t have the spare time.

Greg dropped down across from her. “Doctor said it is Cholera. He’s requesting permission to stay another 24 hours. He asked that we tell his sons they have a newborn and he’s trying to save it.”

“Fine, but 24 hours is the limit. He can bring the child here, where we can help.”

“Good. All crews have finished their first missions and have left for the second half. We’re working on the 12-volt setups in the caves now. The LEDS are up and running and all of the pipes will go in today and overnight. Tell the camp to expect constant noise for the next two days and then we’ll have the kitchen in place. The bathrooms and showers will be last to go in. We’ll need a large amount of water for the first fills and to check for leaks.”

“We’ll find it or we’ll melt snow. Go on.”

“Vents and fans are running, so the moldy smell is fading. We have detectors and extinguishers on every level, and the battery banks are being put in tomorrow. We had a delay with the cords, but the engineers have all they need now, from Kyle’s first run. The store they found was stocked. Their relief is already loading crates.” Greg scanned his list. “Oh, and the den mothers need their next lists.”

Angela opened her book. “Carpeting, dividers hung, beds and mats set up, bedrolls and all the spare blankets brought in. Racks and baskets of the goods we use every day hung up. Tell them to get it ready to live in.”

“You got it.” Greg was writing it down word for word. “Cynthia’s got a final copy ready.” He handed her the four-page paper with a slight frown, not sure if Angela would care for the underlying tone of rebellion that Cynthia’s words were encouraging in her new newspaper.

“I’ll go over it today and let her know by morning.” Angela put it in her book. “What else?”

“Kendle’s class starts tonight. She has a full roster of women. No males.”

“I’ll add a few people to it over the next week. They have to see that she’s serious before the men will take lessons from her on anything.”

“Cool. We drafted a new crew for the oil refinery run. They’re leaving any time now.”

“Good.”

“That’s it from me for now. I’m about to make rounds of the topside, then hit the caves for fresh news.”

“Marc has point.” Angela yawned. “I have a bedroll calling my name.”

Greg spotted Samantha coming and doubted Angela would get to answer it anytime soon.

Angela sighed, noticing the newest disturbance. “Okay, I’ll be here for a bit yet.”

Greg smiled his sympathy and left the two women alone.

“Yes, Samantha?”

“I got a call that said *he* joined the crew and is working.” Her team had chosen to stay late. Adrian showing up had been another surprise.

Angela shrugged. “So?”

Samantha frowned. “So, what’s *he* doing there?”

“Sounds like he’s working.” Angela dug into her tray. “When are you going back down?”

“Now. We don’t want him there. The *little* sleaze is bad enough.”

Angela looked up, frowning. “If it weren’t for second chances, Sam, you wouldn’t be here right now to complain about my choices.”

Understanding she wasn't going to get what she wanted, Samantha stomped from the mess.

Angela tried not to snicker, not wanting it to get around that she was enjoying this. *Because I'm not. I just find her hypocrisy amusing.*

Angela spotted Seth coming her way. The good feeling faded as quickly as it had come. Seth wasn't going to be put off by a few sharp words. He wanted answers about Becky and she would have to provide them or he would make up his own. "Sit down, Seth, and listen to me closely."

## 2

"She's pissed." Candy watched Samantha manhandle the truck down the hill toward them.

Cynthia shrugged. "Boss must have said no."

They'd chosen to ask Angela to remove Conner from their crew, but when Adrian had shown up and took a place on sniper patrol, Samantha had left to confront Angela about it instead of waiting until tonight like they'd all agreed on. Conner wasn't causing problems, but the awkwardness was hard to work through. Having Adrian here had actually been helpful. It had kept Conner from staring at Candy on their breaks.

Candy looked down in time to find Conner standing nearby, leering at her chest. Again.

Angered, she spun around and bent over. *Pffttt!*

Conner froze; the smell hit him like a slap. Tears welled as he fought not to breath in more of the noxious fumes. He

ducked his head, hoping for clear air and got a fresh blast in the face as Candy farted again.

Conner rolled away and flipped off the tailgate, retching and gasping.

Candy stood up, patting her enlarging stomach. “That’s my babies.”

The rest of the crew busted out laughing, including Adrian.

Arriving in time to witness it, Samantha was slightly mollified. She gestured to the next wreck. “Let’s get to it.”

Adrian studied the landscape and his son, shaking his head at the boy whenever he got too close to the women. Conner had hormones running rampant, but no self-control. It worried Adrian. *I need to pull him in.* Adrian immediately began making plans to do so. Angela would be quicker to forgive him if he was able to save his son.

### 3

Late afternoon faded into dusk. Kindle repeated her motions for the class, though she’d already made the fire several times. Some of her students had caught on quickly and were now watching in complete boredom. The rest were struggling with the difference between tinder and wood.

“You have to catch the tinder on fire, and use it to make a larger fire,” Kindle repeated for the two women staring at the piles of material as if they were foreign objects. Would the camp men be this clueless too? Kindle thought they would. Adrian and Angela had been doing everything for these people except teaching them how to survive on their own. Kindle was determined to change that.

Her radio crackled. “Kendle to the main gate.”

“Copy.” Kendle put the small fire out with her hand, not feeling the heat through her scars. “That’s it for tonight. We’ll meet again tomorrow, same place, same time.”

Kendle left them to clean up, certain that they wouldn’t, and marched to the main gate. She couldn’t find a reason to be called. It kept a scowl on her face as she passed fires and trashcans that were supposed to keep the darkness at bay. To Kendle, it added a gloomy, smoky air to the mostly empty areas. The camp was in the caves, enjoying the natural temperatures and avoiding the cold wind that was now biting into Kendle’s exposed cheeks. Winter was definitely coming. It made Pitcairn seem even further away.

“I’m here.” Kendle scowled at the gate guards. “What’s up?”

“Someone needs your help.” Marc came from the shadows. “I’d like you to give it.”

Kendle narrowed in on the vehicle flying up to Adrian’s locale. “*She* wants it, you mean.”

“Yes. She’s close to Kyle.” Marc watched Kendle’s reactions flash across her face. “Will you use your gift to help him?”

“I don’t trust him. I still think he’s wrong for what he did to her.”

Marc rotated toward the shadows. “Ask Jennifer what he did to her before you make up your mind. That’s not asking too much, is it?”

*No, it’s not.* Kendle didn’t mind the thought of healing Kyle. It was carrying out Angela’s orders like a flunky that rankled.

“Then resign from her team.” Marc leaned against the gate in the shadows where he could study things unobserved. “Resign and go live with *him*.”

Kandle had already considered that. “I can’t. He’s not you!” Kindle stomped to the gate that led by Zone C. Her annoyance with each stop to go through a gate was clear in her mutters. She didn’t respond to the drunken shouts that came from the refugees. She stormed by them and disappeared into the tree line that surrounded Adrian’s camp.

Marc was relieved. He also cared for Kyle and they needed his strength here. He hadn’t been happy to hear about the accident, but he had been glad for the report on Dog. Knowing the wolf was alive was a comfort. Marc still had hopes he would return.

## 4

“She won’t come.” Jennifer was already tired of waiting. “She hates me. I’ll ask Conner when they get here.”

“Conner chose to stay and guard the girls.” Adrian came through the trees. “Samantha wanted to get an early start in the morning.”

Jennifer frowned. “We’ll go down to him.”

“No.” Kyle was leaning against the hot hood of the station wagon. “I don’t want it from them!”

“Kyle!” Jennifer scolded. “Don’t be that way. You need help.”

“Not from them.” Kyle was dripping sweat. “Traitors!”

“That, we are.” Adrian dropped down by the dead fire ring to build a fresh blaze. “The reasons why don’t matter.”

“I didn’t come for your excuses!” Kyle avoided Jennifer’s calming hand. “You betrayed us!”

Adrian kept building the fire. “It worked out pretty well for you. You got the high place, the respect, the girl, and the job you asked for.”

“I earned all of that!” His face twisted at the agony from the strain of shouting.

Jennifer slapped him on the arm. “Shut up!”

Surprised, both men fell silent.

“Get out here and help him!” Jennifer was out of patience. “I know you’re listening. Come out!”

Kindle stepped from the shadows to Adrian’s right. None of them could read her expression.

Kindle tried hard to keep it that way as she approached Kyle. Jennifer, she ignored.

Kyle tensed as Kindle’s hand curled around his wrist and then his body arched as her light shot into him with the force of a train. It lit him up in a shiny blue glow that glinted brightly enough to cause Kyle to shut his lids.

Kindle let go of the connection, panting a bit. She’d shoved it in him quick and hard. It had drained her to do it so fast.

Adrian gently helped Kindle to stand up straight. He kept an arm around her waist when she trembled. “You can stay here tonight.”

Kindle didn’t argue. She let him lead her into his tent and lay down on his bed, inhaling deeply of his scent. Angela was right. It was intoxicating.

Adrian secured the flap without glancing at any of them, including Kyle, who was quickly recovering his strength.

Adrian pushed off his boots and socks, and then dropped his shirt in the corner before joining Kindle on the bed. He heard their company leave and didn't care.

Kindle felt the power in the air, the need and the concern. She lifted her arms to him, unable to fight it any longer. She needed to feel alive and Adrian could give that to her.

Adrian slid into her hot arms with a groan as their skin met. He lowered his mouth to hers and sent his hands and magic over her willing body at the same time.

Kindle arched in pleasure. She hung on as Adrian's mouth lowered to deliver a dizzying numbness that sent her flying through the clouds. Each cloud she blew through refilled her energy and lifeforce until she was so full she felt like she might burst.

Adrian pushed deeper, groaning as she climaxed around him. "Yes, yes!"

They came down the hill of light together.

Adrian kissed her gently, wishing it were someone else.

Kindle kissed him and then shoved him off her before things could restart. "I can't take that again yet."

Adrian gathered her against his heat before covering them up. "You'll come to crave that feeling."

Kindle didn't doubt it. Sex with Luke had been satisfying. This was...indescribable.

Adrian lay quietly until she was snoring lightly, and then slowly ran a hand over her stomach. He didn't need a child right now and the spell would keep her from catching pregnant. It wouldn't succeed every time, but it would on first use. After this, he would have to be more careful.

Adrian thought of Marc's words about bringing Angela to him and felt his flesh respond, but his heart cried out in denial. Angela wouldn't allow Marc to bring her here and she certainly wouldn't submit to his touch. It would never happen.

## 5

"Don't ever make that suggestion again!"

Marc winced at the shrill snap. He'd told her Adrian was expecting a visit and she'd gotten so angry that Marc had felt the need to take a step back. He hadn't, of course, but the urge had been there.

"Why are you pushing me?"

"I want the baby. I see Neil and Jeremy making it work, and I think about the future. You'll need—"

"Stop."

Marc did. He wished she wasn't pregnant now, though. It was endangering her and that was terrifying.

"For me too, but I just need a few more days, Marc, and then I can take a break. Just a few days."

*She doesn't even have one.* The witch ignored Angela's protests. *It's her or the child.*

"No!" Angela was sorry she couldn't quit shouting. "I have another option." She sat down in the chair. "Have Conner and Kindle meet me in the doctor's tent in the morning. He'll be gone, so we'll have privacy."

Marc realized she had opted to try the healing before the baby came and forced himself to agree. "They'll be there."

"It might succeed. They're both gifted."

“Yes.” Marc was suddenly scared. What if he lost Angie and the baby?

“Have Hilda there too.”

Marc would also bring Adrian. He owed Angela for all the hell she’d suffered and if he could help, Marc would insist that Angela let him. Once things were underway, it would be hard for her to refuse.

Angela missed Marc’s thoughts, busy worrying over the choice she’d made. This baby already meant too much to her to lose.

## 6

“Which one do we want?”

Vlad’s question was met with silence as Melinda considered. They were atop the cliffs, spying on Safe Haven. Melinda was using her gift to determine the best hostage to grab.

Vlad waited impatiently, kicking at mud and flies. He wasn’t worried about noise carrying down the mountain today. The wind was long and loud, and it would cover anything other than an explosion. They’d considered a number of plans and narrowed it down to two. One would have to wait for the weather to cooperate. The other depended on a hostage.

“Her.” Melinda pointed toward a lone vehicle rolling away from Safe Haven.

Vlad narrowed in to discover two men with their target. “Follow them and grab her when you can. Kill the men and bring their heads as proof. We’ll have pikes ready for them.”

Kranten and Melinda left immediately, both eager to have something to do. Neither of them were good at waiting.

Vlad thought to ask why she'd chosen that girl, but decided to wait until they had the hostage, instead of following them to find out. If the girl's gifts were useful, he would have to have another plan ready so they could exploit her afterwards. As of right now, the hostage died.

Vlad began working on a secondary idea. With their numbers so low, they would need all the help they could steal with Jay's alpha power. Being like his father was handy out here and the boy was too young to know he was being used.

Vlad peered down at Safe Haven, trying to spot Missy or Tara. They were also vital to the plan, but he had no way to contact them.

“Won’t matter.” Vlad handed a kit of food to the bald man whose name he still hadn’t asked for. When the rest of their people in town found out about the train slaughter, they would come here. Vlad planned to send the bald man to tell them as soon as it was light enough to travel by. After that, all Vlad had to do was hold the right advantage when they arrived and Safe Haven would cease to exist.

“Get ready!”

Jennifer had already told them of their tail.

Kyle had also spotted the truck in the distance, but they had all hoped it was one of their people following them after the brief stop in camp for Jennifer to grab the baby while the males grabbed fresh supplies.

*Bang!*

The gunshot pinging off the hood declared it wasn't one of their people.

"Ram them! She'll flinch!"

Whitney didn't want to play chicken on the winding, one lane road at night, but he obediently hit the gas, hoping Jennifer was right.

The two vehicles sped toward each other, passengers shouting and screaming, and then they were nose-to-nose.

Melinda jerked the wheel, taking her car over the edge.

"Look out!" Kyle yelled as they hit a tree.

Jennifer wrapped herself around the baby seat as glass shattered. The station wagon absorbed most of the impact.

She wiped the debris away from the crying baby, checking for injuries.

"She okay?" Kyle came around to help them out.

"I think so." Jennifer lifted the baby into her arms.

"What about you?" Kyle looked at Whitney.

"I'm good. But tired of accidents, I've got to tell you."

Kyle understood completely. "Come on. There's a cabin at the top of this hill."

The trio walked up the damp road without peering down at the wreckage. The smoke and noises coming up said no one could have survived the hundred-foot fall.

And then Kyle heard a footstep.

"Down!" Kyle spun around to fire.

Jennifer hit the ground as a slug flew over her shoulder, barely missing the baby.

Kyle fired again.

They all watched the man fall over the cliff this time.

Kyle ran to the edge to verify the threat was over.

Jennifer calmed the screaming baby who hadn't been hurt.

Whitney stared in shock at the scene, unable to believe how fast things could go wrong now.

"Must have jumped when the car went over." Kyle rejoined Jennifer. "You guys okay?"

"Yes. You saved her."

Kyle gently turned her toward the cabin, not liking being out in the open. "Let's get under cover."

Whitney followed after he grabbed their kits from the smoking car. "Another one bites our dust." He kicked the wheel as he came around. They would come down tomorrow and drain the fuel.

The trio cautiously eased into the lobby of the filthy Timber Hills cabin rental lodge. The office was covered in moldy papers that had been exposed to the rain for months. The entire place stank.

Kyle reluctantly began erecting his tent near the broken windows. It smelled too rotten to explore the inner rooms. "We'll go further up in the morning and get something nicer."

Jennifer was getting used to having her life endangered. "Whatever you say." She was busy making sure the baby wasn't hurt.

Kyle let her go, even when Autumn began to protest. Being a mother wasn't easy.

As night fell, they ate around a small fire that Kyle had built in the lodge fireplace, all of them glad for the feature. The warmth it provided drove the cold back and helped dry out the room, which helped with the smell.

By midnight, the odor was mostly gone and all of them settled down for sleep. Tomorrow, they would set up a perimeter and call base to explain what had happened, but tonight, they needed to rest. It had been a long couple of days; all four of them were sound asleep a short time later, missing their newest problem as it arrived.

Whitney and the baby slept soundly in his sleeping bag on the lobby couch. Neither of them woke when the footsteps came or when hands slowly drugged the canteens. It was a shame that Melinda hadn't survived the accident, but Kranten preferred to work alone anyway. His dream charm was almost as strong as Jack's. Capturing them this way would be much safer than trying to fight the gifted teenager now sleeping on her man's chest. When any of them woke, they would eat or drink something, and then be defenseless against whatever he chose to do.

The Italian man had shot him, but Kranten always dressed in vests for moments like this. He marched toward the sleeping baby with only a slight limp.

## 8

"Should we go check that out?"

Samantha didn't want to, but they'd witnessed the flash and heard the gunshots. That meant it was close to Safe Haven. "Call base and find out if any of ours are making noise in that grid."

Cynthia handled the call; they all waited uneasily for Angela's answer.

Conner and David were on the opposite side of the fire from Samantha and her girls. Conner had been careful to not even be caught glancing at them. David, on the other hand, made eye contact with Cynthia as much as he could. He liked a little shot of mocha in his women.

The radio crackled with Kenn's grouchy voice. "Boss said that vicinity crawls with trouble for us, to be quick, quiet, and careful."

Samantha immediately got up and began preparing for war.

The others followed more slowly.

The radio crackled again. "She also says some of ours are in the line of fire."

That got everyone moving. They rolled up the winding road in two trucks a few minutes later.

## 9

Jennifer struggled to wake, sensing there was a problem. The fog was thick over her mind. She shoved at it weakly. "Kyle!" She hoped she was yelling, but Jennifer couldn't be certain as she managed to push a layer of the blurriness from her mind.

"That's it. Drink up."

The voice was chilling. Jennifer jerked herself upright and tried to focus on the tent wall. *Who is that?*

"Good, huh? It's a special brew I made for weak humans. A quick death can be handy."

Jennifer spotted Kyle on the mattress; eyes open but not alert and realized they'd been drugged. She tried to call out to

Angela, but the fog in her mind prevented her from uncovering the door.

“Ah, she’s awake. I knew she’d be strong.”

The sound of a light struggle came and then a man appeared in the tent flap, holding a glassy-eyed baby. “Hello, Jennifer.”

Jennifer screamed in rage at the sight of her child in a stranger’s grip, but the drugs overwhelmed her. She dropped to her knees, gasping for breath. This wasn’t like the drugs Donner had used. This was fire in her veins—poison. “Give me...my baby!”

“She’s perfect leverage.” Kranten smirked. “Your leader will give me anything I want in exchange.”

“What do you want?” Jennifer forced out, fighting with all her will to remain awake.

“Lives. Hers, yours, and many more.”

“You won’t get them!” Samantha informed him, swinging as hard as she could.

Kranten had no time to duck the gun butt. He slumped forward over Kyle’s body, dropping the baby onto Kyle’s lap.

Samantha hurried forward and hit the stranger again, then once more. Blood ran from his nose.

Samantha stepped aside to allow Conner inside the tent to heal the damage from the poison before it could kill Kyle or Jennifer.

“Stop!” Tracy was unable to get Whitney to stop drinking from the poisoned canteen.

Samantha instinctively knew what would free him from the spell. She fired a bullet into Kranten’s brain.

Whitney let go of the canteen, blinking... Then he dropped to the ground, puking and bleeding.

Conner rushed to him, forcing his magic in between bouts of vomiting.

The team watched in horror.

Jennifer and Kyle slowly recovered, but the baby being still and silent caused them great concern until they realized Conner had healed her first and then told her to go to sleep. They listened to Whitney's battle for survival, but neither of them left the baby.

Conner was able to get rid of the poisons enough for Whitney to become aware of what was going on. He stumbled to the door to force himself to keep vomiting.

Conner went along to keep him safe and to heal him further.

Samantha waited until it seemed like Whitney would live, then gestured toward their vehicles. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Whitney let himself be loaded into their truck a few minutes later, feeling a little better, but in no condition to be alone. He would be taken to the medical bay, where he would be monitored for side effects.

Jennifer and Kyle also let themselves be herded into the truck. It obviously wasn't a good time for them to be away.

They entered Safe Haven a short time later. The rescue team began providing updates.

Nearby, Marc realized Conner was now empty. There was no way he could help Angie.

## 10

Vlad felt Kranten's death, as he had Melinda's. He ground his hand into the fire to keep from screaming his rage. They had underestimated these Safe Haven people again. Too many lives had been paid for those mistakes.

As he glowered toward the scene of the crime, snow began to fall. He didn't pay attention at first, too full of vengeful desire to be alert. When he finally noticed, there was already a thin layer of white covering his camp and making the fire sizzle.

Jay and the bald man stayed out of the way as Vlad approached the noisy fire, expecting him to cover it or kick it out the rest of the way. They didn't expect Vlad to laugh.

Vlad continued to express his amusement as the wind blew harder, bringing more snow. He'd forgotten the first rule of hunting. Use whatever was most abundant.

"Are things okay?" The bald man was ready to flee to their town, or maybe even further. He didn't think these Safe Haven people could be beaten.

"Fine, fine." Vlad waved distractedly. "With the snow, will come new opportunities, my friends. We'll reach out and grab them."

Confused, the bald man put his head back down and tried to sleep through the cold. Maybe everyone had gone insane since the war. That would explain things.

"Get up!" Vlad kicked the man. "You have to go to town—now!"

The man didn't protest, leaving quickly instead. He would find a place to hole up for the night where it was warm, and away from Vlad.

He was quickly gone.

Vlad cackled again. *I'm not beaten yet, not by any means.*

## 11

Angela slipped from Safe Haven's safety via a weak set of fence links that she planned to have Marc reinforce. Until then, it made a convenient escape route.

Angela slid down the embankment and then took a winding path through the trees that led her up the hillside. Conner and Kindle couldn't help her, and she wouldn't allow Adrian to try. That left one solution and she'd made the choice to take it. She was already damned. There was no reason to resist now, not if it would save the baby.

She stopped in the shadows of Zone C, listening to the shouts, the hatred. *This is so wrong. I can't believe I'm doing this.*

The witch remained silent, also surprised. The demon wasn't positive Angela would follow through, but if she did, everything would change again and forever this time.

Angela let her feet take her to the rear corner of the gated site, zeroing in on ugliness. She didn't need to hear the conversation to know it was bad, but she listened anyway, hoping it would ease her guilt.

"They'll open the gates in the morning and we'll grab whoever it is."

“They said supplies were coming in this load, so they’ll have too many guards.”

Angela got close enough to peer at the man and woman who were hunkered over a tiny fire to plan their attack.

“We have guns and ammo now, thanks to the daily runs. They won’t be expecting that.”

Angela tried to feel angry that they were plotting to kill her Eagles, but the wrongness of what she was about to do refused to fade.

“We can’t get through their gates,” the man insisted, rubbing his scarred arm. “How do we short circuit their power?”

“If we can get the right hostage, we’ll be let in,” the woman answered.

Angela swallowed a snort. *Why does everyone think I’ll negotiate? Have I been too soft?*

“How about we act like we have an outbreak and lure the doctor in? You heard those sentries talking about the Cholera down in town.”

“Yeah, that might work. Who do we have that’s sick enough?”

“Harvey’s boy, Joel. He had the influenza last month and doesn’t sound healthy.”

“He isn’t,” the man agreed. “We’re studying him for signs he’s carrying something.”

“So we can spare him,” the woman pointed out. “While they’re killing him, we’ll be grabbing their doctor.”

Angela had heard enough to ease her conscience, but she knew the guilt wasn’t going to leave her after this. “Why don’t

you bargain with me?” Angela came from the shadows. “If you have their boss, the guards will open the gates.”

The conspirators recognized her. Not spotting any patrols, both of them came toward her at a fast run.

Angela waited for them to scale the fence, thinking she would have to add that to the security list.

The woman was the first one over. She dropped in front of Angela with a raised fist.

Angela sent a current of heat into the woman’s stomach that took her to the ground. She then faced the much larger, healthier male and began pulling.

Marc forced himself to remain in the shadows. He hadn’t been there for the other kills. He viewed the quick attack in uneasy disappointment. She drained both lives in seconds, not reacting to the woman’s pleas for mercy.

Marc could actually see it helping her. Skin glowing, fullness returning, even her hair was becoming the glossy black that he loved. Marc rotated toward the hole in the fence she’d come through. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it, only that he didn’t want her to know he had witnessed it.

“Too late for that.”

Marc found her right behind him. He waited for the revulsion or disgust that he’d expected to feel. When nothing came, he met her eye in confusion. “Why?”

“I hate him as much as you do. I’d never let him taint our child.”

Marc was a bit stunned. “This won’t?”

“No.” Angela sighed unhappily. “She’s innocent. I’m the one who’s damned.”

Marc followed her. He didn't know how to handle this ruthless stranger—that was clear.

Angela waited for him to be close enough and then slowly reached out to take his hand. His flesh wasn't yielding at first, but he caved quickly and let her place his hand over her stomach. There was now a small bump. Marc was immediately fascinated by the feel of it.

"Would you deny her life, to allow evil a place inside our gates?"

"Never!" Marc let himself be convinced. "Never."

"They're going to die." Angela glanced at the zone where the noise had yet to settle down. "This way, they've served a purpose."

Marc found that hard to argue with, especially after overhearing their plotting. He agreed with Angie's choice, just not her methods.

"I have the same reservations. But I want this baby, Marc. There isn't much I won't do to keep her alive."

The only life Marc valued more was hers or Charlie's. He tugged her into his arms for a long hug. "Whatever you need."

Angela wiped her tears on his shirt, hoping he didn't notice. He was so much better than she was. She didn't deserve someone so good. She deserved to be with a terrible person...like Adrian.

Adrian studied the couple. Kindle was sleeping blissfully in his tent, but Adrian had known Angela was close. It had drawn him from Kindle's warmth in time to watch her take two lifeforces to heal herself. It was something he'd never

thought to witness her do, and while it hurt him—he'd corrupted her—it also gave encouragement.

"She's giving in to the dark side. There's hope."

Adrian reluctantly returned to his tent, telling himself to be patient. She would try hard to abide by the natural laws for a while now, to prove to herself that she hadn't slipped that far. It would be a while yet before an opportunity to bond with her through these mistakes presented itself.

"I can wait. I'll wait 'til hell freezes over to have you and I won't care if you've gone bad. Marc won't take you that way, but I will."

## Chapter Fifteen

# Perception



1

“Go on and print it out.” Angela folded the paper. She would go over it in detail later, especially the interview. Everyone would want to read that a few times.

“You want me to change anything?” Cynthia was a bit nervous. Some of the wording wasn’t supportive of the current leadership.

“Nope. Our people deserve the truth. You’ll give them that.”

“I’ll have it ready to hand out in the morning.”

“Good.”

Surprised, Cynthia left Angela to her stack of papers. She hadn’t expected the first draft of her paper to be approved. In fact, she hadn’t been certain any of her drafts would make it. She’d expected censorship and lies, not freedom to tell the truth.

“I’ve read that draft.” Greg was also sorting through stacks of papers. “It might cause some problems.”

Angela didn’t tell him that sometimes problems were useful. Cynthia would help her push these people back into American values and strength. It had built the country once and they needed it now, more than ever. Angela opened her notebook. “I think I’m ready.”

Greg lifted the first sheet and got on with the morning updates. “We had another group of refugees come in around dawn. Marc put them in Zone A.”

“The doctor’s home.” Angela could feel his displeasure coming from the medical bay. “Get him on the testing.”

Greg wrote it down. “The ants are making a home in the secondary cave we chose—the one that connects to ours. Is that okay?”

“Yes, but keep them out of ours. Some of our camp haven’t accepted them yet; sharing the cave with them during the snow drew a lot of complaints.”

“I’ll have Jennifer pass the message for them to stay out of sight for a while.”

“Good. She’ll do it without hurting feelings. Have an extra bin of scraps delivered to them each day. That’ll help them to not feel shunned.”

Greg wasn’t sure about ants having emotions, but he didn’t bring it up. He was one of the people who didn’t care for the sight of the mutations, but he did recognize their usefulness.

“Have her ask them about helping take some of our heavier equipment down to the bottom levels. They can carry a hundred times their own weight, so that could be useful.”

“I agree.” Greg stifled a protest about having to work with the ants. If they could carry the heavy machinery down, that would be more than useful. It would be amazing.

“We’ve gone through the first week’s loads that came in. Shane found two wood gas generators at the lumberyard. Theo’s already using them. He said he’ll need a safe place to store the fuel we get from them.”

“That rocks! Have it put in a truck by itself and I’ll send it out to locations that need it.”

Greg didn’t ask for details on that, knowing the answer wouldn’t be one he cared for. If Angela felt the need to stock locations for an emergency, it probably meant that trouble was already verified.

“Not always. Sometimes I’m just being careful.”

Greg didn’t ask any questions. “We’re not uncovering much food. The stores have been cleaned out.”

“I expected that. We’ll do more rationing, quietly. Here’s a list of things for the cook and the garden crews.”

Greg read over it and approved of them. Subtly changing their diet to more bread-based items would slow their supply usage, though it wasn’t healthy. To combat that, Angela was having more vitamins passed out, and releasing their reserve of fish to be consumed now. It would add a couple weeks to their estimates. “No problems on these. Most people won’t notice.”

“Good. I hope it will only be that way for a month or so, and then we’ll have the second harvest from the garden. How are we on animals?”

He checked a sheet. “Not great. And we don’t have anyone free to go searching.”

“We’ll cover that next week. Gatherers will become stockers and we’ll be able to spare a couple of teams then.”

“Good. Next is an update on the settlement in general.”

“Yes, where are we on everything? Any chance we’ll make the morning’s deadline?”

“None at all. The plumbing should be finished today, along with the power. Air is done and working well. A few reports of groans and creaks, but we’ve all agreed that’s normal, considering that we’re drilling, banging, and making plenty of noise while we sweat.” Greg scanned the sheet again. “I’d say we have a shot at twelve days, unless something happens to speed things up.”

Angela wasn’t worried over it. She’d known her deadline wasn’t reasonable, but the cold weather was coming and hurrying these people along had been necessary. “What about sanitation and escape routes?”

“The sanitation will be finished tomorrow if we can get more septic equipment. We’re stuck waiting on loads to come in for that one. However, the escape routes have been reconned, mapped, and we have guards posted.”

“Excellent.” Exiting the cave through those damp bottom tunnels wouldn’t be pleasant and she hoped they didn’t need to use them.

“We do have full loads of wood, gravel, sand, and dirt. Very low on water and fuel.”

“That’ll be better after today. The water from Neil’s run will hold us for the rest of the month. We also have a team collecting from the northern oil refinery now.”

“Okay. Next is...Eagle training. Marc left sheets for you to approve. He said Kenn and Shawn did well on them.”

“I’ll go over it later, with these other things.” She put the papers into her book. “Who do I have meetings with today?”

Greg consulted his schedule. “They’re all covered. Marc handled the doctor, Samantha told Conner he isn’t getting back in here yet, and that’s it.”

“Really? I’ve got a free hour?”

Greg laughed at her innocent pleasure. She was cute when she wasn’t being the boss. “Last thing I have is Tara. She asked for a different job. I told her we need hands in the caves and she agreed to try that.”

Angela’s demeanor turned cold. “Any word from her settling partners?”

“None that I’ve noticed.” Greg quickly scanned his papers again. “She follows the rules and stays out of the way.”

“And Missy?”

Greg gestured toward the kids’ area, where a large group of children and their chaperones were lined up to enjoy field trip day. Missy was with Leeann. The two girls were chatting happily and ignoring everything else around them. “Seems content enough.”

Angela didn’t comment, staring at the little girl. Missy’s gifts were incredible, but Angela didn’t want her to use them. She needed time to be a kid before being a descendant consumed her life. Angela stood up, pocketing her notebook. “I’ll be on rounds.”

Greg nodded. She looked better today than she had the entire time they’d been here. It was heartening.

Greg whistled as he strolled to the front gate for a check in with the guards over Zone C. That was the area he didn’t have

an update on yet and he wanted to have it ready if the boss asked for it.

Angela headed for the female tents, hoping to catch Hilda before she started her day of working in the caves. If Hilda were willing, she would submit to a new exam and discover if she and the baby were out of danger for a while. The lifeforces were capable of healing many things; Angela needed to hear that her horrible gambit had succeeded. She'd already given her soul to these people. She shouldn't be required to sacrifice her unborn child too.

## 2

Neil slid into the shower stall with a groan. “That feels good.”

A few stalls over, Jeremy chuckled. “Yeah, hot water will cause that reaction.”

Neil let it beat on his sore shoulders while he stared through the window. He and his team were going back out after lunch mess to supervise the collection of water from the treatment plant. As he stared, he caught a glimpse of Samantha going by. Her pace wasn’t the confident stroll that Neil was used to. He frowned. “Can I talk to you about something?”

“Sure,” Jeremy answered, not hearing the tone. He was busy ignoring his body while he washed.

“Have you, uh...” Neil flushed. “Have you and Samantha been... You know.”

Jeremy grimaced. *So much for ignoring my needs.* “No, not since the night we got here.”

Neil felt heat rise at that memory, but the concern overruled it. “I haven’t either.”

Now Jeremy was the one frowning as he realized what Neil was getting at. “You think she’s hiding something or just not in the mood? We’ve all been pretty busy.”

“I’m not sure, and I’m out again after lunch, so I can’t watch her.”

“I can.” Jeremy finished rinsing. “I will.”

Neil got a rag wet. “I know it’s only been a little over a week and being pregnant has to screw with things, but it isn’t normal for her. You know?”

“Yeah.” Now that it had been pointed out, Jeremy agreed. Samantha’s sexual appetite was new to them, but it had been voracious from the instant they’d started having contact. For her to go cold turkey wasn’t normal. “I can try to talk to her about it.”

“That’ll go well.” Neil snorted. “Let me know when you plan to do it so I can be there to sew you up.”

Jeremy snickered. “Okay, I’ll let you know if I spot anything we should be worried over.”

Neil hoped that would be enough. He already knew Samantha wasn’t going to want to talk about anything that might be wrong. “Do you think she’d talk to someone else? Like maybe Cynthia?”

Jeremy considered it. “They have gotten close. Maybe.”

“I might mention it to her before I leave.” Neil soaped up. “You’ll have to deal with the fallout if Samantha figures out it came from us.”

“Yeah, but it’s worth it to make sure she’s okay.”

“I agree. I’ll do that when I’m finished here.”

Jeremy didn't tell Neil that he'd seen Cynthia stomping toward the gates, where the next teams were getting set to leave for the day's labor out of camp. The reporter wasn't happy. Jeremy was almost certain it was because Conner was working with them. He wasn't supposed to have that information, but he'd overheard Samantha and Cynthia complaining about it. Jeremy wasn't happy about the arrangement either, but he trusted Angela. If she thought the boy deserved a second chance, then he did.

Jeremy's thoughts went to Adrian; he drew a mental line. That criminal didn't deserve to be let back in and Angela needed to be careful about using him, even from a distance. If people thought she was conspiring with a traitor, she would lose control and that would be bad for everyone. Angela was a gifted leader. Safe Haven wouldn't be the same without her.

Neil's thoughts stayed on Samantha. He'd noticed more things off about her, other than the lack of sex and the weaker body language, but he was hesitant to explore them. Samantha had spent a lot of time in the west, on foot and in compounds that had been contaminated with radiation. Neil was terrified that she was one of the members trying to hide a disease diagnosis.

### 3

"He'll have another nasty scar." The doctor subtly kept Kyle between himself and Jennifer. "Nothing else wrong with him."

"See?" Kyle gestured. "I told you we didn't need to come in."

Jennifer didn't rise to the bait. She'd insisted the doctor give Kyle a complete checkup and though neither man had been happy about it, she'd gotten her way.

"Your turn?"

Jennifer scowled; the doctor shook his head.

"I have a lot of work today."

"I'm spending the day with my sons after this."

Kyle grinned at both of them. "Cowards."

The doctor couldn't deny it, but Jennifer slapped Kyle on the arm. "Stop it. You know he's scared of me."

"With good reason. You're a vicious killer." Kyle had meant it as a joke, but both of them wincing made him take it to the next level. "I mean, we all know how terrified the babies and animals are of you."

Jennifer recognized the joke, but the doctor took it as an insult.

"I'm not scared of her. I just don't like it when people get special treatment."

Jennifer laughed, unable to help it. "Yeah, special."

Kyle loved the sound of her laughter. "I think so."

Drawn into their bond against his will, the doctor was forced to accept that the teenager also had a soft side. She was gentle with Kyle and with her daughter, who the doctor had double checked for signs of abuse.

"You'll never find any!" Jennifer was instantly angered at the mental accusation. "I'm capable of love and kindness. That may not be true of you!" Jennifer left the medical tent, slamming the flap in a vain effort to express her outrage.

Kyle sighed. "You've gotta stop doing that. People here are tired of being prejudged."

The doctor didn't respond. He was busy trying to soothe his guilt for hurting Jennifer's feelings. *She shouldn't have been in my mind. I hate that!*

Kyle followed Jennifer, pulling his shirt on over the thick scar that should still be a gaping wound capable of taking his life. Kindle had done fast, amazing work. Kyle knew that was part of the reason Jennifer had insisted on the checkup. She didn't trust Kindle.

"No, I don't." Jennifer let go of her anger at the doctor in favor of her anger at Kindle. "She's going to keep messing around with Marc and we'll get the order to remove her. I don't want that to happen."

Kyle didn't say Adrian would be the one to get that order. "We need to help her adjust and find someone other than the traitor."

Jennifer glanced at Kyle. "You have to forgive him sometime, you know. He's not going anywhere."

"I won't. Ever."

Jennifer thought in time Kyle might be able to understand why Adrian had made those choices, but she agreed with the sentiment. What Adrian had done was awful and it had hurt his men more than anyone else. Those in his army had been believers.

"The puppy is almost trained and ready to come home with us." Kyle neatly switched the topic. "Next couple of weeks."

"Nice! I haven't played with him in a while."

Safe Haven animals were now put through a training program before being handed over to an owner, and the owners had to know the methods and continue them. Angela had added it to Adrian's program not long after they'd had

their dog uprising. So far, the few dogs here hadn't shown any signs of following their fellow canines, but the Eagles were watching for it. Jennifer was going to the weekly training lessons, where she often scanned the animals as well.

"Can I bother you for a minute?"

Kyle and Jennifer rotated to find Sheila behind them. The former slave from Cesar's camp had chosen to remain with the camp for Angela's war and she'd been keeping her head down since then.

"What?!" Jennifer had little forgiveness for any of them.

Sheila flushed, hesitating.

Jennifer turned away. Reading her mind had barely taken an instant. "No, I won't." After finding Lilly with her baby, Jennifer had no sympathy. "My forgiveness isn't for sale, so keep your offers."

Kyle caught up to Jennifer, but he didn't give her the expected lecture on forgiveness. He had his own demons to fight in that area.

## 4

Tonya spotted her target and beelined for the mess before she could lose her nerve. Dealing with other people was hard for her sometimes. Tonya dropped onto the bench across from Peggy, smiling. "I have something for you."

Peggy, who was watching for Doug, frowned. "What?"

Tonya slid a large baggie over, glad she'd thought to put it in a sack first.

Peggy realized it was the next batch for the cancer drinks and allowed a small bit of approval to come through. “I’ll take care of it. Thank you.”

“Welcome.” Tonya lingered instead of leaving right away like she had been doing.

Peggy frowned. “You all right?”

“I need to ask you for something.”

“What?” Peggy couldn’t think of anything Tonya would ask for that was over the line now. Things had changed.

“I’d like your help birthing my baby.”

“You what?” Peggy repeated distractedly. She’d caught sight of Doug’s big shoulders coming through the line with his tray.

“You’re nice and I know you plan to help some of the other women here.” Tonya shuddered. “I won’t go to the new guy. He creeps me out.”

“Creeps you out,” Peggy repeated. “Got it.”

“Yes, and I could even do a couple of your shifts, if you feel like teaching me.”

Peggy wanted the woman gone. “Sure, fine.”

“Thanks!” Tonya beamed, standing up. “Kenn was right about asking you. You are nice.”

Before Tonya could add anything else, Peggy lunged from the table and stabbed Doug in the arm.

“Son of a...!”

Startled, Tonya quickly backed out of the mess and fled for the pharmacy.

“There you are.”

Tonya jumped, spinning to discover Samantha waiting by the shaded corner of the pharmacy tent. None of her helpful

rookies were here yet. Tonya tried not to appear nervous as she opened the tent and stepped behind the makeshift counter. “What do you need? We’ve got a fresh supply of baby wipes now, and toilet paper, but only one per person.”

“I need something that you have to keep your mouth shut about.” Samantha had accepted Tonya on the team because the redhead could hold her own. It didn’t mean she liked her.

“Fine, as long as it doesn’t break the rules.”

Samantha blinked, not used to Tonya being upstanding. She also wasn’t used to the short hair. “I need you to tell Neil and Jeremy that I came in for the wipes.”

“Okay.” Tonya handed her the thin package. “And what am I really giving you?”

“Something to keep me from starting each day by puking.”

Tonya’s quick mind added it up. “You’re having trouble and you haven’t told them?”

Samantha came further into the tent, trying to appear menacing. “No, and you’re not going to either!”

Tonya chuckled, not scared of Samantha. “I will, if you don’t convince me you have a good reason.” Tonya began digging through her bins. “I’ve got what you need, but take it easy on them. Studies hadn’t determined long term effects on a fetus.”

Samantha was surprised again at how professional Tonya sounded. “Did you have experience at this before?”

Tonya shrugged. “Not legally.”

Samantha took the bottle. “I’m sick and the doctor can’t do anything. He wouldn’t even give me something to calm my stomach. Said it was a waste of supplies since I’m gonna die anyway.”

“Sick with what?” Tonya forced out through the shock.

Samantha leaned in and revealed her misery. “Cancer, John said.”

“Oh, shit. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.” Samantha shrugged. “But I’m going to have these babies and you can help me with that.”

“I will. I’ll do some reading when I get time and see if there’s anything else we can do.”

Tonya’s quick offer to help eased Samantha’s mind about coming to her. She lingered, waiting for her shift time to roll around. As she hung around, she realized Tonya had a calming effect on people. Her customers left happy, with what they came for, and her trade requests were reasonable. Tonya had become friendly, open. It was a good half hour for Samantha, who needed to believe in miracles. No one thought cancer was beatable, but no one had thought Tonya capable of this level of reform either.

Samantha slipped out as the next customers came in for Advil and wipes. Tonya had beaten the odds and now had an entirely new life. Samantha was certain she could do the same.

“Hey!” Cynthia had her kit in hand. “Ready for another fun day?”

“Yep.” Samantha grinned. “If we give Candy one of Li’s egg rolls, she’ll get gas again...”

The women laughed at the memory. They were still snickering as they began loading their gear onto the horses the animal crew had ready for them. They were a few miles from home and they needed to conserve fuel, but Samantha didn’t think she could take another ride down the mountain on a jostling horse. She glanced over at the team next to them.

Allan's crew was piling into a large van that would return with the supplies from the electric store that Kyle had secured before getting hurt. "You guys feel like helping a lady?"

Cynthia stared in surprise as Samantha bartered a ride for them to the bottom of the hill, arranging for the horses to be tied to the rear and the driver to go slow.

"What's up with that?" Tracy was also surprised. Their first day on horses, Samantha hadn't wanted to get off hers.

"I think she's feeling restless and trying not to let herself get out of control." Cynthia sighed. "Or she's hiding something. I'd rather believe my first guess."

"So would I." Tracy liked Samantha and had deep respect for her. Finding out she was hiding lies, like some of the others here, would be a huge disappointment.

Samantha didn't answer the glances or raised brows as she gestured to the van. "All aboard, ladies." They would discover it at some point, but for now, Samantha didn't want to discuss her future. All she was concerned with was giving birth to two healthy babies. After that, she could worry about herself.

## 5

"I think it's selfish. We don't have to eat meat."

Ray turned to find out who said that and clamped his lips shut as he saw Chris and the rest of Billy's crew entering the gate. The veterinarian was staunch in his beliefs that the animals should be protected, not eaten, but the camp refused to listen. Ray agreed. Meat was a key to life. Vegetables and fruits would keep a person alive, but Ray didn't think they actually satisfied the body. Many of his old friends had tried

those diets, wanting a more natural existence, but the illnesses that had come afterwards had convinced Ray that meat was important.

Chris nodded to Ray as he came through the gate. Ray gave a bob in return, but didn't take his attention from the afternoon surroundings. The refugees in Zone C had discovered missing members and then held a fight to determine who would lead them next. The loser's bodies were currently sprawled outside their area.

Ray was waiting for it to draw the ants. Angela had told them not to remove bodies that nature needed. Ray was hoping seeing the ants dragging off the corpses would settle these new people down. Even the other refugees in Zone A and B were afraid of them. Ray thought it was smart of Angela to separate the wild arrivals from the others. Those two-dozen survivors were trouble.

"I can't believe Chris joined the Eagles. I thought he'd always be the veterinarian." Dale had climbed the first rafter to spend the last minutes of his shift together.

Ray didn't send him away. Many of the other men had their girlfriends here at the end or start of their shifts and Ray was tired of denying Dale the same benefit. "He might do okay." Ray scanned the southern border that ran along the road. The street was busy today, but so far, all of the traffic was Safe Haven crews.

The other Eagles who noticed Dale standing by Ray on the rafter turned away from the couple. They no longer beat the gay men, but ignoring them was common.

Dale's face puckered up. "I hate that. Why do they do that?"

“They don’t like what we do, they don’t agree with it. We’ve talked about this.”

“But why do they even care?”

“Because we’re not hiding it. Do you like being forced to watch something you don’t like?”

Dale frowned. “Why do you always defend them? They’re wrong.”

“This is America, Dale. They have the right to dislike it, as much as we have the right to do it.”

“We were changing that before the war, changing the laws to include us,” Dale reminded his lover. “We could do that again.”

The bell rang for shift change as Ray stared at Dale in disapproval. “Didn’t you learn anything from the war?!” Ray jumped from the rafter as his relief exchanged places.

Dale hurried after him, not sure what he’d done wrong. “Wait!”

Ray did, only because so many people stopped to stare. He didn’t want them to know he and Dale were having an argument. They were already in the gossip too often. They didn’t need to add more fodder.

“I’m sorry for what I said. I’ve learned a lot since it all blew up.”

Ray took a deep breath and gently grasped Dale’s hand. “Listen to me, okay? It’s important.”

Dale nodded eagerly, thrilled with the public display of affection.

“There has to be equal protection for everyone and the line is American. Not gay, not minority, not handicapped, but American. We’re all equal.”

“When there are more of us, that won’t be how things happen,” Dale stated firmly. “I’m not an activist, but even I recognize the opportunity for changing things from the beginning this time. Why wait another two hundred years for equality?”

“Because that’s not equal. That’s us being set aside as something other than American and I won’t allow it.” Ray no longer cared about the listening people around them. “When others come, we’ll make them understand or we’ll drive them out of here. Safe Haven is a paradise and it will decide the laws for the entire country at some point. We’ll help with that—fairly.” Ray let go of Dale’s hand and straightened his shoulders. “And just so you know, the others who come here won’t be my kind. I’m an Eagle, a full member of Safe Haven. They’ll have to try to be *my* kind before I can ever spend time around them.”

“Because of the preconceived notions here.”

“No,” Ray refused to let it go. “I’m not just gay, white, Christian, or any of those other labels. I refuse to be a part of the problem anymore. I’m an American. That’s all I need for my identity and I’d bet survivors in other lands feel the same right about now.”

“Do you think I’m part of the problem?”

Ray sighed. “Maybe a little, but everyone is. We have to try harder to be better people. All that other stuff doesn’t matter. It never did.”

A few of the people going by were giving the two men approving looks. Ray realized that was something everyone had been waiting to hear. Knowing he and Dale had no plans to restart the old politics had given them a new level of

acceptance. “Let’s get some food and spend the day roaming the new tents they’re putting up. I heard one of them is a movie theater.”

Dale returned the eager glance; the couple walked to the mess without feeling the usual sneers of ignorance. It was a nice moment. Ray absorbed it. He was tired of the constant stress. It had been a long nine months since the war and he needed the break that Angela had told them all was coming. Everyone did.

## 6

“Break time! Sniper switch.” Adrian had brought all of his camp with him today. They’d been toiling alongside the women until about noon, when Adrian had pulled the men off work detail and spent time on training. He was covering the guard duty over the women, but his ten other men were now just as sweaty and filthy as the females. He’d put them through basic rookie training today, jumping them faster than he had any of his other teams. As a result, they were exhausted and viewing him with hostile thoughts.

Adrian, also filthy from demonstrations, climbed the nearest telephone pole and signaled Conner down. “Stay away from them.”

Conner intended to. He was still embarrassed about Candy farting on him and making everyone laugh, but he also wanted to make peace with her. The slightly noticeable stomach bump hadn’t changed his interest in her, but it had given him a new respect. She was going to be a mother. Conner had adored his;

it was now harder to view Candy as a sexual object because of that.

Conner slid into the truck they'd pushed aside; glad to be out of the wind. It wasn't cold until the air gusted and then his eyes watered and wouldn't stop.

Conner wiped his face and lay against the seat, ready to snooze until his dad called him for the rest of his shift. Hoping to get half an hour, the teenager shut his lids and let himself relax. He wasn't recovered from saving Jennifer and the others yet. He hadn't ever taken a lifeforce and he wouldn't. His recoveries would be natural and slow.

Steps crunched outside the door.

Conner refused to look. If it was trouble, his dad would yell.

Samantha knocked on the window, not feeling bad when the boy jumped. "Put it down."

Conner cranked the window open, frowning. "What?"

Samantha bent down.

The teenager immediately leaned away. Her unstable emotions were easy to read.

Samantha didn't try to stop him as he dug into her mind.

Conner groaned as he understood what she wanted. "This is what he meant when he said I'd never have any peace."

Sam winced, but didn't reply. She waited for him to decide her fate with a mind flashing through scenes of her death and the effects it might have on Safe Haven.

"You guys are gonna use me up." He was already exhausted.

"I'll get you time with her," Samantha blurted, flushing guiltily. "She doesn't hate you."

Conner had stiffened, considering the offer. He reluctantly shook his head. “It can’t work that way. I’ll help you because it’s the right thing to do.”

Samantha, relieved, smiled at the tired boy. “Thank you.”

Conner shrugged it off. “Can you let me sleep a little now?”

Samantha left him alone. She would make sure he got rest and anything else he needed. She would also try to get Candy to spend a little time with him. Once he saw Candy as a pregnant woman with a nasty attitude, his infatuation would go away and then they might even be able to be in the same camp together.

Samantha had taken Angela’s words to heart about second chances. Conner was young and dumb, an excuse she hadn’t had when she’d made her own huge mistakes. Holding onto a grudge against the son because of the father wasn’t fair. Samantha intended to let it go.

She glared at the sniper above them, face darkened. *But not that one. That’s my line.*

## 7

“I can’t see the lines on this road.” Shane was driving the crew to base. “I didn’t expect the paint to fade so fast.”

“Wow, I didn’t think about it. Only nine months. That’s a riot!” Nathan was one of the kids from Angela’s airfield rescue and young. He often said things that his older companions ignored. The pregnant girl from that same rescue was almost the exact opposite. When she spoke, people listened.

“It got dark fast.” Tommy yawned. They’d spent the day loading the last of the water. All of their crew was ready for a hot shower and sleep. The trucks had been sent ahead while they finished clearing out a small room of vending machine snacks and toiletries. Thanks to Li Sing’s all-day meal packing, they’d been well fed and watered, but none of them had thought to bring painkillers for their sore muscles. They had items in their medical kits, but all of them were reluctant to use those things except in an emergency.

“Hey, is that a light on in that house?”

Everyone peered through the dusty van windows at Nathan’s excited question.

A tremor reached their vicinity at that moment. The road shifted under them, vibrations pounding through the tires, and then the street under them buckled. Shane lost control of the van. It slid with the crumbling pavement, tilting, and then rolled the rest of the way down the cliff.

The van came to a stop upside down, with dust and glass billowing from the impact.

The rumbling didn’t last long. As it faded, the door to the house opened and a small group of people rushed out with torches and guns.

## 8

Shawn shifted his Colt to a better position so he could lean against the cold cliff. It felt good on his spine. Shawn was on duty outside the Eagle training area and though the tremor had brought a few people from their tents and the cave, things had

already quieted down. Marc and Zack were making rounds and Angela hadn't even come from her tent.

*We're getting used to the new environment.* Shawn scanned the far perimeter. The snipers would be on full alert right now, as all the Eagles were, but Shawn didn't expect problems. Even the refugees in Zone C were quiet. Around 3am, the temperature had dropped into the 40s. Everyone not required to be out here had sought the warmth of shelters.

Shawn was enjoying it. He had long underwear under his thicker Eagle clothes, and the only part of him that even felt the cold was his face. He had the mask in his pocket that all of them had found in their gear yesterday, but he wasn't planning to use it. He didn't like how it limited his vision.

A movement nearby drew Shawn's attention; he quietly ducked into the deeper shadows of the cliff to remain undetected. Someone had come from the large tent area. He could have assumed he or she had permission of the guard on that vicinity, but he didn't. As cold as it was, those two sentries might have gone into the station tent to get warm and missed it.

The person was wearing a long dress and tall boots. Shawn carefully followed as she took the path toward the front row of tents. Those were all secured at this time at night. Anyone needing items from them had to talk to the man on point—Marc—who had the keys. Stock inside the tents was crated and padlocked each evening.

The woman paused near the pharmacy tent, and then kept going down the lane. She took a left at the end, toward the new activity tents that Kenn had been working on all day.

Shawn found Logan in the station tent and waved to get his attention. When the man realized there was a problem, Shawn used the Eagle hand code to give instructions. He told the man to stay where he was and act as if he hadn't witnessed anything.

Curious, Logan did as he was told, trying not to glance at the woman about to vanish into the garden area. There wasn't a guard in there yet since it was still under construction.

Shawn waited for the woman to get out of sight and then gestured for Logan to alert the others on duty. Shawn advanced on quick, quiet feet, drawing his Colt as he entered the darkness. He flipped on his Surefire light and found the woman cowering along the wall next to the bags of seed. "Don't move!"

Tara cringed, hands coming up. "I'm sorry. Don't shoot!"

Shawn eased closer, sweeping her for weapons. Her hands were empty, face flushed. "What are you doing here?"

Tara stood up, trying to smile. "Getting a moment alone with you."

Shawn stared in surprised confusion. "Excuse me?"

Tara took a step toward him, shielding her eyes from his light. "I know what she told you, about us. Can we talk?"

"You snuck out so I would follow you here?"

Tara flashed a brighter smile. "Sorry. I didn't mean for you to think I was doing something wrong."

Shawn indicated the coming guards. "They won't believe that. Neither do I."

Realizing she was in trouble, Tara paled. "Hey, wait. I didn't do anything wrong."

Shawn felt her fear. He believed her, despite his words. “Tell them you got lost. If they hear the truth, I’ll never live it down.”

Tara nodded quickly, coming over to take his arm. Sparks flew at the contact. “I am sorry. Please don’t be mad.”

Shawn couldn’t feel anything but attraction. He led her from the darkness with a curt gesture to the waiting Eagles. “It’s okay. She just got lost.”

The other Eagles, who had been dealing with that same reply since they arrived, chuckled and returned to their posts. The layout would be better when it was finished. The signs were already painted and waiting for the structures to be in place.

Shawn holstered his Colt and led Tara toward the tents, conscious of how it felt to have a woman on his arm. Aware of his distraction, Shawn gestured for a rookie—Joseph—to take his post.

Tara allowed their bodies to brush as they walked, giggling when Shawn stumbled.

Shawn tried harder not to trip over his own feet. He’d had a quick moment with Leslie right after she’d first joined Safe Haven, but he could hardly remember it now. Especially with Tara’s perky breast brushing his arm.

The tent guards hurried out to meet them.

Shawn realized the pair was dating. He quickly added a note to his book while Courtney and Howard watched in dismay.

Shawn escorted Tara all the way to her tent, frowning a bit when he saw Missy’s shadow and realized Tara had left the girl alone to come find him. *Not good. She’ll need the*

*parenting classes Angela wants drafted.* “I’ll have evening mess without my friends tomorrow. You can join me and we’ll talk.”

“In front of everyone?”

Shawn nodded. “I don’t sneak around for anyone.”

Tara flushed, taking her arm from his. “Maybe I shouldn’t either!” She ducked into the tent without giving him time to respond.

Shawn stared at the zipping flap. “What did I say?”

He heard Tara’s snort, but she didn’t speak and he left. He had no idea what he’d done wrong.

The guards were concerned with the punishment that would come; they remained outside the hut, not chatting and flirting as they’d been doing earlier. The boss wouldn’t be happy when she found out they had let someone get by unnoticed.

As Shawn returned to his post, he found more movement where there shouldn’t have been any. He hit his radio. “Breach in the training area!”

Eagles and lights flooded the area. Shawn stayed where he was as a man was dragged violently from the training tent.

Marc appeared seconds later and jerked the man up by his shirt to find out who it was.

Darian grimaced, blood dripping from his lip. “I got lost.”

Marc gave the man a harsh shake. “Well, you’re found now. Come on. We have the brig ready. Kenn finished it today.”

Shawn watched the man be taken to their new jail, full of new worry and guilt. Tara hadn’t received that type of treatment. *Is she worthy of my protection?*

He didn't have an answer to that and he vowed to get one.  
If she was bad, he didn't want her.

## Chapter Sixteen

# I'm Everywhere



### 1

**A**drian slipped into his site by jumping from the ledge above. The neat move required good timing and a certain level of physical fitness. It was encouraging to him after all the time he'd spent feeling weak and he enjoyed a moment of pride.

“Where have you been?”

Conner's voice in the darkness was unexpected. Adrian slipped as he spun, landing on his ass in the damp dirt.

Conner couldn't keep from snickering, but he knew to retreat. Making fun of Adrian while in range wasn't smart.

Adrian sighed, picking himself up. *That's what I get for being proud of my skills.*

Conner's chuckles continued, sending a flush over Adrian's cheeks, but he controlled the urge to strike out. It was often funny when someone fell. He wouldn't punish the boy for being human.

Adrian took his shirt off and tossed it over a nearby branch to scrub later. He used the dew on the foliage around them to clean his hands, then headed for his tent.

Conner followed, observing eagerly. Almost all of his survival knowledge had come firsthand, after careful trips into the Little Rock Public Library. His mother hadn't been allowed to teach him things that weren't approved.

Adrian was zipping his jacket over a black turtleneck when Conner peered into the tent. He noticed the missing dog tags, but didn't comment on it. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"No." Adrian slid his gun into its holster. "But you can answer mine. Why did you agree to heal Samantha?"

"How do you know that?"

"Because she didn't shoot you or try to remove your limbs." Adrian thought of Jeremy's Jeepster. "Samantha has a quick fuse."

"How did you know she's sick or that she asked me?"

"She was on John's list of positive tests, and there isn't anything else she would want from you."

Conner let that sink in. His father was smart. He would have a lot to teach.

"Yes, I will. To people who are worthy."

"What do you want from me? I'm trying!"

"Yes, you are."

“But?” Conner frowned as Adrian began gathering things into a kit.

“Unless you prove yourself, those women won’t ever trust you.”

“So?”

“So, they hold your fate, boy. When they go to Angela and tell her that you’re reformed, she can let you back inside those gates.”

“How do I become *reformed*?” Conner asked sullenly, saying the word as if it were a disease.

“Start by telling me why you agreed to help Samantha.”

“Selfish reasons.” Conner moved to let Adrian through the flap. “Same goal.”

“The methods matter.” Adrian went toward their small center fire. “Do you like her, as a person? Do you like her men? Do you feel bad for her children?”

“That one!” Conner exclaimed, choice of words proclaiming his youth and inexperience. “I do feel bad for the kids.”

“Good.” Adrian lightly kicked the heels of soldiers—some already awake, some not. “It doesn’t excuse using her to get in, but it does show that you’re not totally corrupt. A descendant who has gone bad will slaughter children to attain their goals.”

“I’d never do that.”

“We know you can feel compassion for kids. What else?”

Conner concentrated. “Um... I care about a few people in there, like Charlie and maybe even Becky.”

“Why haven’t you tried to make contact with them?”

“It’s against the rules.”

Adrian sensed the evasion. “You’re scared.”

“Yeah.” Conner flushed unhappily. “What if they tell me to get lost?”

“Becky probably will.” Adrian shrugged. “She’s been through a lot. I’m not sure forgiveness is big on her list.”

“Charlie will too. He likes the good, the right. He might even tell on me.”

“There’s always a chance. But what is life without risk?” Adrian motioned to the soldiers using Eagle code and was pleased when all of them understood and started getting ready for the daily duties he’d given them. They’d clearly been practicing. Adrian sent good vibes to wash over the dozen men. “Excellent.”

Conner also felt the pleasure, but didn’t get to enjoy it, since he hadn’t been the intended target. It was disappointing and motivating at the same time. “I’ll try harder.”

Adrian smiled at his son. “I know and you’ll succeed if you remember to put yourself last in every way, even in your thoughts. The correct solutions are always easier to reach when you remove yourself from the picture.”

The soldiers began leaving.

“Hey, are they headed down to the site?”

“Yes, but you’re not. You’re with me today.”

Conner wanted to protest not being told, but the only thing he wanted in the world more than time around Candy, was time with his dad. “Okay.”

“We need to make a supply run. On the way, we’ll be hunting and doing recon. And I’ll give you a few ways to keep up your energy. Our gifts can be depleted if we use them up too quickly.”

Conner ran to get his own kit. He didn't have much in it right now.

"We'll eat on the road." Adrian kicked dirt over the smoldering embers of the fire. "Check your gun."

Conner was used to this part of a descendant's life. Adrian was pleased with the smooth motions. "Good. Let's go."

Kindle came through the trees. "Mind if I tag along?"  
Conner's face tightened.

Adrian lifted a brow. "You're on second shift. Have you slept?"

"A little. I'm good for a couple hours and then you can send me back."

Adrian glanced at Conner. "Next time."

Kindle had expected it after overhearing Adrian's last words. "Okay. Maybe I can sleep in your bed. Mine certainly isn't cutting it."

Adrian grinned, ignoring Conner's blush. "In roughly fifteen hours, I'll join you."

Kindle didn't tell him she would be on duty then.

Adrian led Conner down the mountain by means of a side path he'd discovered. He didn't want to get close to Zone C right now. None of those people were happy.

## 2

"Someone came in our gate last night!"

"We want to report a killing!"

Kenn didn't leave his place on the gate. The rookies were getting a taste of a shift here; Kenn already hated it. He used

the speaker that echoed into all of the quarantine zones. “The boss will handle it. Stay calm and tell us what happened.”

“Someone came in and killed two of our biggest men!”

“We want justice!”

“We want inside your gates!”

Angela shook her head. “Tell them my decision.”

Kenn hit the button again. “Word just came down, folks. Those people in Zone C will not be let into Safe Haven. Please take your things and leave.”

Shouts and horrible insults began flying. Kenn was glad they had another hour until it was time to open their gates.

“Open it now.” Angela had a tripled patrol here right now if she included all the rookies. She wasn’t worried about any of the troublemakers getting inside. She didn’t honestly want to kill them in front of her camp either, but if they didn’t leave, that’s exactly what would happen.

Hoping to forestall it, Angela climbed to the second tier of rafters and let her eyes glow that dangerous red.

The witch surrounded her with protection.

Angela let the bubble around herself be seen. She didn’t want to start her day with murder, but none of those people would be allowed in here.

Around the main gates, the other zone people came from their tents to glare and mutter.

“We ain’t leavin’!”

“Come out and make us!”

Angela denied the Eagles who would have responded to the challenge. “We have plans in place for this.”

Angela signaled Jennifer.

Jennifer whistled toward the far edge of their circular site, where the ants had set up their colony in the secondary cave. People stopped what they were doing to gawk as a long line of soldier ants scurried from their cave and rushed toward the zones.

Instead of going through the crowd, the insects were able to run along the cliff to get to the zone. The people there began screaming as the ants overwhelmed the opening gate. Being used like farm dogs, the ants herded the people from the zone instead of attacking them. A few of the men refused to be driven out and the soldier ants did kill those, using their powerful jaws to clamp down on tender throats after the men were covered and forced to their knees. It was ugly for those in the other zones.

Angela motioned to Kenn. “Explain this to them.”

“Like anyone could do that,” Kenn muttered, but he dutifully hit his radio. “Those people refused to leave and they threatened us. We will not tolerate that. Follow the rules. If we tell you to leave, then leave.”

The mutters calmed a bit. Kenn looked at Angela. “We’re not doing this to the other people, are we?”

Angela shook her head, though she wasn’t positive about all of the four dozen people they had split among the other zones. “We won’t have to.”

Kenn didn’t like the answer, but he didn’t argue. Angela was capable of determining who was good and who was bad, a needed skill during any time, but one that was especially useful now. *Unlike my own gifts.* His were innate and usually not visible to other people, even descendants.

“Why?”

Zone C people shouted as they got away from the insects and went down the hill.

“Why can’t we come in?”

“Tell us why! We can change.”

Angela stepped carefully around Kenn and hit the button. “You have a killer among you and I can’t tell who it is. You don’t care, you won’t share, and you burned the Safe Haven rules without even reading them. You conspired to take over my settlement as soon as you’re inside. You’ve plotted the death of each man on this gate, and because I don’t *like* you!”

Angela’s voice had increased as she listed their offenses.

For a full minute, there was silence. As she waited, she rubbed the deep scar that occasionally ached. She could still feel the wolf’s teeth against her skin, hot and hungry. It made her wince as the screams and shouts resumed.

The radio crackled. “Boss, there’s a call for you.”

Angela left the gate without giving any instructions. If the people didn’t go, the ants would continue to flush them down the mountain. Kenn was about to think of the crews waiting there and get on the radio to make calls. Her men were caring and sharing, and they would survive. Most of the camp was signing up for the classes or the Eagles. Weeding through that list had been harder than she’d expected. Self-respect was returning to her entire camp; there was no way she would let in new disruptions without a good reason.

### 3

Seth and Becky stayed on the rafters of the main gate, both ready to offer assistance. Angela’s instructions had said to be

helpful to the Eagles in whatever way they were needed. So far, it had simply been giving other guards short breaks, but the people from Zone C were unhappy. Most of them had fled down the road, but a few were attempting to get by the ants and regain the safety of the gated area. The guards had little sympathy for them. If Angela said they were bad, then they were.

“You okay?” Seth came to where she was standing. Her gaze was on Adrian’s site. Seth wondered what she was thinking.

“Sure. You?”

Seth heard the forced cheer. “Can we talk?”

“Not if you’re about to ask me to resign from the Eagles, and then go hide in a tent or cave until the baby comes.”

That’s exactly what he’d been about to do, but Seth wasn’t going to admit it. He used his backup topic. “Actually, I was wondering how you feel about moving into the caves. Theo almost has them ready for everyone.”

Becky considered the idea, liking that topic much better than the one she’d been chewing on. Her mind had been whispering of Adrian’s betrayal and the woman sleeping with him. “Maybe. I don’t think I’ll have an issue with it.”

“I might... It’s like being buried.”

Becky winced at the reminder of their last battles for Angela. Things had worked out in the end, but those moments had been terrifying. “I understand. I’m okay with topside.”

Seth smiled. “You want to catch the movie when they get the theater tent open?”

“Yes, please.” Becky blushed. They could be alone in the dark.

Seth liked the sparks, but he returned to his post before either of them could get too distracted. He'd lost his team, except for Tommy, and Jeff had left Safe Haven with Kevin. Distractions were usually welcome. He hated thinking about his missing men.

Becky also returned to her musings, wondering if Kindle realized how much the Eagles were starting to dislike her for keeping company with Adrian.

"She knows." Cynthia was walking by the gate. "She doesn't care."

Becky realized her mind was open and forced herself not to bring down the wall. She didn't need people studying her more than they already were.

Cynthia kept going, busy handling things for the boss. She knew Becky's thoughts weren't all together, but she understood why. Time would remove the sting from the wounds she'd suffered and Seth's love would heal her heart. They had to be patient.

Cynthia continued on to the path that led to the cave entrance. Large tents with bathrooms and Eagle stations covered the site. Cynthia took note of the progress. Angela would ask.

She spotted Jeremy coming from the large gathering tent halfway down the path and detoured that way. "Got your next run."

Jeremy took the paper and skimmed it. "Sure, we can do that. When?"

"Tonight, after mess." Cynthia wrote it in her book. "She said to call for the vet if you find anything alive at the fish

farm next door. Have him run tests and if it's bad, destroy it to keep other people from eating it and getting sick."

"Sounds good." Jeremy was happy to be sent out on another gathering run. Anything was preferable to going inside that cave.

Neil came from the stone entrance and spotted them. Jeremy motioned him over. They hadn't been working together, but they would be now. "Boss has new orders. You guys have a run."

Both men glanced at Cynthia, trying to judge if this was a good time to talk to her, but she was clearly busy.

Neil read the orders. "Cool. You've already got the fine print?"

"Yep."

Cynthia left as Jeremy filled Neil in. She was hoping to be finished and in the mess or her tent before the copies of her newspaper came out. She would stand by every word, but she didn't expect it to go over well. The truth hardly ever did.

"Do you have a minute?"

Cynthia stopped to let Daryl catch up with her. They hadn't seen much of each other during the last week.

Daryl took a risk and gave her a hug.

Surprised, Cynthia hugged him back.

Their small spat was easily forgotten as they held on.

Cynthia sighed. "Nice."

Daryl placed a kiss on top of her head. "I missed you."

Cynthia didn't want to tell him she'd been too busy to miss him. "Me too."

Daryl took it the good way and he stepped back reluctantly. "Free for a meal?"

“Not until evening mess. I still have a list right now.”

Daryl understood she needed to go and waved her off. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Mood improved, Cynthia continued her rounds.

Daryl was also soothed a bit. She’d ignored him for days; he’d expected that to go badly. He also expected their talk during mess to be ugly, but it had to happen. If she was in love with Adrian, like many of the women here had been until recently, then he would have to bow out. If her heart was free and clear, Daryl wanted a commitment.

#### 4

“You can ask for more.” Angela tried to send warmth into the radio. “We’d be happy to send anything you need. You’ve helped our men. We owe you.”

“No shit?”

Angela grinned. “No shit.”

Around her, there were shared expressions of relief. Angela could have demanded their men be returned or simply gone in and grabbed them. Rewarding their rescuers was a much better solution, and doing it over the open waves would encourage others to defend Safe Haven people instead of attacking them.

“You can bring whatever you want, but we voted and we don’t want more than we need,” the voice replied firmly. “Your men are safe with us.”

“Thank you,” Angela answered. “Please give my radioman the location in code and we’ll send a team out immediately. They will not hurt you.”

“We trust Safe Haven. You took out the government.”

“Yes, we did. And we’ll help you in any way we can. Expect a van.” Angela gestured for Kenn to finish the call and headed toward the main activity tents. They’d placed their brig in the center so members and guards could be responsible for them. Marc was there now, dealing with Darian.

Angela wasn’t anxious to join them. She detoured into an activity tent, where groups of Eagles were enjoying a break.

The men spotted her coming and stopped their games and conversations, sensing she wasn’t there to goof off.

Angela went to Joseph, pleased to see he was being treated like any other rookie. Getting minorities into Safe Haven programs was a key to future peace. Everyone, of all races, had to feel the same pride, have the same goal of survival. No one could be set above the others. Angela didn’t have a full solution for that yet. Because of their gifts, descendants would always be viewed as superior. In a few generations, when everyone had descendant blood, she hoped those perceptions would fade. “But I’m not counting on it.”

“On me saying yes to whatever you want?” Joseph had gotten tense the instant she’d locked onto him.

“I’m sorry,” Angela replied distractedly. “I’m in my own mind. That had nothing to do with you.”

Known for telling the harsh truth, Joseph didn’t doubt her. If it had been aimed at him, she would have told him why.

“I did come here to ask you for something. If you agree, you’ll be going with Marc.”

“Doing what?” Other than the highest levels, no one worked *with* Marc anymore. He was the XO. Everyone worked for him.

“Did you hear the call that came in?”

Joseph nodded. All of them had. “Eagles keep their radios on.”

“I’d like you to go with Marc to collect our men. You’ll help provide security where needed.”

“And the real reason I’m being sent?” he asked snidely.

“I want you to get the people thinking about Safe Haven. They’ll be much happier here.”

Joseph wasn’t sure what to say at first. His race was being used. *Should I be offended?*

Angela frowned. “No. I didn’t ask you to do a dirty deed in a dark alley. I’m asking you to help save more of *our* people.”

Joseph liked the answer and he was able to agree. “Okay. Marc’ll tell me what he wants from me?”

“Yes, I will.” Marc was in the tent flap. It hadn’t been hard to figure out what Angela would do for this situation. “Be ready after mess.”

Joseph gave the popular answer. “You know it.”

Angela scanned the tent. “As you were.”

The men chuckled.

Angela favored Joseph with an approving nod she knew he felt. The bald professor had adjusted a lot since coming to Safe Haven. He was a good man. Angela wanted everyone to know that. His notions were about to be challenged. If he handled it correctly, his respect here would increase and they would have a new group of refugees. If he couldn’t handle the truth, Adrian’s dream of blending blacks in through Joseph might be lost. It was going to be up to Marc to know when to step in and when to move aside.

“I’ll handle it.” Marc followed her from the tent. “You’re positive he’s the one?”

“No.”

Marc understood why minorities needed to be a larger part of their population and agreed wholeheartedly with Safe Haven attempting it. In a hundred years, race wars would sweep the country again and this time, there wouldn’t be laws of society to guide people through it. If they could encourage everyone to get along now, there was a chance that future wouldn’t happen. Safe Haven held a lot of power to influence the future. Marc approved of Angela using it on this.

Before he could completely distract her, Angela lifted a brow. “What do you think about Darian?”

Marc chuckled. “And I thought I got away with it.”

Angela smirked and waited for the report on his interrogation.

“Show or tell?” Marc asked suggestively.

“Just tell, please.”

“He is Dari’s twin brother. He wants to know why she was killed. He’s gonna keep snooping until he gets the truth or a bullet.”

Amusement gone now, Angela frowned. “Your recommendation?”

“Show him. He’s not like the others from Devine’s group. I was a little surprised to discover that.”

“Did you have to get rough?” She needed to know what to expect for the next time she saw Darian.

“No. He opened right up. Gave me a nice image of their town.”

“Pine Bank?”

“Yes. They have more power than we do.”

“Quality over quantity. You know that.”

Reminded of his ulterior motive, Marc leered. “Yeah, baby.”

Angela blushed prettily.

Marc kissed her.

Kindle came through the tents in time to witness it and she froze, pain filling her heart. She’d slept with Adrian and it had been amazing, but she would trade him for Marc in an instant.

Angela caught the thought and glowered at Kindle with crimson orbs.

Marc felt the waves of coldness and sighed. “She’s not going to change. I was wrong to bring her here.”

Angela’s sense of duty warred with her jealousy. She shook her head, tone scathing. “Give the *princess* a little more time. If she doesn’t snap out of it, I’ll handle her.”

Angela’s voice carried. Kindle blanched, realizing she’d created a scene. She spun in the opposite direction, struggling not to cry. *I hate it here! I want Luke.*

Angela’s anger faded at Kindle’s misery. “She’s lost. You’re like the man she killed and she’s having a hard time separating her grief from the attraction.”

“What should I do?” It was uncomfortable. He’d never been one to enjoy being fawned over by multiple females, but this was even worse because Angie’s patience was running out.

“You’ve already tried to pass her around the Eagles. And screwing Adrian didn’t fix her. Maybe you should give it a try.”

Marc gaped.

Angela burst out laughing.

Realizing she was joking, Marc gave an exaggerated sigh of relief. “I’d do a lot for my country, honey, but that’s askin’ a bit much.”

Angela lifted a brow. “Sex is a bit much?”

“Trying to stay hard while wondering when you’re going to stab me.”

Angela burst out laughing.

Marc enjoyed it. She didn’t smile nearly enough.

Angela caught the next thought and smiled again, this time seductively. “I’ve got half an hour if you do.”

“We could take over a shower.” Marc leaned in, voice dropping into a sensual snare. “I haven’t had my mouth on you in weeks.”

Angela blushed down to the roots of her hair. “Yeah, um. That would be fine. Lovely.”

Marc snickered and steered them toward their tent for changes of clothes. He was supposed to go to bed now, but the hot, dreamy feel of her under his arm was enough to send fresh adrenalin through his system. *I’ll sleep when I’m dead.*

## 5

Early evening came over the mountains with all the grace of a hippo, splattering shadows and resentments along the stone as the survivors gathered for their meal. Aware of the tension around her that was cutting though the rattle of paper, Angela chose to read the rest of the short edition first. The newspaper was Cynthia’s first, and only four pages long.

Angela skipped the headline article and moved onto the information at the bottom of page 2.

### **Settlement and Contest Updates**

63% ready to transfer into the cave.

75% of materials gathered.

57% of building, installing infrastructure complete.

Top gathering teams: Shane—37% Billy—38%.

Top building team: Theo.

It only took a moment to scan the numbers and Angela continued on to page 3, where she had provided a number of Do and Don't items for the reporter. Distracted, Angela skimmed the advice to boil the water two minutes longer, test expired goods by smelling, feeding animals before people, and the stand-by of never leaving without a radio and gun. It was standard information newer people would require.

Angela dropped to the bottom of page 3, to the short list of obituaries. Her heart clenched. *I should have been able to save them.*

Around Angela's table, mutters and scowls were being directed her way. Lost in her guilt over the deaths, she didn't react.

Angela forced herself to go to the final page, where Safe Haven's rules and code of conduct were printed. Below them were brief instructions on how to handle crime. Angela sighed. There was nothing left to put off the interview she had given.

Angela flipped the paper to the first page and tried to read it like a camp member, so she could determine their reactions. So far, there were only odd glares and mutters. She'd waited

until the paper was released to send Marc out of camp, just in case. After so many of the people not voting for her, she couldn't take the chance on assuming she was safe.

### **Safe Haven Settlement: Too good to be true? by Reporter Cynthia Quest**

I recently sat down with the Boss and asked her some of the hard questions I've heard people whispering since we arrived in these stunning mountains. The following is a copy of the conversation, but I warn you now—it is not comforting.

**Cynthia:** I'll start with the questions I've heard most. Are we finally safe? Can we stay here?

**Angela:** For a while, but nothing lasts forever.

**Cynthia:** Does that mean you've foreseen something else coming?

**Angela:** That's hard to answer. I see many things, but the choices people make can change them by the minute. Nothing is carved in stone.

**Cynthia:** So there is something coming, but it's not certain that we'll be hit by it?

**Angela:** Good guess. Yes, that's close enough.

**Cynthia:** Why haven't you told everyone?

**Angela:** Why should I panic them when I'm not sure it will disturb us?

**Cynthia:** Okay. How long before you are sure?

**Angela:** The next couple weeks will tell.

**Cynthia:** Weeks? That's all we'll get here?

**Angela:** If things go badly, yes.

**Cynthia:** What can we do to stop it from happening?

**Angela:** Nothing that I've found yet. It's not a Safe Haven problem. It's another apocalypse side effect.

**Cynthia:** Can I interview you again in two weeks?

**Angela:** Of course, but when I know, I'll make plans to ensure our safety and then put them into motion. You'll know.

**Cynthia:** Where do you think we can try to settle down and build those lives, if not here?

**Angela:** South, so far. I'm still searching, but if I had to pick right now, I'd take us to a small island in the south and keep us there until this country has revived itself.

**Cynthia:** People won't like hearing that. They want to stay here.

**Angela:** I'm doing everything I can to make that happen.

**Cynthia:** Will it be enough?

Angela turned the page to finish the article, feeling a chill in the air that had little to do with the weather. The camp had been hoping for better news.

**Angela:** Ask me again in two weeks.

**Cynthia:** I will. Another whisper I hear a lot is about how secretive you are. It reminds people of Adrian.

**Angela:** I've been stabbed, shot, abducted, drugged, and many other awful things. How can I run this camp and keep people alive if I'm always fighting off would-be assassins? And how can I stop that if everyone knows my plans and schedule? Secrets are necessary right now. We still have powerful enemies.

**Cynthia:** That's the final topic I'd like to discuss. Will Jack Devine's people come here to avenge him?

**Angela:** Probably, but they can't beat the power here.

**Cynthia:** You're certain?

**Angela:** Yes.

**Cynthia:** And if they come?

**Angela:** The Eagles have it covered. We won't allow our people to be harmed, but I have no plans to send teams out to attack this other group. We'll have to learn to get along.

**Cynthia:** The men who came here don't want to get along. I think they should be eliminated.

**Angela:** Personally, so do I, but Safe Haven stands for the good, the light. We have rules and laws here, and we'll abide by them. Unless we're attacked, we will not engage the strangers. They have as much right to live as we do.

**Cynthia:** Have you foreseen them coming? Is that the trouble?

**Angela:** That is not the possible problem, but considering the luck we've had with nature, the apocalypse, and strangers, it wouldn't surprise me for all of it to come at the same time. *If* that future happens. As I said, the choices people make determine what happens. As long as everyone does their job, and they remember to abide by our code of conduct, we might be able to stay here for a lot longer.

**Cynthia:** Well, we'll all be hoping for the best.

**Angela:** So will I, and I'm doing all that I can to give our people time here. In a few days, the cave will be ready for our official moving in. We're so much stronger now. I take hope from that.

**Cynthia:** Okay. Thank you for the interview. Is there anything you'd like to add?

**Angela:** Yes. Please remind people that discussing the abilities and skills of the people here will make them a target, both in and outside of our gates.

**Cynthia:** I will.

### **Reporter's final thought**

As you can see, safety is a matter of perception and, in my opinion, not to be counted on. We were led here under false pretenses by Adrian, and now we have to blindly follow his powerful, secretive successor. That's a lot of trust for these times.”

“You okay?” Marc took the seat next to her. He swept the mess with a hard expression, but found only sullenness.

“Yes.” She admired his full Eagle gear. He was sexy, but most of the time, he didn’t even seem to know it. He also looked tired, but he would get to sleep while Billy drove. Daryl would cover point tonight.

“They’re taking it well.” Marc nodded his thanks to Li Sing as the man came out with a plate.

“Better than I expected.” She enjoyed his heat. Soon, they would use the rolled up flaps to enclose their main areas for warmth. “Have you read it?”

“From thoughts.”

Aware that he was having his crew eat before they left, Angela passed him the paper. “Here. I have a couple meetings.”

“Thanks.” Marc glanced up from the headline to see Jennifer, baby in her arms, threading her way toward them through the crowded mess. “Good meetings?”

“Mostly.”

Marc didn’t care for the sound of that. He skimmed the paper instead of allowing it to pull him into a place where he might miss trouble.

“How’s that beautiful little girl?” Angela cooed, unable to help it. Babies were sweet.

“Grouchy.” Jennifer slid the baby into Angela’s surprised arms. “Can you hold her while I get a tray?”

“Sure.” Angela stared down at the nine-week-old baby. It was an instant reminder of her unborn child and the danger that surrounded her. It was also a painful flash of the child she’d lost.

Autumn’s lids opened gradually, brought out of her nap by different arms holding her.

Angela tried to force those bad thoughts away. Autumn didn’t need to know about death yet.

*I already do, the child answered mentally. People think of another baby when they hold me. Can you tell me why?*

Angela blanched. *When you’re older.* It felt surreal to send that to a newborn, but Autumn was typical of all descendants. Their minds weren’t hampered by age, only their bodies.

*That’s what mommy said. Then she cried.*

Angela held the baby to her for a hug-type clutch, and refused to think of anything except resting. After a long moment, Autumn’s young body relaxed in sleep and Angela was grateful.

“Now we know why Jennifer needed a break.” Marc had caught the quick conversation. He hated the truth that Autumn would have to be told one day.

Angela stared at Marc in horror.

He placed a hand on hers. “We’ll all be here for her. And, for ours.”

Angela nodded shakily. The newest vision of the future had been frightening. In it, there were babies who could think and adults who couldn’t.

“We won’t let that happen.”

“No, we won’t.” Angela gently placed the baby back into her mother’s arms after Jennifer sat the tray on the table and took a seat. “They get one life; we’ll make sure it’s full and happy.” Angela glanced over at a small group of soldiers entering the mess. “Watch this.”

Marc did, wondering why the men were marching eagerly toward the table where Kenn and Tonya were sitting snuggled together. The couple was clearly on a dating meal. It was sweet.

“Hey, there, Red!”

“Good to see you again.”

Tonya smiled uneasily at the four men, suddenly realizing she should have told Kenn about that part of her mission. “You guys settling in?”

“Oh, yeah.” Captain Boothe grinned at her as all of the men sat down. “Safe Haven is great.”

“Yeah, man.” Corporal James speared a potato wedge to dip in ketchup. “Steady food, hot water, and even enough females for sex! Great place.”

Tonya grimaced.

Kenn flashed a scowl at the loud words. People across the mess were twisting to stare at their table.

“Well, we’re glad you like it here.” Tonya tried to cut off the coming disaster. “Kenn, let’s go and have that—”

“Oh, yeah, Red. We didn’t expect things to be so, well, free. I mean, most places wouldn’t be okay with one chick for two guys, but the Ghost doesn’t have trouble with it.”

Kenn froze, replaying the man’s words.

Across the mess, conversations ceased.

“Seems like one chick for two guys is a common setup.” Boothe held his bread around the loaded hamburger. “That’s great, considering there ain’t enough women to go around.”

Tonya nearly choked as Kenn’s fork clattered to the tray.

“No, it’s okay, man.” Boothe smiled. “We know you and Ghost got this one. No worries.”

Kenn was turning red.

Tonya tried to slide under the table so she could vanish.  
*This is bad.*

Kenn’s hand on her arm stopped her exit. “Whoa there, big momma.”

Tonya froze.

“So, how does it work, man?” James didn’t realize there was a problem.

“Yeah, can we pick one or do they pick us?” Boothe gestured at Tonya. “How did you and the Ghost handle things?”

Angela’s snickers were floating toward them, but not fast enough to cool him off. Kenn glowered at Tonya as he let go of her arm. “You’ve got some explaining to do.”

Finally realizing something was wrong, the four soldiers fell silent. The entire mess got to listen to Tonya.

She cleared her throat. “I, uh, had orders. I followed them.”

Kenn's head swiveled to where Angela and Marc were sitting, both snickering. "What kind of orders, woman?!"

"She said she was there to negotiate with the base commander. Told us she was the Ghost's mistress." James snorted. "Man, did we help her then!"

"Yeah, I'll bet you did," Kenn drawled in an icy tone that spoke of violence coming.

"It wasn't like that. Marc has always been nice to me and sure, he's fantastic to look at, but I..." Flustered, Tonya realized she was making it worse.

"Son of a bitch!" Kenn glared at Marc. "Angie and Kendle weren't enough—you had to have Tonya! Where the hell do you even find the time for all these women?"

Marc, feeling fantastic after making Angie moan his name twice, grinned widely and shrugged. "I'm the Ghost, dude. I'm everywhere."

## 6

"What do you think about her?"

Jennifer stopped to scan the mess, where Tara and Shawn had joined the food line and created fresh gossip.

Kyle waited patiently, feeling happy with her arm linked through his as they did rounds. While Marc was gone and Angela was sleeping, Jennifer was Daryl's XO as he covered point.

"She's closed off. And the boss told me directly to—" Jennifer snapped her mouth shut, realizing she'd made a mistake.

“To leave her alone?” Kyle had received that same order from Adrian, many times.

“Yes.” Jennifer relaxed. She could trust Kyle. “Angela has something planned with her, I think.”

“Matching her up with Shawn?”

“That’s certainly what she thinks.” Jennifer shrugged. “But I’m not sure he likes her much.”

Kyle wasn’t sure why. Tara was attractive, and obviously able to have kids. She had a job here and she’d been cleared by the boss. She had all the basics of a good Eagle mate.

Jennifer frowned. “Do I?”

Kyle chuckled. “No. You’re top grade. She’ll have to work her way up to your level.”

Pleased, Jennifer beamed at him.

Kyle refused to let her dazing ability freeze him this time. “You’re beautiful.”

Jennifer blushed. “Thanks.”

Kyle kept them moving, aware of the sparks running up his arm from the innocent contact of her hand on his skin. Their intimate moments were burnt into his brain and they reared up at any tiny provocation to sear him with need.

Jennifer tightened her grip on his hand. “We can sleep together.”

Kyle knew she meant actual sleep, but that didn’t stop his pulse from increasing. Despite wanting her desperately, Kyle planned to take his time claiming her. Sleeping together meant an entire shift of feeling her warm, young body pressed tightly to his. “Whatever you want.”

“I want you to work on your promise.” Jennifer spun toward the gate to do a check there before she got completely

distracted. She knew Daryl and the Eagles had things covered, but she'd been given an important role today and she wasn't going to mess it up.

Kyle followed slowly, mind spinning. She kept pushing him, saying she wanted another baby, and he had no problem believing that. However, he also knew Autumn was young enough that Jennifer didn't need to get pregnant again right away. Would she settle for the pleasure side of that, without the pregnancy attempts? He wasn't sure how to broach the subject with her and had chosen not to. He would stick to his plans of slowly bringing them together to ensure her good feelings for him didn't change. When he took her all the way to being his woman, he would make the final choice then. As far as he knew, that was a long time off.

Jennifer spun around to glower at him with crimson eyes.

Kyle sighed. "Okay, baby. Okay."

Mollified, Jennifer returned to her rounds.

Kyle headed for the mess, wishing Neil or Marc was here for him to talk to.

Jennifer gave a short wave to the three Indian men who were escorting the ants. Three times a day the insects came to the mess for the scraps. Angela had assigned Marc's Indian buddies to the chore of making certain there were no problems between ants and people. There hadn't been any so far. Jennifer didn't expect any. The ants were useful and the people here now knew that.

The trio of new men nodded to her respectfully. The tallest man sent her a tiny, hopeful smile that said he was interested in her.

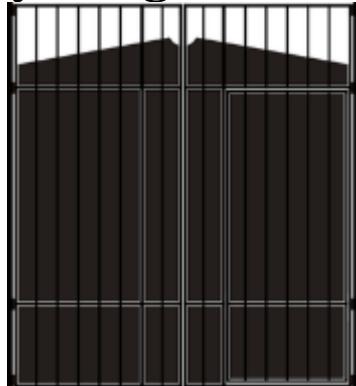
Jennifer's stomach twisted; the clammy feel of fear came over her skin. She hurried toward the gate. Kyle was the only man who didn't draw that reaction from her. The males here were mostly kind and patient, and even handsome, but Kyle was the only one she could trust.

Safe Haven's engines echoed as Neil's crew rolled through the gates. They were headed north—a direction that hadn't gone well for any of their teams so far. "Good luck, gentlemen."

The rock salt was already needed, but in a few weeks, it would be the difference between getting off this mountain for runs and being stuck here until a thaw came. Winter in places like this came months before the rest of the country saw it, though Jennifer was certain that had also changed. Between the war and Yellowstone blowing, there was little doubt about what type of winter they could expect. The only unknown was how long it would last. Jennifer hadn't worked up the courage to survey that far ahead. However, she was positive that Angela had. *That woman is a walking crystal ball.*

## Chapter Seventeen

# Everything You Expect



### 1

“Did you talk to the doctor?” Neil joined Jeremy as the gates clanged shut behind their truck. They’d chosen to leave at an odd hour to arrive near dawn. Their watches glowed the 2am hour brightly in the dark cab.

“Yes. If you want to call it that. He told me to mind my own business.”

“Same here. And we didn’t get to talk to Cynthia alone.”

“We’ll handle it as soon as we get home.” Jeremy grunted. “For now, let’s get ready for the north. You know what Angela said about these runs.”

“Yeah, and none of them have exactly gone smooth. You got the map?”

“Right here.” Jeremy held it up.

They were both distracted from further talk by the sight of a pathetic shadow wearily trudging up the road toward them. In the darkness, all they could see was a thin man who couldn’t stop coughing.

“You wanna?”

“Yeah.”

Neil pulled over to the man and rolled his window down.  
“You okay?”

The man coughed harshly and spat, before nodding.  
“Almost there, I think.”

“Headed to Safe Haven?” Jeremy picked out runny eyes and a red nose.

“Yes.” The man coughed again.

Neil got on the radio. “Another Yellowstone refugee is coming to the gate. Can you send someone?” They had a full load of men, with no room to run the new refugee to the top of the road themselves.

“Copy that.”

Neil gave the new man a sympathetic look. “They’ll come get you and the doctor will check you out.”

“Thank you.” The man wheezed, pulling a thin jacket tighter around his lean frame.

Neil frowned. “Been on the road a long time?”

“Weeks.” The man delivered a weak smile. “Name’s Jayson.”

“Neil. We’ve got to go now, but it won’t be long before someone rolls down for you.”

“No problem.” Jayson stepped back. He coughed again, bringing up phlegm that he quickly spat toward the trees. “Sorry.”

“We understand.” Jeremy felt bad for all the refugees who’d breathed in the ash. Most of them would die, according to their doctors. Jeremy thought it might be true of Jayson. As they pulled away, Jeremy hit the mike. “Looks sick, base. Someone wake up the doctor.”

“Copy.”

Neil and Jeremy studied the man in their mirrors as they rolled down the hill, not speaking until he faded from their view.

Neil could feel Jeremy stewing on it. “Let it go.”

Jeremy sighed. “I can’t, man. I’ve been trying, but each time we have people like that come in, the truth comes out.”

“That Adrian got us out of that zone so we didn’t die? I don’t buy it. He didn’t know, and even if he did, it doesn’t excuse his betrayals.”

“No. It doesn’t.” *But we wouldn’t be alive if he hadn’t.*

Neither man spoke the thought, but it stayed on their minds as they rolled away.

## 2

Daryl helped to open the gate; he didn’t bat a lash when an extra person exited and headed in the opposite direction of the ride Neil had called for. Daryl didn’t watch the person disappear into the tree line by Adrian’s camp, and he didn’t put it in the report after securing the gate.

Samantha had a pass from the boss, though neither of the women wanted anyone to know about it. Daryl didn't care. That was a problem belonging to Neil and Jeremy. Daryl's issue was currently asleep since he'd had to take point for Marc and miss their planned meal together. Whatever Angela and Samantha had going on with Adrian might even be a blessing. Daryl was scared that at some time, Adrian would remember who had gotten Cynthia pregnant and want to be a father. It was something he wouldn't be able to handle. He wasn't Neil or Jeremy. He was a one-woman man and he needed his mate to be the same.

"Off duty soon, big boy?"

Daryl grimaced as his flesh responded to the usual mating call. He'd been servicing the older women almost since arriving. They liked his pleasing nature and he liked pussy—of any size and shape. It had worked out well. Until now.

Daryl turned around to view the large woman in the shadows of the gate, her eyes wide and shining with need. His body, as always, was willing, but his heart flat-out refused. He sighed unhappily. "I can't. I'm sorry."

The woman shrugged calmly. "I wasn't sure. Had to try."

Daryl gave Hilda a soft smile. "Would you like a recommendation?"

Hilda gave a curt nod. She wasn't in love with Daryl by any means, but she had enjoyed their moments together.

"Billy."

Her expression revived and the twinkle returned. "Would he? I'm not his usual type."

Daryl thought of the private conversations he'd had with the driver. "He loves the female body—all shapes and sizes."

“Like you?”

Daryl blushed a bit. “Sounds like it.”

Hilda stared at him as she slowly retreated. “Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure.” Daryl’s voice dropped into the low growl that she enjoyed. “And *yours*, I believe.”

Hilda giggled like a schoolgirl, hand over her mouth as she vanished. The respect of the moment left them both in peace, instead of in pieces.

### 3

“If I’m going to do this now, you have to let me take it from here.” Kyle was tense as he and Jennifer entered the tent at the end of their shift. “We go at *my* speed.”

“Just so long as we’re going, Mr. Reece.”

Kyle grinned, kneeling down to untie his boots. “No worries.”

Jennifer followed her normal routine for the end of a shift, removing the dirty clothes down to her bra and underwear. She didn’t pause in the stripping, but she heard Kyle gasp and saw his shadow on the wall freeze.

Kyle drew in air and forced his fingers to untie the second boot. He was glad their tent was out of sight behind the new wall dividing the guard station.

Jennifer slid into a long robe and sank down gratefully in the folding chair. She picked up the mug she’d brought from the mess, smiling in relief.

Kyle stared at her in longing, wanting her so bad he ached. He wanted to take her into his arms and hold her until she felt like that from contact with him.

“Is that possible?” She stifled a yawn.

“Very.” He also followed his normal routine, stripping down to his boxers. They usually did this part separately, or she would keep her eyes shut as he disrobed and slid into the bed. This time, she watched every move he made. Her cheeks stayed bright red, but she didn’t look away, even when he adjusted for growing flesh.

“I always wondered what your knees looked like.”

Kyle chortled, taking a t-shirt from his kit. He wasn’t ready to be in that bed with her. The t-shirt was a large one that he found comfortable, and it covered him enough to let Kyle relax under her wide gaze. At some point, they would be naked with each other and it wouldn’t matter, but right now, her bare feet and ankles were making his pulse race. Kyle increased heat on the small heater and sat down on the bed.  
“Smoking bother you?”

Jennifer shook her head. “I like the smell.”

He usually left the tent, but Peggy was keeping Autumn and he needed the nerve calmer before they went any further than being half naked around each other.

“I’m sorry that I’m rushing you.”

“It’s okay.” Kyle puffed to get the cheroot lit. “I understand, as much as I can.”

There was a peaceful silence where they stole glances at each other and wondered what came next.

Jennifer didn’t want to concede on her demands, but she was curious. “If I hadn’t flipped over losing the baby, how would you have handled it?”

Kyle was surprised by the question, and by how she'd worded it. He tried to answer more carefully. "I would love you, Jen."

"Meaning...my pleasure?"

Kyle's mouth dried up. "It matters to me more than I can say. In fact..." He hesitated, not positive that she was ready to hear it.

"What?"

"I don't think I want this any other way."

Jennifer stared at him in shock. "What?"

"I need it together, for us. I've used women and not cared. I've also loved women with my body and it was nice. I didn't care one way or the other, but now..." He hesitated again, uneasy.

"Please?" Jennifer could have read it, but he needed to say it and sometimes, hearing it meant more.

"I dream about pleasing you, baby," he groaned roughly. "Not taking you or claiming you, but making you cry my name in the best pleasure you've ever felt. I need you to love me too, Jenny, and sex isn't that big a deal. Making you feel good, making you happy that you picked me—that is a big deal."

"You know that's not what I want."

Kyle couldn't let it pass this time. "No. You were hurt. It was used against you like a weapon. You only know one side of it, so how can you make that choice?"

"Because I'm terrified." She sighed. "If you can make me feel that way, I'll be a slave—like I was before."

"Other way around, I think." Kyle blew out thick smoke. "You're so brave. You're so young. You've been trained to accept a man's touch so you don't get hurt, but it's not

supposed to be that way. One day, you'll trust me enough to let me show you."

"And until then?"

"We'll do what you want. I won't ever push you on sex, but when *you* push me on it, this will come up."

"Why does it matter to you? Tell the truth."

"Because you're mine. And I can't be yours until his ghost is gone."

"Can you do that?" she demanded suddenly. "Can you make him leave me alone?"

Kyle hated the tears spilling down her pale cheeks, but he knew they were necessary. "In time, yes, I can. But not your way. With your way, you end up hating me as much as him, because I'm never going to be satisfied with your surrender, Jenny. I need you, all of you, and if I can't have that, I won't ever be happy."

"And neither will I. It would kill me to think I've made you unhappy after all you've done for me."

"I feel the same way."

Jennifer wiped at her tears, loathing the Mexican man for the mental suffering that she suspected would never give her any peace.

Instinctively knowing what she needed right now, Kyle slowly slid over and tugged on her arm. "Come here."

Jennifer gratefully curled up on his lap and bawled like an infant.

Angela had paused in the shadows behind the tent, listening and approving. She continued toward the main gate now, confident that Kyle was making real progress with

Jennifer. The teenager was in a rough period of growing up, where everything was confusing about men and sex. Her abuse would have to be addressed each time the side effects popped up.

Angela slid deeper into the predawn darkness as Samantha reentered camp, obviously much improved. The spring in her step said Conner had been able to push the disease back. Angela was glad.

Hidden from view of everyone except her personal shadow, Wade, Angela leaned against the mountain and lit a stale smoke. They were almost out of the nasty things and she didn't plan to go searching for more. Adrian had been right when he said they didn't need to worry about drug use because it would eventually run out. He'd been more concerned about alcohol, which was easily produced.

As Samantha entered camp, Kindle exited, now off duty. Angela felt the man meeting Kindle before he came from the trees that lined his small site. He wore no shirt. The exotic tattoos over his thick arms and body cried out to be caressed.

Adrian ignored Kindle as she stopped in front of him. The island woman didn't exist for him, only Angela did. He couldn't see her, but he knew she was near. He scanned, hoping she was outside the bubble, but he couldn't find her.

Kindle hadn't gotten over the last snub from a man. Her rage exploded. She swung with all her strength and punched Adrian.

Not expecting it, he fell on his ass and sprawled in surprise at her feet.

Kindle waited for his reaction, able to hear Angela's laughter in her mind.

Adrian also felt Angela's amusement, but it was a bitter sensation that he had to glean from Kendle's wary mind.

Adrian glanced up, rubbing his jaw. "Now you're acting like her."

Both females winced.

Adrian picked himself up and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I'll be right behind you."

Kendle went quickly, surprised at herself. She'd just initiated rough sex. Was she nuts?

*No, just angry and horny*, she realized, stripping her Eagle jacket as she entered his chilly tent. *Safe Haven brings that out in me.*

Adrian stayed still, staring at the gate shadows where he would have picked to lurk. He hadn't seen her in weeks, hadn't heard her voice even in his mind. It was torture. "I'm doing everything you expect and more. Please don't forget about me."

The sentries on the gate had been smirking, but as Adrian continued to stare in longing, their smiles became scowls.

Not wanting word to get to Marc, Adrian slowly turned away. Kendle was expecting a fight, but he didn't have it in him—not for her. There was only one woman on the planet that he would battle over now and she was currently crying. He could feel the sadness. It was clear enough to make him realize the bubble couldn't stop their emotions from reaching out.

Angela waited until she had herself under control and then stayed longer, smoking and studying the road that led to her mostly sleeping camp. While she waited, Seth and Becky left in a black van. A bit later, gathering crews began to roll in and out to start another day. A while after that, as dawn had begun

to illuminate a stunning mountain view, the sound of multiple engines echoed.

Angela headed for the gate. This was what she'd come for. Anger filled her—rage that had little to do with traitors and their mistresses. She strode to the guards determinedly. “New orders, gentlemen. Pay attention.”

## 4

“Doctor Brooke to the main gate.”

Angela waited as her men directed the newest group of refugees into Zone A. They were the survivors of the Cholera people. She wasn't concerned over them. She did need to be positive they weren't carrying anything before she let them in, but the group of twelve seemed normal for these times. The other man who had come in last night, Jayson, was also in Zone A. His symptoms were from ash exposure; he had a calm, kind, pathetic air. He had told the sentries that he lost his family recently to strangers and didn't think he would make it far if Safe Haven wouldn't let him join. After their recent suicide, the Eagles were sympathetic. The gate guards had marked him as a Yellowstone refugee and put him in Zone A.

*Another lesson to learn,* Angela mourned silently as the doctor rushed toward the gate with his medical bag.

“We're checking them out.” Ray waved from his post above them. “Give us a few more minutes to set up a perimeter and then you can go out, since they're asking for you.”

The doctor pushed his chest out. “Young man, there is enough security here to make me think I'm in a prison. Secure

your perimeter while I work.” The doctor shoved by Simon, who was operating the latch today, and opened the gate himself.

The Eagle team guiding the refugees into their gated pen were surprised when the doctor hurried by them to greet the group of people, but they didn’t stop him. Their orders were to cage the people and get back inside so Angela could scan them as they settled in. She and Jennifer liked to evaluate people unobserved, providing a more valuable profile.

The team finished putting the people into Zone A, locked that gate, and then hurried to the safety of home.

“Damn!” Simon scowled. “We had a jam and had to send for a new weapon. We’re not ready to go out there yet.”

“He’s fine.” Ray was also frowning. “And he’s locked in. We’ll cover the perimeter and then escort him back in. Just don’t forget to report the violation.”

Angela nodded to Simon’s raised brow.

The men went on with their usual procedures for new arrivals needing medical care.

“Hey!”

Angela felt that now unwelcome shield of battle fall over the entire area as the guards spotted their huge mistake.

“I’ve got your doctor!”

The man in the center of Zone A, using the innocent group as a shield, was one of the Zone C survivors who had fled. He now had the whimpering doctor in a tight grip under one arm, and a handgun waving from the other.

“You gotta let me in there now!”

“There’s the killer the boss sensed.” Bobby stared angrily from the top ledge. “We have to stop letting these people live!”

The man had obviously come in with the new refugees, blending with a dirty robe that had fallen to the ground in his struggle with the doctor.

“Agreed.” Angela hated the fear hitting her in waves from Zone A. This moment wouldn’t last long, but none of the new people would ever forget it.

“I’ll count to ten and these gates better all open!” the lunatic shouted, staying behind cowering women and men. The group was armed, but they feared if they accidentally shot the doctor instead of the madman, they would be sent on their way or even killed by the Eagles.

“One!”

Angela looked around. “Who wants to play hostage?”

Kenn quickly spoke up. “That’s me.”

“Get to it.” Angela was proud of how far Kenn had come.

“Two!” the man screamed.

Kenn left the safety of their gate, unarmed, and went to the Zone A gate. After unlocking it, he opened it and waited for the next order.

“All right!” The man wrenched the doctor around to be his shield and dragged him toward the zone gate. “You’ll like me in charge, I promise.”

“Please, let me go!” The doctor was no longer struggling.

“Shut up!” The man slammed his gun into the side of the doctor’s face.

*Mistake.* Kenn spotted the next problem coming, but there was little he could do about it.

While the madman was distracted, another man came up behind the killer and stabbed his knife deep into the lunatic’s neck.

The doctor dropped to the ground as the arm around his throat let go. The body covered him as it fell.

Jayson dropped the knife, looking horrified as he staggered back. “I didn’t... I had to help...”

Kenn studied Angela instead of the trees, where four new shadows had appeared.

“Well, that’s unfortunate.” The rest of the exiled Zone C men came from the shadows with their guns aimed at Kenn and Jayson. “For you, of course, not us. Nick was the nicest one of our bunch.”

Kenn sank to his knees and put his hands on top of his head. He knew the routine.

The four invaders surrounded the Marine.

“Open those gates and get that bitch out here,” the leader, Degussa, ordered. “Let her tell me no again!”

“If we see those ants, we’ll shoot him!” another of the men screamed, scanning fearfully.

The doctor scrambled to the gate and banged. “Let me in!”

Angela shook her head at the nervous sentries. “Let this play out.”

“Where was he on the count?” Degussa called. “Ah, yes. Three! Four! Five!”

Jayson slowly edged toward the semi-safety of Zone A, but he was grabbed by one of the scruffy men and shoved down next to Kenn.

“Seven!”

“What’s all the yelling about?”

Every head spun to discover Adrian standing in the tree line with a Saiga shotgun. His expression was furiously cold.

Degussa recognized the threat. “Kill him!”

Adrian opened fire before they could. He hit all four of the standing men without touching Kenn or Jayson. Tactical buckshot did slam into the ground near the other gates though. The people there scurried away in terror.

In the silence that followed, there was a new sound—one of scornful clapping.

“Seeing the great Adrian Mitchel in action is so boring now.”

Adrian turned to witness Vlad and half a dozen enslaved men on horses coming from the same trees where Degussa’s group had been hiding.

“You used to have such flair.” Vlad’s personal shield was glowing hotly as he surveyed the gate. “I’m taking what’s been mine since he slept with my wife. Stand down.” Vlad dismounted and marched toward Adrian with a dart gun.

Angela was aware of the looks being cast her way, of the immediate expectation that she would rescue him. It was flooding over her in waves from both sides of the fence.

Kenn found Angela through the grates. “Boss?”

“You two! Get up and go inside.” Vlad signaled his men to handle it as he approached Adrian.

Adrian lowered the Saiga, sensing a shifting moment in time. Angela’s choice here would seal their fate. If she let Vlad have him, he would be killed as payment for Jack and it would probably happen right now.

“The great Mitchel.” Vlad approached him. “You won’t walk away this time.”

“Boss?” Kenn questioned again, letting Jayson slowly tug him toward the main gate.

Angela winced, holding in rage and desolation. She was listening for more support, but other than the Eagles, there wasn't any. Angela slowly rotated to view her camp, and the dozens of faces now trying to get a look through the gate at the action. *Can we survive without him?*

*You can,* the witch answered tensely. *These people won't. And if I save him now?*

*You can't.*

*I knew. I just had to hear it.* She slowly shook her head at the questioning Eagles.

Kenn saw the gesture and dug his heels in. "Don't do this."

Vlad ignored him, holding a free hand out for Adrian's weapon.

Angela winced again, but said nothing.

Kenn jerked out of Jayson's light grip and glared at the men on the gate. "We don't allow this. We don't allow crime on our doorstep. We are Eagles, god damn it!"

His shout took guards by surprise and sent guilt through them.

"We're supposed to stand for the weak, and to protect those who need help. Where does it say those people have to be worthy first? We either live it, all of it, or we turn into pieces of shit, like these guys."

"Hey!" Vlad glared. "You can't—"

"Oh, shut up!" Kenn snapped. "In a minute, she'll zap your ass like you deserve and I'll go have a beer. So, just. Shut. Up!"

Vlad gaped in complete shock.

Adrian grinned proudly. "That's my XO."

The Eagles were giving Angela hard and uneasy looks now. She shrugged. “He’s a traitor. We know he isn’t worthy. Our men are free and it isn’t happening inside our gates. Someone tell me why I should help him.” *Please! Someone please come through for him here.*

“Because if we change the ideals that Safe Haven was founded on, we won’t have a Safe Haven anymore.” Zack had come at the clicked code over the radio, as had other Eagles and members. “Kenn is right. The person doesn’t have to be worthy. We have laws of conduct to follow and if we don’t, this all falls apart.” Zack looked at Angela. “I say we save him, but we don’t forgive him or let him in. And we’re doing it because it’s happening right here in front of us.”

Angela appeared to consider it. “Is that what all of you think?”

More support came than she had expected. Angela gestured in relief. “Majority rules. Eagles, go clear our front porch.”

Vlad jerked Adrian’s weapon free, but it was too late. Kenn heard Angela’s choice and lunged. He hit Vlad as the shield came up; both men flew to the ground from the impact.

Vlad scrambled to his feet as the gate opened and two dozen men rushed out, firing.

Kenn and Adrian knew not to budge, but Vlad couldn’t employ that option. He tried to fire a quick blast of magic through the hail of lead and still bring his shield back up in time.

Angela sent a minor barrage from the top of the gate she had quickly scaled.

Vlad's shield vibrated dangerously. *She can get through!* He froze, terrified for an instant, and then ran for his horse, forgetting he held a weapon that he could have used against the coming men. He'd always relied on power. The Saiga was foreign in his hand.

The men with him took off as soon as Vlad did, but the Eagles kept shooting. They tried to avoid the human targets in favor of the descendant who was a larger threat. Bullets zipped and pinged off Vlad's weakening shield until they were all out of sight a moment later.

Angela whistled and then waved at the Eagles. "Let's get it cleaned up." She left the gate without ever looking at Adrian.

It went a long way in soothing the people who heard about it later and disagreed with the choice.

Zack followed her. "Should I send a team after them?"

"No." She sighed tiredly. "We'll get another shot."

"But wouldn't it be better to eliminate the problem now?"

"Yes, but we can't. We need our teams working. There'll be time for fighting when the building's done."

"You *bitch!*"

Angela and her escorts rotated as the doctor shoved through the gate and began shouting.

"You wouldn't open it! How dare you!"

Angela slowly walked to the man, giving him time to remind himself who he was shouting at. "The next time an Eagle tells you to wait, that it's not cleared yet, what will you do?"

Doctor Brooke blanched. "I'm not going back out there! Ever."

Angela tried to be sympathetic and bring the rude healer into the fold. “You could join the Eagles. After a while, you won’t feel as scared anymore.”

“Join...” The doctor’s profile iced over. “You can’t brainwash me, lady!” He spun toward the medical camper.

Angela jerked him around with an iron grip that declared her shoulder fully healed. “But I can banish you for not following our rules, for not trying to adapt to our ways, and for being an orally-abusive asshole. Would you like to leave, doctor? I know Marc asked you that, but this is the official question. Should I have the Eagles help you pack?”

“Because I went out of the gate?” He was dazed at the fear washing over him.

“Because you don’t like descendants. I’d like to know why. Maybe we can find common—”

The doctor jerked out of her grip and leaned in close enough to make her guards come forward. “Go to hell.”

Angela chuckled disdainfully. “A giant child who’s scared of everything and terrified at even the idea of trying to change. You’re a coward.”

Exposed, the doctor’s rage flared. He got in her face. “I don’t have to take that! You can’t say that to me!”

Angela made a motion to keep her sentries still while she waited calmly for the doctor to be done.

“I’m not scared of you! I’m not scared of anything!”

Angela slowly raised her hand, ignoring his automatic flinch. She gently cupped his cheek, sending calming waves into his mind. “It’s okay to be scared, Jimmy. We all are. Even me.” Angela lowered her hand as he gaped at her and at the sensations she’d sent. “Please join the Eagles. We need that

fire and you need the training. In three months, you can erase the shame you've been carrying all your life."

His mouth opened... "Your word on it?"

"I've seen it."

"I..." The doctor's shoulders slumped. "I'll think about it." The doctor became aware of the resentful glowers from Eagles that promised payment. "Sorry about screaming at you."

Angela snorted. "Sometimes, I wish more people would. Screams and insults are usually honest." She wiped at her damp cheek. "Then I remember what it feels like." She glared at him, letting him see how pissed she was. "*Don't* make the mistake of doing it again."

Angela left him babbling and went to the target range to pop off a few rounds. "If I go totally corrupt, I'm going to sit on his face until he smothers. Finally have a use for that big mouth."

On her heels, Greg laughed. "Wonder how Marc will feel about that."

Angela grunted. "If Marc had been here for this, we'd be short a doctor right now. Let the Eagles know I have hope for Doc Savage."

"Do you, honestly?"

"Yes." She joined the shooting line. "I have hope for everyone."

"Even Adrian?" Greg insisted, causing silence to fall among those closest to them. "Can he be trusted again or forgiven in time?"

Angela checked her weapon before replying, buying time. It was a question that many of the people were silently asking

each time his name came up. “That’s up to Adrian’s Eagles.” She shoved the 9mm into the holster until it was her turn. “And Safe Haven does offer second chances....”

“But?”

“I’m not sure either of those things are wise. He’s a traitor and no matter what anyone feels about him, that fact won’t ever go away.”

## 5

Kyle and his team lingered outside the main gate as the doctor nervously came out to do the blood tests. Kenn stayed with them, loving the front row action he’d gotten, but missing Adrian. That man was back in his tree line, recovered Saiga dangling, expression unreadable as he watched his highest team joke and chat.

Kyle noticed Kenn’s stare and followed it to where Adrian’s pale eyes waited for a sign of recognition, be it forgiveness or hatred.

Kyle spotted Conner and Kindle in the shadows behind his fallen idol. Disapproval flashed across his profile. Before thinking to consult Angela, he reacted. “You’re either with us or against us. You better make that choice soon or the Eagles will do it for you!”

Kyle turned his back on Kindle’s dismayed expression, ignoring Adrian completely. All the men agreed with him and so did most of the camp. Kindle couldn’t keep living both sides of the line. It was time to choose.

“He’s right.” Adrian went to his tent. “Tell the boss what you need and she’ll set it up.”

Kendle didn't care for sneaking around, but it didn't stop her from following him inside the canvas. He'd been right when he'd said she would crave it, but it wasn't for the pleasure. After he knocked her out, she didn't dream, and that was more valuable to her than all the orgasms in the world.

A radio in the corner crackled to life. "I have an official announcement from the boss, folks. Tomorrow, we relocate into the cave, and everyone earned a reward, because we've really been in it for a week already! We're moving, folks!"

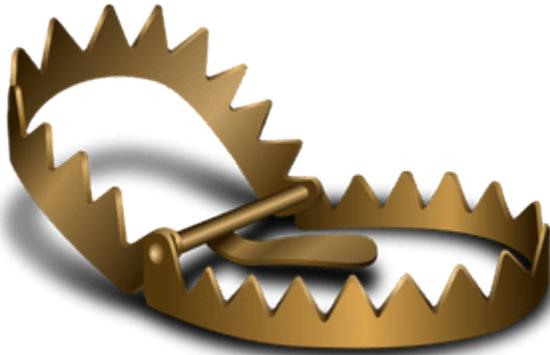
Adrian was ecstatic at the news. "I knew she could do it. Less than two weeks. That's amazing!" He spun around and jerked Kindle into his arms, making her giggle as he twirled them around. He'd been waiting for word to come.

Kendle felt the excitement change to arousal and tilted her mouth up as his lowered. He would pretend she was Angela now, and the pleasure would be incredible.

Inside, the old Kindle shriveled up a little more and continued to bleed.

## Chapter Eighteen

# Lurking



### 1

“**D**amn tremors.” Billy scanned the wreck site. Shane’s vehicle looked like it had rolled down the cliff with them inside it.

“That’s exactly what happened.” Marc keyed the radio. “Safe Haven is on your doorstep, Eagles.” They were parked at the end of the driveway of a small house that held sullenly twinkling red tinsel in the trees around it.

The front door opened immediately following the call. A large group of black men came outside, loosely holding minor weapons like bats and clubs. Marc didn’t see any guns. He wondered how long the group had been here. Since the beginning?

Behind the strangers, the stranded Eagles jogged down the stairs.

“Thanks, man.” Shane greeted Marc as he got out of the van. “We’re okay here, but they don’t have much food. Felt guilty about eating.”

“They don’t have much of anything here,” Tommy explained before Nathan could start prattling.

Marc gestured toward the rear of the van. “Then you’ll like what the boss sent.”

Shane helped carry the cooler of beef and pork to the nervous strangers. Marc followed, observing the peaceful interaction. It was a nice change from the constant fighting.

Joseph stayed with Marc, not sure what to do now that they were here. He hadn’t thought to ask and Marc hadn’t given him any instructions. *I don’t know how to do this. She knew that. Why am I here?*

Billy remained by the driver door as Quinn went with Marc. Fresh from a shift over the snow gathering location, Quinn hadn’t hesitated when Marc asked him to come along as security.

“Oh, shit!” A short teenager standing in front of his mother pointed. “They got blacks!”

His mother quickly shushed him.

Marc grinned. “Kids, huh?”

The woman gave him an uneasy smile in return, sweeping his hard body.

It caused the wide man at her side to twist toward her in surprise. “What just happened here?”

“Where?” the woman asked.

“Here,” the man repeated, scowling. “What happened here, woman?”

“What?”

Marc didn’t know if she was screwing with the man’s mind or not, and hid a snicker. *Women, huh?*

“Was that a crack?” The woman glared at Marc. “You got a problem with women?”

“No, ma’am!” Marc choked out through his surprise. *She’s a descendant!*

“Your boss didn’t tell you.” Brittani shrugged. “I probably wouldn’t have either.”

Marc held out a hand. “I’m—”

“The Ghost.” Brittani shook with him. “We know all about you and your people. We’re fine being neighbors with Safe Haven.”

Joseph felt like he should be doing something. “Any thoughts of being members?”

The woman glanced around her group. “Thoughts of the past might prevent that. You’d have to be convincing.”

“Can we stay and share a meal with you?” Marc pointed at the coolers. “We’ll cook and supply the food.”

The wide man glared at Brittani. “You gonna welcome them personally?”

“We’ll just be talking.” Marc could almost hear Angie snickering at this.

The woman turned to Marc. “Why? You don’t think I’m hot?”

She was, in fact, but Marc only laughed. “The boss is gonna love you, lady. Name your terms while I feed my men.”

She smiled. “Thank you for knowing how it had to go.”

“Thank the boss when we get there. She told me I had to know when to ease off. She didn’t tell me you were willing.”

Brittani chuckled. “Yeah, she said you guys needed the drill, but I can tell you’re tired, so I’m cutting you a break.” She wrapped her arm around the waist of the wide man, who instantly looked mollified. “Come on. Let’s eat and then get moving. Oh, and she said you need to check the alarms on the return trip.”

Marc gaped, both loving and hating how easy this had gone. He saw Joseph had the same expression. Marc shrugged. “She didn’t tell me.”

Joseph wanted to be upset, but it was amusing. He cracked a reluctant grin. “That Brittani’s something, isn’t she?”

Marc went cold, stopping as alarm bells blared. “How do you know her name? She didn’t give it and I haven’t said it.” Marc shoved into Joseph’s mind, digging through weak, hastily erected walls to discover a carefully tended secret. “You’re a descendant!”

Ahead of them, Brittani cackled. She’d spotted it as soon as Joseph got out of the van. She’d known descendants were close by the power she’d felt and the woman was eager to have her people under their full protection in Safe Haven.

## 2

Samantha pointed. “What town is that?”

They were stopped for a quick meal of Li Sing’s burrito wraps. None of them were in a hurry to restart working. Since leaving after this morning’s excitement at the gate, they had cleared thirty-two vehicles. They’d expanded the cleared road

by five miles; all of them were covered in grease and dust. Even the soldiers had taken turns this time. Samantha hadn't argued when they'd insisted. She and her trained girls had taken up the sniper posts and tried to keep their attention off the sweaty men.

"Cleveland, I think," Conner answered when no one else did. "My dad and I went through there a couple days ago. There isn't much left."

"You guys had a different list, I'd bet." Samantha smiled cheerfully. "I want to go through there and then call it a day. Five miles is good. You'll watch our vehicles."

There was a tense silence where the soldiers frowned and the females nodded.

"Good. Pack it up, gear up, and let's roll."

Samantha's words drew reluctant respect. The soldiers followed her orders and then her as she led them toward the town.

"Wait." Conner got their attention. "We shouldn't go in there yet. Let's wait until tomorrow."

The soldiers stared at him, but the females felt a cold chill. They knew that tone, even if the voice was different.

"Why?" Cynthia sneered. "So you can feel like you protected us?"

"I'm too tired to do anything about what I think may be waiting in there." Conner sat down on the hood. "Do whatever you want. I'll watch the vehicles."

He sounded like Adrian. It sent anger through the women.

"I say we go and do it now, while there's still light." Samantha gestured. "Vote on it."

Enough hands rose to get the win. Samantha signaled for them to follow. The mall she could see was half a mile over cracked pavement and a small wooden bridge. If they found anything useful, she planned to send a pair of the soldiers back for their wheels.

Candy and Tracy brought up the rear, not letting the males surround them for this run.

David shrugged when his men looked to him for instructions. "Follow their lead, I guess."

Samantha loved the feeling that gave her, but nervousness was also present, creating an ugly mix in her gut. It was a reminder that she was carrying new lives. She slowed their pace a bit. Conner had been able to heal her completely. She wouldn't waste the gift by getting hurt. He had refused to tell her how it was possible to get rid of the cancer though, and she hadn't insisted once the pain receded.

Samantha motioned her team to get their weapons out, something the soldiers had already done. The group of nine strolled into Cleveland, Georgia an hour before dusk.

Samantha took them straight to the mall that had two stories encased in brick and a huge entrance sign lying across the wide stone steps. It was dark and felt empty. Samantha led them up the stairs calmly. She had scanned the mall and the town all day, as much as she could. She didn't feel any danger, despite Conner's words.

The mall had been looted and there were bodies, but both were light. The group took mags and gear from the corpses. The soldiers realized the skeletons wore uniforms of a foreign nation and stored the information. Adrian had said to get a

complete account of everything that happened today. He'd obviously known Samantha would go exploring.

The setting sun didn't cast much light. Samantha flipped on her belt light, adjusting the angle so the glare off the shiny floors and walls didn't blind her. Those in the rear did the same, allowing them to read the various signs.

*"You are here."*

*"Wheelchair Rentals at the Office."*

*"Radio Shack."*

Samantha headed toward the big red letters. They would check other stores, but if this one held something usable, it would go with them now. Parts for their radios were hard to come by.

Samantha swept the store with her light. There was broken glass, plastic, and papers, but no bodies. She eased through the propped-open door. Forcing her finger to stay off the trigger, Samantha led her group inside and began scavenging.

"We should clear the rooms back here." David took a position near the rear hall.

"Go on." Samantha pried open a metal cabinet. "Everyone else, grab what you can and be ready to leave in ten minutes. I want to be back at the vehicles by dark."

David and two of the men went down the hall together in a neat form that drew Candy's attention. It made her feel safe and a little curious about how they had been trained. Would she be able to achieve that in time?

Samantha opened a drawer of resistors. They came in many sizes that could be soldered onto circuit boards. "We'll have to test these before we install them." Samantha carefully

loaded the packages into her kit. “But there’s a chance some of them will be usable.”

“Won’t all of them?” David frowned. “They’re not even opened and the cabinet isn’t damaged.”

“I don’t know if we’re in an EMP radius from the war. I’m not sure it would affect these anyway, since they’re not connected, but it would suck to install them and then find out they’re dead weight.”

“Good point.” David was starting to like these Safe Haven women. They were smart, they were brave, and they were feisty. It was a powerful combination.

The noises of clinks and thuds echoed across the mall, along with their voices and laughter. It made the soldiers nervous. David was forced to say something. If he didn’t, his men would. “We’re making too much noise and our time is up.” Before she could protest, David picked up her kit and slung it over his shoulder. “Lead us out.”

Samantha stood there for a brief moment, considering, and then she spun toward the door, gesturing to her team.

The women followed her while casting resentful glowers at the men.

David swallowed an apology. The blonde was cool; he didn’t want her pissed. He’d already heard stories about her temper.

Samantha stormed down the stone stairs, hating the fact that he’d been right on both counts. *He didn’t have to handle me like that.*

“Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?”

Samantha paused on the bottom step, not sure if she would accept his apology or not. She certainly felt she was owed one.

“We have orders to get you back to Safe Haven’s gate by dark. I should have told you that when you suggested coming in here.”

“Orders from who?” Samantha asked in a dangerously cold tone.

“Our boss. He said you’re needed at home.”

“You should have told me!” Samantha hurried off. “I owe you!”

“Damn.” David took off after her. “That’s not what I wanted to hear.”

“She means it.” Cynthia flew by to take Samantha’s right.

“Great.” David let himself and his men once again be the filling in the sandwich. “Now they’ll never let me in.”

“You’re living with our enemy,” Candy told him as Samantha increased her pace and a sense of urgency filled the air. “We weren’t going to let you in anyway.”

Before he could reply to that bombshell, David stumbled and fell. Half of his men stopped to wait for him; the rest of the group kept running.

“Stay with the women!” David grunted through the pain. Something was sticking through his leg. He could see both ends of it. He was almost certain it was a dart of some kind.

*Dart? Fuzzy, David tried to focus. Did someone shoot me?*

“Look out!”

“No!”

“Open fire!”

David heard the chaos from a foggy distance, but he couldn’t stop his eyes from shutting. *Help!*

### 3

“We came from Atlanta.” Brittani smiled at Marc while everyone was enjoying the burgers the Eagles had prepared on their personal stoves.

Each Eagle had made two sandwiches from their kits and shared with one of the strangers. Li Sing had told Marc of having a custom like this when new people came to his restaurant and Marc had adapted it. Besides showing there was nothing wrong with the food, it also gave the Eagles a new layer of training. They hardly ever had to use the gear in their kits and that had to change. Marc had spent the time guiding the team through assembling the Emberlit stoves, lighting them, and then cooking the meat. Marc had enjoyed the demonstration.

The new group of men and women had watched in interest and hunger. They’d been cooking over open fires too, but they didn’t have the gear that the Eagles did.

“Atlanta?” Marc frowned, swallowing. “That had to be ugly.”

“It was. My dad and I grabbed the few people we knew we could trust and came out here to our family cabin.”

Marc peered around the neat home, approving. “Nice handmade radio there. You do that?”

Brittani motioned to the wide man she’d been sparring with earlier. “Gus. He usually runs the radio, but when we found out we had Safe Haven people here, I decided to make contact.”

“Wise. And you’ve been here the whole time, listening on the radio to the fighting?”

“Yes.” Brittani didn’t shy away from Marc’s slightly accusing tone. “We’re inner city people. We don’t know how to fight and I don’t know how to train them anymore than I already have.”

“You didn’t want them to be sacrificed in someone else’s war.” Marc read her guilty thoughts. “We won’t hold that against you. A lot of good people didn’t come and fight with us.”

“I didn’t know you.” Brittani shrugged. “And I’ll kill for these people. It didn’t seem like a good time to bring them around.”

“It ain’t now, either, girl,” Gus said in a quick rush.

Brittani’s cold frown gave Marc pause. He observed her intently as she pinned Gus with a nasty glare.

“What did you say, *Boy*? ”

Gus realized he’d tripped a switch. “Nothin’.”

“*Nothing!*” Brittani gestured angrily. “We’ve spent hours and hours on it and you still sound like some ignorant fuck!”

Gus flushed.

Marc grimaced, but he approved of the lesson. In fact, he had hopes that Angela would create a language class soon to help with those already in Safe Haven. Understanding what someone from across the country was saying got hard sometimes.

Sighing, Brittani put a hand on Gus’s big wrist. “I don’t want them to be mean to you.”

Gus smiled a bit. “I know. I’m sorry I embarrass you.”

“Embarrassed,” Brittani repeated automatically. “If you leave off the ‘e d’, then it means you always embarrass me and that’s not true.”

“Embarrassed.”

“Very good.”

“A teacher!” Marc got it then. “You taught English?”

“English, and some history—even the parts I hate. You have a school?”

“We have a tent that we call a school.” These people would be a wonderful addition to Safe Haven. Smart, willing to learn, and hard workers. Marc smiled. *Perfect.*

“Thank you.” Brittani was relieved. “For me being able to come to the same conclusion about you.”

Marc held out a hand. “Welcome to Safe Haven Refugee Camp.”

Brittani shook gratefully. “It’s an honor. And, a relief. I’m not a strong enough leader for this new world.”

Marc didn’t agree, but he didn’t allow himself to consider where this feisty woman might end up after Angela’s evaluations.

Marc looked at Joseph. “Get us packed up.” He started to ask Shane if he needed to do anything here before they left, and found the Eagle gone. Marc sent his grid out and found that Eagle behind the little house. He immediately liked what he saw in Shane’s hands and directed the conversation back to the topic at hand. “Can we send trucks for you tomorrow or is that too soon?”

“Can’t come soon enough,” one of the older women in a rocking chair muttered. “Then she can make those grandbabies she promised.”

Brittani groaned in embarrassment. “Oh, mother! Why do you do that to me? I hate kids.”

The men all snickered.

The old woman flashed a toothless grin at them, indicating she enjoyed her daughter's distress.

"Tomorrow is great for the trucks," Brittani told Marc, casting hard glares at her mother. "We'll try to be ready on time."

"We'll stay and help if you like." Shane was in the doorway now. "Least we can do for your help."

"Fine by me." Brittani looked around. "Objections?"

There weren't any. Marc stood up. "My team will head out now. Call if anything changes."

Brittani and Gus walked them out while the others finished eating. Marc noticed that the woman stayed close to the large man. Bodyguard or husband, Marc wasn't sure, but he did know that anyone who tried to hurt Brittani would have to go through that mountain first.

"Yes, they will." Gus's dark profile glinted with intelligence that Marc hadn't suspected.

Marc laughed with them. "She got me on this trip."

"She's your wife?" Gus was viewing Angela through Marc's glare of adoration.

Marc wasn't sure how Angela would want him to answer at first and then it was as if her voice was in his mind. *Of course, you say yes. I've been yours since we were kids.* "Wife, soul mate, boss. She's everything."

Gus smiled down at Brittani. "Yeah, they get to you that way."

Blushing, she nuzzled his hand in comfort and then pointed toward the house. "Go make sure your brother doesn't open that cooler yet."

When they were alone, Marc stepped over to her so that his men couldn't hear them either, sensing she wanted a quick, private moment.

Brittani leaned toward Marc. "Gus wants to be an Eagle—already. If that happens, tell your boss I'll cause so much trouble that she'll have riots. He isn't leaving my side."

"Why? His size and gifts would make him an incredible addition to any team."

"Because he's not all there. He's like a teenager right now. In a few years, maybe he'll even be an adult, but not if he has to go out and fight. Killing someone will destroy him. He's that pure. I've kept him from being corrupted for the last nine months. You have to do the same."

Marc could feel her dangerous rage flickering in weakening control. "I'll tell her about Gus's mentality. The rest of that, you'll tell her yourself."

"Deal." She chuckled. "Still friends?"

*Cute and playful.* Marc suddenly suspected Gus would have competition for her love whether he wanted it or not.

"No, he won't. I love Gus. He worships me. I'd never disturb that for a quick roll in the hay."

Marc liked her more after hearing that. He held out a hand again. "Until I see you again, watch your six."

Marc and his team pulled away with waves and a good feeling about the people. Shane and his team certainly liked them. Marc wondered if Brittani knew Shane was interested in her. Marc had noticed the vibes, but knowing Shane had replanted a wild rose near the back porch for her had clarified it. Shane was unhappy that Nancy hadn't joined the Eagles and Brittani obviously would. Marc wondered if Shane knew how

desperate he seemed and then decided the man did. It's why he was trying to find a woman and settle down, so he could feel at peace again.

*Good luck with that.*

## 4

Billy took them straight toward camp, stopping when Marc told him to. Their one short break was at the place where Marc had put his alarms down. He was uneasy as he surveyed the location from the passenger seat. He didn't go rushing into a possible trap, but he was curious about what had happened to his alarms.

"You want me to do it?" Billy didn't want Marc to leave the van at all. The hinky feeling had invaded the minute they got here.

"Yes."

It surprised everyone that he would let a man face danger in his place. When Marc got out too, normalcy returned. The pair approached Marc's alarm with extreme caution.

"You've been a driver for years, right?" Marc asked as they spotted a branch over his alarm.

"Two decades. I raced cars as a child."

"What do you make of the tire tracks next to us?"

Billy spotted the faint trail in the mud and knelt down to examine it. "I'd guess it was a bike, something light, and there was one person. Maybe a day ago."

"Keep going." Marc tried to pick up any lingering trail of the person on his mental grid.

“Light on fuel and water...headed southwest, toward Safe Haven.” Billy surveyed the surroundings. “The road’s way over there. Why would anyone *ride* over here?”

“Bingo,” Marc enjoyed his role as teacher. “No one would have known this was here, unless they were watching us.”

“Like right now?” Billy was getting a stronger wave of that hinky feeling.

“Maybe. Maybe not. If it’s one person, they have to sleep sometime. We won’t count on that.” Marc bent down nearby and pulled up a rock. “I left a camera. It was Kindle’s idea. She felt a disturbance in the force while I laid the discs and I used my horse as cover to put it down.” Marc slid the small black camera into his pocket. “It only had enough battery life and room for about 18 hours, but it might tell us who doesn’t want these alarms up.”

“Any persons of interest?” Billy scanned intently as they went back to the van.

“All the usual, but few motives. Watch your six out here on runs. We may have a lurker.”

“Lurker?” Billy frowned as they climbed inside. “Never heard of that.”

Jax scowled. “You saw a lurker?”

“No.” Marc shifted into drive. “But I feel him.”

“Not good, man.” Jax began to scan the stone and weed landscape.

Billy scowled. “What the hell is a lurker?”

Quinn spoke up from the rear seat. “A lurker is a crazy. They’ve been alone too long and gone nuts, but not in the pathetic way. They’re deadly. They wait for you to sleep and slit your throat.”

“To steal your stuff?” Billy had no trouble imagining a long-bearded psycho running around the cliffs in camo with a hatchet.

“They hunt people,” Marc informed the confused driver. “The old world labeled them as predators or serial killers, but these guys are almost worse. They stalk you for days or weeks, and then snatch you and carve you up while you scream. My unit handled a few of them for a security firm we moonlighted with. They like blood and they’re territorial. Safe Haven might have landed right in a lurker grid.”

“Does the boss know yet?” Billy was suddenly sure she would really ground the command people now.

“Not yet, but I want to view this footage first,” Marc took the chip from the camera and slid it into the fully charged camera that he’d brought along for this reason. He’d already planned to stop here before Angela sent him. He hadn’t needed the reminder from her, but that was her sense of fairness. If the Eagles saw she even stayed on his ass, they would adjust to it quicker. “In a few minutes, we’ll know for sure and have a report to give her when we hit the gates.”

Respect for Marc went up.

Billy wondered if the man knew it was because he had just reminded them of Adrian. Both men were a wealth of knowledge and ingenuity. They were also both lethal when riled. Billy pitied the lurker, if there was one. Marc sounded nervous about the possible threat and that meant he wouldn’t stop until it was eliminated.

“You went off mission. And then left a member of your team behind?” Marc was shocked. Samantha’s jeep had been flying toward Safe Haven when they hit the road to home. Marc had waved her over.

“Yes!” Sam was frantic. “We have to get help!”

“I am the help, Samantha.” Marc turned to Justin.

Justin didn’t care about the blame and he told the truth. “David was shot through the ankle and he fell. We didn’t see what happened after that. He told us to stay with the women and they were running away.”

Marc grunted, motioning toward the jeep. “Take me there.”

The trio of vehicles—a van, a jeep, and a small truck, flew over the cleared road and then took Marc all the way to the place where David had fallen. In the darkness, they hadn’t seen anyone else, but arrows had been flying hard and fast.

“Stay in the van.” Marc waved as they arrived. “Billy, with me.”

“Same bike.” Billy pointed as soon as they neared the bloody tracks. “And it’s heavy. The lurker has our man.”

“He’s not our man.” Marc was considering his options. “He’s from Adrian’s group.”

“Does that matter?” Billy didn’t like the idea of leaving anyone to be carved up.

“No, but I’m thinking a trap would be better than a hunting party.”

“Oh, shit!”

“What?”

“I had a bad thought. What if our lurker is a descendant?”

Marc led them toward the van. “I never assumed otherwise. And I think he’s military. Not many people would have known how to disable my alarm. An average person would have just destroyed it.”

“Was it a trap for us? Leaving the camera intact?” Marc hadn’t let anyone in the van watch the video, and none of them had felt comfortable asking him about it.

“I don’t know, but there’s a message for Angela on the video.”

“Why her?”

“She’s the boss. Sometimes, that’s all it takes.”

## 6

David couldn’t take his hands away from his waist. It was an odd way to wake up; he opened his lids slowly against the glare he sensed.

Everything was blurry and upside down. He realized he was hanging from a tree by his ankles. Pain lanced through various parts of his body and then centered in his leg. It continued to grow until he began to groan.

“Hold still!”

David tried to see who it was but the pain increased again. He screamed until the blackness took him.

“You hear that?” Billy was covered in goosebumps.

“They aren’t far.” Marc used his grid but found little. “We’ll come back and track it down. You in?”

“You know it.”

Fed up with being ignored, Samantha slapped the seat. “We’re coming too!”

“We’ll see what the boss has to say about that. But I suggest not using that tone with her.”

Samantha flushed and slumped in the seat. This was all her fault and she wasn’t even going to be able to go along and try to make it right.

“Is it about your honor or the missing man?” Marc pinned her through the mirror with a hard glare. “Cause it matters.”

“Honor. He’s one of Adrian’s men. How could I trust him enough to care if he lives or dies?”

Marc understood that sentiment as much as anyone could. “Stay in camp. Do what the boss says.”

“Why? Because I don’t value life enough?”

“Because you’d only be along to prove you can handle yourself and this time, it could get you killed. Lurkers are not anyone to play around with.”

“I’m a good hunter. You’ll need me.”

Marc didn’t tell her he’d been tracking trash for most of his life, but his tone said she should know it already. “I need you to follow orders. It’s part of the job.”

Samantha gave in then. “Fine.” When Marc used that tone, everyone knew he was finished being sensitive to the person’s feelings and it bothered Samantha to be on the receiving end of it. She much preferred to be the teacher’s pet.

“Don’t we all.” Marc wondered if Angela had known this was coming. She hadn’t acted like it, but that meant little. Still, he didn’t think she would have sent him out blind against someone who was obsessed with killing. That was more like something Adrian would have done. “Take us to the gate.

When we get there, send a message to Angela. Tell her I said if I'm not home by dawn, to send her pet killer.”

Everyone knew he meant Adrian. The mood went from sullen to tense. Marc wouldn't send for Adrian unless he thought there was a chance he could lose whatever fight might be waiting.

Guilt crashed down on Samantha's shoulders. She clamped her lips shut against the pleas that wanted to come out. Marc wasn't the one she needed to beg for permission to go along.

“No, I'm not.” Marc adjusted automatically against the force as Billy rushed them up the mountain in the darkness. “And I'm not waiting for you to talk her into it. Make it up some other way. You're off this run.”

## 7

“Can you repeat that last part?” Shock and anger warred for the top slot in Angela's mind.

“If he's not here by dawn, he said for you to send in your pet killer.” Samantha didn't meet her eyes. Angela had met them at the gate, with Greg and Shawn on her heels.

Angela gestured for them to leave.

The group of women dejectedly trudged toward the showers or mess.

Angela didn't have time for their emotions as she scanned the doors in her mind. She'd never heard of a lurker. She'd sent the witch out for information as soon as she picked it from Samantha's mind. While the witch and Marc went hunting, she

needed to scour the halls and see what new doors might have opened up.

Shawn and Greg waited patiently with her, watching the soldiers hurry into Adrian's site to inform him. The people in Zone A had been viewing the activity with concern after this morning's attack, but they were settling back down now. The other zones were empty.

Minutes passed and then Adrian appeared at the tree line. He signaled to the guards on the gate.

Zack scowled as he glanced at Angela. "Do we give it to him?"

Angela didn't answer.

Shawn did what he thought was best. "Marc asked for him. I say we do—because Marc needs him."

"Damn." Zack gestured at Greg. "She'll be searching for a while. Go get him some wheels and one of the girls."

"Samantha," Angela croaked suddenly. "They need Sam."

The men around her hurried to do as they'd been told.

Angela returned to her searching. She hadn't predicted Marc and Adrian working together in the dark. If she'd gotten a vote beforehand, she would have guessed that Marc would tell Adrian to cover his own people. Marc had known she would want David rescued if possible, but asking for Adrian in the only manner tolerable to him (snidely) meant there was a chance for the two men to eventually co-exist.

*Dreaming again, the witch warned from a distance. The only thing that might come from this is a murder. Two men have never been more at odds in this universe.*

“So why am I here?”

Marc let Adrian’s question hang in the air as they settled into the tall weeds to wait. Billy was in the truck below, left to guard their vehicle. Now they had to wait and see if their lurker was still lurking. Tracking in the dark was nearly impossible and they would make too much noise. This plan was better for their prey.

“I realize you needed someone who was used to hunting this way, but there are half a dozen of those in Safe Haven now. I know. I helped train them.”

Marc scanned the darkness around the truck, thinking Billy might have nerves of steel by the time winter came. As he’d done with a few men over the years, Marc had taken Billy under his wing. The man didn’t know it yet, but he was being trained by the Ghost. Billy had a big future ahead of him and he would need the guidance.

“You want to talk about Angie.”

“I hate it when you call her that,” Marc immediately responded, not pausing in his scans. “You haven’t earned the right to be so familiar.”

“Bullshit. You hate it because you can’t avoid feeling how much I care for her when it comes out sounding that way.”

Marc let it go in favor of the silence he knew Adrian didn’t handle well. The blond had gotten used to people jumping when he spoke, not the other way around.

“Is it because she took those lives?”

Marc winced.

“Surprised me, too.” Adrian shrugged when Marc didn’t respond again. “She wants the baby enough to risk corruption.”

“Risk? It doesn’t mean she already is?”

“No. She chose bad people. No different than the variety of killers she’s got working for her now.”

“Variety?” Marc only knew of two.

“She has five active right now, with three in reserve while they recover or age. As long as everyone sticks to their assigned chores, it could create a beautiful environment when enough of the assholes are gone.”

“And if even one of those people goes off grid?”

“It’s not her killers we have to watch out for. They’ve gotten a taste of that freedom and they won’t risk it yet.”

“But Angie might, right?”

“Yes. Taking a lifeforce is different from taking a life. It corrupts the soul to take a pure force.”

“And the consuming thing she told me about?”

“That’s a myth, as far as I know. Jack and his crew were animals who enjoyed acting that way. They also liked using the stories of their cannibalism to scare their targets. Made them easier to corner.”

Adrian’s words matched what Marc’s demon had told him. He continued with questions that worried voice hadn’t had any answers to. “Did you predict all of this? Is that what’s in your notebooks?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve seen a lot more, all the way to the island and back?”

“Not back.”

“Are you with us on the island?”

Adrian didn’t want to answer that. “It’s up to you, in the end.”

“Obviously, I end up agreeing. Why?”

Adrian sighed. “Do you really want to do this now?”

“No, but it’s too late to shoot Kindle before she can heal you. Tell me.”

“Because what I told you was the truth. She needs more than you can give her. I’ve saved her life. So have you. And it’s not over, Marc, not by a long shot. It’ll take both of us to keep her alive.”

“Did it heal her enough to have the baby?”

“It healed her completely.” Adrian adjusted the scope on his rifle to narrow in on Billy, who appeared to have fallen asleep while waiting for them to return. “Your daughter will be more beautiful than her mother.”

Marc didn’t like the feeling of bonding that was coming, but before he could break that mood with a snide remark, Adrian cleared his throat.

“David is a good man. Thank you for this, even though it was a cover.”

“Don’t confuse me with yourself. I thought he and his men should have been allowed in. I know she refused them so you wouldn’t be alone.”

“Yes. She has hopes of reforming me.”

“Impossible!”

Adrian didn’t take the bait. Reform was easy. Following through on it was much harder. He would have to have a damn good reason to change and the one thing that could bring it about was forbidden to him and always would be.

“Not when I die,” Marc ground out, unable to leave it alone. Not knowing when and how was eating at him.

“I won’t do it when the time comes. So tell her to make other plans. I’d kill you as fast as you would me.”

Marc didn’t know what they’d seen. It was frustrating, but he was forced to let it go as a shadow below them moved.

“Here we go.” Adrian aimed.

“Take him alive. I at least want David’s body to take back if we’re too late to save him.”

“No worries. The flea’s ass is in my crosshairs.”

The shadow approached the truck with a crossbow in one hand and a large knife in the other.

“Take the shot.”

Adrian fired.

The loud report echoed across the mountains. The shadow by Billy’s window dropped to the ground.

Billy, following orders, remained in the truck.

“You’re up. Go take one for the team.”

Adrian grimaced. “You got it, *Mary*.”

Marc recognized the nervous response. Adrian hadn’t been the one doing the dirty work for a long time.

Adrian approached the vehicle carefully and quickly, hoping Marc was covering his back and not aiming at it. He hurried to the fallen man and used his foot to roll him over.

He gestured to Billy, who flipped on the headlights for illumination. As the lights came on, another shot fired.

Adrian slumped against the hood, gasping at the pain. A double vest had stopped the slug from entering his shoulder, but the impact was enough to stun him. He let the sensation

take him to his knees and then to the ground, listening as he tried to forget that he'd been shot.

The body next to him immediately rose up, coming over to take his weapon and point it at Billy. Marc had been right to suspect this.

"I know you can hear me. Stand up."

Adrian did, not needing to fake the reaction. The blood wasn't there though, and the lurker realized it too late. Adrian swung with full strength and knocked him out with a hit to the temple before he could spin the gun and fire.

Another bullet slammed into Adrian, hitting flesh this time. He fell to the ground, rolling under the truck for protection.

Silence fell.

The Eagles waited for their shooter to come closer.

Inside the truck, Billy stayed down, listening in amazement as Adrian and Marc handled a *pair* of serial killers.

Marc waited patiently for the second man to show, a bit surprised there were two of them. It was rare.

The sound of a bike came and then Marc had it in his sight. He pulled the trigger gently and hit the rear tire of the Yamaha.

The bike skidded sideways and then slammed into the ground, flipping the rider into the air. It came down in a bed of weeds, but not hard enough to have killed the rider.

Marc hurried down the hill as he unslung his rifle and drew his Colt.

The rider struggled to stand as Marc neared. He stopped so the person couldn't reach him with an easy lunge. "Take the helmet off."

The rider faced Marc and slowly pulled off the protective gear. Long brown hair streamed down. “You won’t find them.”

Marc realized this was more than rare. It was unheard of. “Husband and wife?”

The woman glanced at the form on the ground near where Adrian was crawling out from under the truck. “Acquaintance, with common goals.”

“And what would that be?” Marc scanned for weapons, not lowering his.

“To get you out here.” The woman smiled insanely. “Hello, Der Ghost. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“There are more?” Billy leaned out of the window he’d lowered. Marc had told him not to leave the truck at all, and he wasn’t going to.

The sound of bikes echoed. Marc frowned. “Three more coming. You’re not lurkers.”

The woman flashed black teeth and madness. “No. We’re from Benjamin.”

“He died in the bunker.” Marc went cold at the memories. “Nice try.”

“We were sent before your bitch infiltrated the bunker.” The woman sneered as the bikes came down the same hill where Marc and Adrian had been hiding. “She succeeded, but so will we.”

“Why?” Adrian wrapped a bandana around his bleeding arm. “There’s no one left alive to reward you.”

“Oh, we’ll have a reward.” The woman motioned to her team, not afraid of Marc’s guns. “We captured the Ghost and

a Mitchel. All the rebels you've denied entrance will flock to us. In a few months, we'll take over your Safe Haven."

"You think it's that easy, huh? We're gonna go quietly?" Marc asked coolly.

"You will or I'll tell them to kill the man I've got stashed."

Billy's weapon appeared in the window. "Now?"

"Fire!" Marc dove toward the woman.

Billy aimed his weapon at the coming bikes.

The three men didn't have a chance to do the same as blood splattered. The bikes crashed into each other from a careful shot through the tire of the lead rider.

Marc held the woman, glad he didn't sense any power in her. "It's over. You lose."

Instead of the anger or begging he'd expected, the woman cackled wildly. "You gave the code with that action. Your man will be dead in half an hour."

Adrian grunted. "How many of these assholes are there?"

"More than a dozen." The woman cackled again. "You screwed up!"

Marc punched her, knocking her out. He hadn't counted on that many people hunting together. "Get her home." Marc dragged her heavy body to the truck. "Adrian and I have things to do and people to kill."

Adrian immediately checked his weapon and waited for orders.

Marc stared around them, not hearing or seeing anything. He flipped on his gun light and headed in the most likely direction. He hadn't planned to hunt in the dark, but maybe it was better this way. Innocent people would be in their dens right now, and wouldn't be caught in the crossfire.

Marc gestured for Adrian to cover him, then studied the ground as they walked. Tracking in the dark was hard, but he'd done it enough to have faith that he would discover a trail. This was about more than their missing man now. It was a necessary thing that had to happen or Safe Haven would be under attack yet again.

"Let's make sure that doesn't happen." Adrian loaded a fresh mag into his 9mm.

"You know it." Marc didn't let anger at Adrian distract him. For this run, Mitchel was probably the best support he could have. *Unless he gets a shot at me in the dark. One of us could die tonight.*

Adrian grinned, but didn't reply. He liked it that Marc thought he was dangerous enough to worry over. *Because I am. Watch your six with me. Despite my many appearances, I truly have no mercy.*

## Chapter Nineteen

# Are You With Me?



### 1

“Drive her straight to the brig.” Angela signaled for the evening gate guards to open them wide.

“Traitor!”

“Killer!”

The people of Safe Haven were not happy to have been woken with the news that someone had tried to hurt Marc.

“Hope you get a bullet!”

“Die, you traitor!”

Angela didn’t like the ugliness, but her people needed to vent a little and the woman in the van needed to be scared for her life. It was definitely in danger here.

The van threw dust over the small crowd of angry people.

Angela hid a smirk. Billy didn't like their hang 'em high attitudes either. As an Eagle, his disapproval was as powerful as hers. She sent a hard look over the crowd that had come at Billy's radio call.

They sullenly left. That instinct to hurt anything that might disturb their lives was one that Adrian had encouraged, even though it had seemed the opposite from outward appearance. Angela hoped to calm those fears in time, but as long as they had people hunting them, it was impossible to do it.

Zack stayed close. "What type of security do you want on her?"

"Just you." Angela swept the waking camp. Dawn had come two hours early. "Handle it like Adrian would."

Zack's brows furrowed, but he didn't protest. He hated Adrian; the fact that their routines and plans came from him rankled Zack. He left her side with a scowl.

Angela waited for the locks to click on the gate. The future hadn't been revealed to her, again. Angela suspected it was because of what she'd done. Her guilt wouldn't let her make plans to do it again, even if it was needed. Only for Marc or Charlie's life would she ever murder and that made her tension worse. She knew trouble was coming. Marc's demon hadn't been wrong. *She will have to let them die by the hundreds before the truth can be accepted.*

*You could try again,* the witch suggested, meaning to convince everyone to flee south now.

*I will.* Angela made eye contact with each of the men on the gate. "And some of them will listen."

*The ones who matter, will save themselves,* the witch tossed out a platitude.

*They all matter! Every life matters to the Creator, and to me, so don't forget that!*

*I did not mean to—*

*Stop.* Angela sighed, calming down while also finding it troublesome that she was arguing with herself again. *Life is the only thing that truly has value. Evil, good, in the middle—all of them. Some deaths serve a purpose and some are needed, but don't mock their sacrifices. They all matter.*

## 2

Angela swept the area again, spotting Peggy moving through the darkness without Doug. She was avoiding him, not even stabbing the big man anymore. Doug was confused, but Angela wasn't. If she didn't want to talk to Doug, she was trying to keep him from discovering her other secret.

In the mess, Kyle and Jennifer were enjoying coffee and cocoa for their end of shift time. If they followed the new pattern Angela had noticed, they would go to the sleeping area next and spend time with three families there. The men who'd died in Kyle's wreck had left people behind. Kyle was now caring for them personally. But for his one flaw, Kyle would be a perfect man. It could still happen for him, in time, but Jennifer would have to get him over that obsession and Angela wasn't positive that was possible. People didn't get over their obsessions. They just learned to avoid them, much like children touching fire. It often took the burn, to learn the lesson.

Behind the mess, the sniper shifts were changing. Angela's heart clenched as she spotted Charlie climbing down

from the perch the Eagles had built. She wanted to keep staring, to give him the chance to acknowledge her, but she knew he was still furious; she turned away so he couldn't reject her. Her emotions liked to get out of control and while being pregnant had a little to do with that, it was mostly the stress of knowing what else was coming.

In the front parking area, teams were already prepping to leave on new runs, including the men who were picking up Shane's group. All of those men would be placed into Zone B for testing when they arrived, and so would Marc's crew. Enforcing the quarantine laws was important and they'd had contact with multiple strangers. The Eagles were already assigned to Zone B, which had been emptied when new people were brought into the inner adjustment zone last night. None of them had been sent on their way. That had emptied both outside zones. It wouldn't be that way again while they were in these mountains. *Until the snow comes*. Their men would be cleared in time to empty the space for Brittani's group, but still there around when those people arrived, to add comfort.

"Can I talk to you?"

Angela found Cynthia behind her. "What's up?"

"I'm worried about Samantha. So is Neil. Jeremy hasn't said so yet, but he's noticing stuff too."

"She's been sick." Angela wasn't sure who all Samantha had told, but she didn't think it was her men or her friend. Her methods to keep such an awful secret had succeeded. Much like John and Doug, who had hidden their illnesses, Samantha had gotten better at distracting people from the truth.

“She’s also reckless.” Cynthia was glad Angela already knew there was a problem. “Conner told her not to go in to that mall.”

“She didn’t listen to her protection?”

“Protection?” Cynthia gasped. “You sent him down to protect us?”

“Of course. He’s a healer and it was a group of women carrying our future. The question is, why didn’t you guys know that?”

“He didn’t tell us.” Cynthia hated how Angela always managed to twist it around and come out on top. “Was he supposed to?”

“Yes. He’s young. Probably forgot.”

“Well, she wouldn’t have listened anyway.” the reporter switched back to her original topic. “She’s acting odd. Her guys are going to talk to you about it soon.”

“I know.” Angela waited for more and wasn’t surprised when it came.

“I need to interview Adrian for my paper, but I’d like to take a guard along.”

“A witness, you mean.”

“Yes. I won’t have people thinking I’m like Kindle or worse, Daryl feeling betrayed. I’ll need about an hour, I think, and that’s it.”

“It’s fine. You can take Daryl if you like.”

“Really? Won’t that cause more tension?”

Angela glanced over at Cynthia. “Worse than the questions you plan to ask?”

“No, but I...”

“You aren’t going to stay on business,” Angela finished when Cynthia paused. “Take whoever you trust, Cyn. It’s fine.”

Grateful and yet still resentful, the reporter left, casting long looks over her shoulder. *How can I like Angela and dislike Angela, at the same time?*

*I don’t know, but I do,* Cynthia answered herself. *There’s something going on with her and I won’t like it when I discover what it is.*

*No, you won’t.* Angela was scanning Cynthia’s thoughts. *I can’t let you give birth and you’ve sensed the ticking clock.*

That bell was set to go off in a few weeks and Angela didn’t intend to stop it. That baby was worse than dangerous. He was true evil and he already liked to hurt people.

### 3

“What the hell is wrong with these people?” Samantha was disgusted. Adrian had dropped her off at the bottom of the mountain road. She had made her way on foot to be sure she went undetected. She’d followed the bike trail from David’s capture location while Marc let the chaos happen, and then she’d found the den.

On the front porch, naked men were chained to the railings and dying of hunger, dehydration, and exposure. In the side yard of the wide farmhouse, under a giant willow tree, there appeared to be a bone pile. Samantha was afraid to look in the rear. A large fire in front of the house glowed brightly, illuminating filthy tools lying around the sparse grass and personal effects of victims. Two large people dressed in all

black stood on the porch with shotguns, sweeping the darkness.

Samantha stayed down. Marc wanted her to be a surprise and she hadn't spotted David at all. She was hoping dawn, which was closer now, would help her with that before it exposed her.

One of the chained men slumped over. The two guards on the porch nudged each other in obvious happiness. They didn't leave their posts, but one of them banged on the front door.

*Are they eating them?* Samantha's stomach twisted. She didn't see tools for that, but the rest of the scene fit.

The door opened. Another black clad person came out and dragged the collapsed man inside. Samantha wanted to be glad he was out of the cold, but she assumed their fate inside the house was worse.

Not sure how she would stay hidden when the sun rose, Samantha stayed hunkered down and tried to keep warm. There was little cover here; the icy wind was relentless as it reformed the landscape into a crystalized quarry. *Come on, Marc. I've never done this before and I'm getting nervous.*

## 4

“Ready?”

“Yep.” Adrian’s hands were full of Marc’s ammo. *I’ve been reduced to gun boy.*

Marc grinned and fired.

The grenade hit the vehicle behind the house and exploded, taking the old wagon with it. There weren’t any people here, not even guards, and Marc took advantage of it.

“Let’s go.” He took off running, aiming for the side yard.

Adrian followed, slamming a grenade in to reload the launcher on the move. It was another variation of the way he had trained the Eagles to do more damage. The former leader tried not to grumble.

They reached the side yard as the rear door opened and the yard flooded with activity.

Marc opened fire as soon as they were in range, hitting the giant tree. Shrapnel flew over the yard, bringing screams.

Marc ran for the front porch next, aiming at the door as the chained man shouted for him to stop. Marc had no intention of firing, but he let Adrian reload it for the appearance. He wanted the house cleared—quickly—and this would do it.

“Get out!” a man shouted as he saw Marc and the launcher in the doorway. “Breach! Get out!”

“Now!” Marc ordered through his belt radio.

Outside, rifle shots lit up the stillness to compliment the screams as Marc and Adrian dropped the launcher and ammo, and opened fire with their own rifles and handguns.

Taken by surprise, the eight men and women were quickly killed, but it was too late for the naked man on the floor. They’d already begun to chop him up.

A ninth man ran for the rear of the property and dove into a small hole Marc assumed led to an underground area.

After Samantha came to cover them, Marc and Adrian freed the captives they found and then headed for the hole.

Samantha stayed topside, lurking in the shadows in case anyone had been drawn to the noise.

## 5

The tunnel was made from sewer piping. Once they climbed down, it was tall enough for the two men to stand up. Neither of them flipped on a light that would make them a target in the darkness. Adrian used his night scope and Marc sent out his grid.

Marc spotted half a dozen still warm bodies and only three heartbeats. He'd learned to tell the difference over the years. He went forward with his gun in one hand and knife in the other.

Adrian spotted their prey. "There!"

Marc lunged forward through the darkness. He was immediately knocked against a dank wall as a bullet went through his jacket and stopped against the triple plates. Marc staggered forward.

His would-be assassin screamed, firing again.

Adrian shoved by Marc to club the man with his rifle.

Marc let him, chest aching. The plates stopped the bullet, but not the force. He felt like he'd been hit by a truck.

"Good to know I'm not alone in that." Adrian's shoulder and arm hadn't stopped throbbing, though the trim had clotted on its own.

"Yeah, but you deserve it." Marc was feeling good, like always after winning a fight, surviving. "Let's get our guy and go."

They found David and another man in the farthest room under the ground. Both unconscious, neither of them looked good. Marc and Adrian each carried one from the cellar.

Samantha hurried to go get their wheels without being told. For all the running around, the house was only a few

minutes from the spot where David had been taken. The mall was a trap they'd been using to draw in refugees. Samantha didn't know what they'd been doing with them, but the survivors they'd brought out would tell the stories. Because there had been other captives here, Samantha wasn't feeling as bad about David's injury.

Until she returned and found him unconscious and covered in blood. Then the guilt overwhelmed her and she burst out crying as she stumbled from the van. "I am so sorry!"

Adrian caught her around the waist before she could go to David, rotating her back toward the vehicle. "We want to leave now. You drive."

Too upset to notice who was giving her orders, Samantha climbed into the van and started the engine.

Marc gave Adrian a nod of approval that he didn't want to deliver, but felt was deserved. David didn't need her tears. He needed a doctor. The arrow through his leg was ugly enough that Marc wasn't sure he would ever walk on it again. Marc also wasn't sure the leg could be saved.

He knew Sam heard his thought by the way she opened the van door and vomited.

## 6

"They're back!"

Angela met the van at the gate. She saw Samantha, Billy, and two injured men. "Where's Marc?"

Samantha was too busy helping one of the men to reply. Angela assumed it was David.

Billy came over to her after waving for Eagles to help the two injured people to the medical bay. A third man from the porch had lived long enough to feel the chains come off; his body hadn't been brought in. "Marc made me stop at the bottom of the road. Said he and Adrian felt like walking."

"Did they? Feel like walking, I mean?" She was instantly worried.

"Adrian didn't." Billy yawned tiredly. "He was looking like I feel."

Angela motioned him on. "Get a report in by evening mess."

Billy vanished toward the showers.

Angela also left, not wanting to be near the gate when the two men made it up the hill. The witch's warning came to mind, but Angela was worried about more than a possible fight or death attempt. She had secrets and both men had clues. It wouldn't take much to put them together. Both of her men were incredibly smart.

*Calling them your men, now, the witch observed. Interesting.*

*I don't mean it the way you took it.*

The witch refused to accept any excuse for Adrian's betrayal. She stormed off, rattling doors all the way down the hall.

Angela went to the medical tent to ask if the doctor needed any help. She found Samantha with her knife against the doctor's throat. "Well, this is new."

Samantha slowly eased away from the cowering physician. "We had a difference of opinion on David's treatment."

David was unconscious. The arrow through his leg was bleeding, with light blood drips trailing across the floor and onto the cot. In the lantern light, David looked bad. Angela glared at the doctor. “You chose not to even try saving the leg?”

“It’ll be awful.” The doctor reddened. “Blood and screams, and it won’t work.”

“You lazy little—”

“Samantha.” Angela’s tone said to get out.

Samantha shook her head. “I owe him. He isn’t losing his leg because of me.”

“It doesn’t look good. You know that.”

“Are you siding with him?” Samantha hovered in front of David’s prone form.

“No, I’m not. He’s going to try or I’m going to relieve him for dereliction of duty. But you have to be prepared to face the truth. Without intervention, the leg might not be savable.” Angela scanned the other man who was slumped in a chair in the tent and awake, but not alert.

“Marc had us give them both a sedative from the medic kits you’ve got us all carrying now. He, uh...” Billy gave the rest silently. *He started screaming while Samantha went for our vehicle. Marc said she didn’t need to hear it, that she would torture herself enough over it.*

“Agreed.” Angela went to check on the man, giving the doctor a harsh glower.

The doctor forced himself to go to David.

Samantha was already busy removing David’s gear and pants.

Angela helped the man in the suit onto a cot. He needed a complete workup, but it would have to wait until David's leg had been handled.

"I need help." The doctor stared at the arrow as if it was the plague. "And send someone who can hold him down."

Samantha growled. "You are not cutting off his leg!"

"Lady, I have to shove that arrow through the rest of the way. Drugged or not, he's gonna fight and scream. You can't hold him."

"I'm staying," Samantha stated stubbornly for lack of a better answer.

"You can hand me things. All the other medical assistants are on cave shifts or sleeping. I wasn't expecting new arrivals."

Their radios crackled. "New arrivals."

The doctor jumped.

Angela sighed, wondering if the newest people had passed two brawling men on their way up the mountain.

## 7

Marc turned to Adrian as they reached the halfway point. "Can you be bought?"

They'd let the small truck of refugees pass them without being seen, but they were now striding up the middle of the cracked road again.

Adrian was surprised by the question and not sure how it was meant. "Can *you*?"

"Everyone has a price." Marc was enjoying the walk in the dark. He didn't get this much privacy often.

“What’s yours?”

“Angie and the kids. Your turn.”

Adrian realized he’d been led into an oral trap, and sighed at his blindness. *I am getting old.*

“Yes.” Marc smiled cheerfully. “You are.”

Adrian didn’t take the bait this time. Instead, he answered the question with one of his own. “What would you give me to tell her I have to go away and then do it? Because I am capable of that.”

Marc didn’t doubt it. If Adrian got some of what he wanted out of this humiliation, he would flee and never look back.

Adrian snorted bitterly. “You think highly of me.”

“With good reason. Now answer the question.”

“What would I be paid to do?”

“Leave the state and forget she exists.”

Adrian studied Marc in the darkness, trying to figure out where this was going. “You can’t give me what I want.”

“We both know that’s not true. She’d do anything to erase the guilt she feels.”

“You’d do that to her?”

“To get you out of our lives forever?” Marc shrugged. “Maybe. Is that your price?”

“I’d have to think about it,” Adrian stalled, but his decision was already made.

“Fine. We’ll be at the gate in about ten minutes.”

Adrian grunted at the time limit, but didn’t protest. “She needs time out of those gates.”

“It’s not safe out here.”

“My site is safe as it can be.” Adrian added more. “And you could send Eagles along.”

While Marc was enjoying some of Adrian's eager groveling, the fact that it was time with Angie they were bargaining for made him put an end to it. "It won't happen unless we make a deal, and even then, I'll need time to consider your request."

"*Requests.*" Adrian's tone hardened. "If I'm being sent away, you have to take responsibility for my son."

"No. Conner goes with you."

"Safe Haven needs him! *Angela* needs him."

Marc didn't respond. None of this was up to him anyway and they both knew it. Angela would make the final choice and they would all try to live with it.

"Why can't you just share her?" Adrian asked suddenly. "Others are adjusting to the idea. Can't you even consider it?"

"I've done more than consider it, you self-righteous prick!"

Adrian was shocked. "You told her you would?"

"And she shut me down quick enough to make my balls hide, so save that shit. I've always been willing to do whatever it takes to make her happy. You just want to rut like a dog and gloat."

"I'd never gloat. I'd love her as much as you do."

"Oh, shut up!" Marc increased his pace. "You don't know how to love."

The two men fell silent as the gates appeared, full of life and light.

*I miss that.* Adrian quickly hid his misery.

Marc could have felt sympathy, but he knew better than to trust the former leader. Adrian was a coiled rattlesnake, waiting for the right moment to infect his prey with poison.

Marc studied the changes that Angela had made during his short absence, approving. The long fences provided a path for new people to follow and Zone B was now the closest to the main gate, indicating that it had now been rotated to be the *good* area. Marc liked that. Strangers couldn't use that knowledge against them if it was always changing.

Tarps of plastic hung over the long tunnels that would provide shelter for the herd while they waited. The ends were staked into the ground and covered with brush so they would stay down. In a few days, the shifting winds would have sent enough dirt and debris to bury the edges in inches of thick padding that would also keep in the warmth. It was a brilliant setup, but it implied too many people were coming.

Marc realized she must be ready for the camp to know about the flood of refugees coming their way.

The gates swung open. Billy and Zack came out to escort them.

Marc lifted a brow toward Adrian. *Well?*

Adrian was staring at what he could see of the inside. His voice was like the rock that surrounded them as he answered. "Kill me or share her, but I'm never leaving. I'll be in your mirror for the rest of your life."

Adrian strode for his site with his head up and his anger held in check. If Marc thought he could be bought off with a night or two of sex, he was sorely mistaken. *I'm in it for the long haul. When your clock runs out, I'll be all over that and she'll be complete for the first time in all her lives. She deserves that and so do I. Not every man on the planet has the strength to accomplish what I have. You don't and she knows it.*

## 8

“Safe Haven is a place of second chances...” Zack was already chilled to the bone after spending a short time with the lunatic woman. Marc’s brig had real bars and real cells. Zack had locked her muttering form inside with relief. “If you change your ways, you could eventually be allowed to be one of us.” Zack knew that was a lie. Even if Angela wanted this looney, Marc and the Eagles would never allow it. “I’ll ask you some questions and you need to tell me the truth. After that, you’ll get a blood test to make sure you’re not ill. You won’t be mistreated or—”

The woman interrupted him with a long laugh that sent fresh chills down his spine. When she stopped, she turned empty orbs on him and went quiet.

Zack hid a shudder behind an itch and knelt down to be at eye level. “Who was the man underground?”

“Did he survive?”

Her fast question surprised Zack. “No.”

“Good!” The woman spat on the floor. “We were going to eat him, but he swore he was a state governor. We kept him for a bargaining chip with the bunker.”

Zack stared. “There’s a bunker in use?”

“Not now. There were riots or revolts, something like that. We were all sent out ahead of it.” She examined Zack with a sane, pitiful expression. “Could I really stay?”

Zack nodded. “I need to know one more thing. How many of you are out there?”

“We had ten in our group...” She moved away from the bars. “You didn’t say if I follow the rules. You’re lying!”

“Yes.” Zack put his hand on his gun. “You’ve been found guilty of attempted murder, murder, kidnapping, abuse of a corpse, and a lot of other terrible things. The sentence is death.”

She opened her mouth to scream, or maybe to laugh again. Zack quickly shot her.

He holstered the weapon that had a suppressor. All Eagles were supposed to carry one. *Was that right?* He stared at the body. *Was it just?*

“Yes.” Marc entered the brig and locked the door. “Besides all the evidence at that farmhouse, I’m sure you noticed she was bat-shit crazy.”

Zack grunted. “Yeah.”

“She was guilty. You carried out the sentence.”

“Do I...hide the body?” Zack wasn’t sure about Kyle’s methods.

“No.” Marc opened the cell door with his master key. “I’ll take the hit on this one.” He lifted the body over his shoulder and took it outside.

Zack followed.

Shocked expressions and justified shouts greeted him as he marched to the gate. Marc agreed with them. He was tired of being shot at, of being hunted. This was how those people needed to be treated.

Marc went through the gate when Zack opened it. The former trucker was curious what Marc had planned.

Marc dumped the body on the ground near Zone C and then began the revolting task of tying it to the fence. He was

glad there were only a few refugees in Zone A to witness him take a marker from his smallest kit and draw a word on her forehead.

### ***Killer.***

It was a warning to those hoping to get inside their gates, and also to those who already had that honor. Safe Haven would no longer show any mercy.

## **9**

Samantha held David's hand as he bit down on the rubber ball. His screams were burnt into her brain; she couldn't stop saying how sorry she was.

The doctor had broken off the shaft and was attempting to drive the rest of the shaft through the leg to get it out.

"Bone, I think." The doctor shoved harder. "Can't cut it out. Has to go through."

"Pull it." Angela helped hold the man in place. "We'll treat the side effects of that."

The doctor reversed his force; the shaft slowly inched out of David's ankle while he screamed.

The wooden shaft popped out with a nauseating sound. Blood gushed from the wound. David's scream cut off abruptly as he passed out. All of them were grateful.

The doctor hurried to pack the wound and control the blood loss while Angela gently squeezed the blood bag. She hadn't trusted Samantha or the doctor to be left alone together for long, but she hadn't interfered with his choices. He was trying to do his job. She had to let him.

The doctor wiped sweat from his brow and then smeared a gob of antibiotic ointment around the wound. He also shoved a generous amount into it, quickly replacing the soaked packing. “I can’t stitch it... No staple would hold it... I’ll cauterize it!” Angela nodded when he surveyed her for approval.

“It’s what I would do, if that helps you. After you check for splinters.”

“That’s good.” He nodded. “Yeah. Okay.” He rushed from the canvas that had been set up behind the main medical tents to give them privacy.

Angela spent a minute observing Samantha. The storm tracker looked healthy despite the events she’d been a part of. In a few weeks, that could matter.

“I’m so sorry!”

David groaned weakly.

Angela placed her hand on his shoulder. She didn’t have the spare energy to send out healing orbs, but she was able to dull his pain a little. David was allergic to morphine and they didn’t have many other painkillers that would work during surgery.

“Thank you,” Sam whispered as David’s body relaxed and his teeth let go of the bit.

Angela transferred her hand to Samantha’s shoulder. “Sleep for a while.”

Samantha’s lids grew heavy; she obediently lay down on the bloody cot by David’s arm. She faded into sleep while yawning.

Angela looked around and found David also sleeping. Approving even though she hadn’t meant to do that, Angela

stayed with them. She wouldn't leave them alone with the doctor, the same as Samantha wouldn't have left her if the situation had been reversed. As she stood vigil, Angela listened to her waking people.

A small group walked by, talking about the pancake breakfast with five types of syrup for folks to try. They'd had pancakes a lot over the last couple of weeks. Li Sing was busy introducing new sauces to keep people happy.

Not far from the flap where she was standing, Angela heard Doug and Darian discussing the rules for Eagles. They left easy hearing range too quickly for her to pick up much. She let it go in favor of listening to the next group complain about the colder weather they had today. She had plans to open the winter supply truck next week, but she would do it sooner if necessary. She needed Safe Haven people to stay as healthy as possible.

"It'll be soon. We'll have the new teams list and restart the in-depth training. You'll love it."

"And hate it, right?"

"Oh, yeah. You'll remember it."

Angela recognized the voices of an Eagle and their rookie trainee. Those lists would be going up this afternoon, at the same time they were moving people into the cave.

"They're coming soon," a young voice whispered from the opposite direction.

*Working crew, Angela thought.*

"And they'll win?"

Angela narrowed in. Who did that second scheming voice belong to?

"That has not been revealed."

“You’d better not...”

The pair got out of range.

Angela stored it. She’d recognized the voices. She started stewing on all the possible outcomes of her war. After a little while, there were too many threads to keep memorizing without missing details.

Angela took her book out to make notes. She passed the morning listening to her people and adjusting plans even when the doctor returned and his patient woke. There were important items to be covered and it was a good use of this time. Later, free minutes would be nonexistent for them.

“I need to show you something before we go in quarantine.” Marc joined her in the tent. He ignored the sleeping patients, but waved at the doctor. “You need a cup of juice or something, don’t you? Go see your boys.”

The doctor didn’t argue. He hated it when Angela was here. Having her mate in these close quarters too was too much.

Marc quickly played the video for her.

Angela automatically counted the number of people. *Ten. We’re short one.*

The woman they’d executed was standing where she would be captured fully by the camera. She held up a sign. *Give him to us or die.*

“Meaning Adrian?”

“I would guess so, but Conner is a healer, so it might be him.”

“What do you want done about it?”

Angela sighed. “Nothing. Unless they come to us or attack a crew, we will not engage this enemy yet. We’re not ready.”

## 10

Moving a camp of three hundred people into a cave was backbreaking, tedious labor. Long lines formed an assembly for most of it and a few hours of work barely saw a dent. Once the small items were inside, the larger furniture had to be lowered with ropes, pulleys, and sweat. Small injuries and constant complaints were the tune of the day; the medical staff stayed busy applying band aides and stitching gashes. Angela was relieved it wasn't worse. She had the ants on the bottom floors, helping to lug equipment into place, but she'd chosen not to have the strong insects do the lifting up top. It would have distracted everyone else too much.

As the morning became afternoon and the bigger things finally disappeared from their main encampment, Angela made notes for downsizing the topside. With well over half of the camp moving in today, it would clear a lot of room for new projects—like the fuel facility she hoped to have Theo and Jennifer design around the wood gas generators. Then, there was the solar farm and the winter crops. She wanted those things in place before the chaos hit. There was a small chance that the tide would flow west and miss them, and if that happened, they might be able to stay here, underground, for as long as winter wanted to rage. The temperatures underground stayed at a constant 50°-55° below ten feet, and they could blast a new entrance to accommodate the larger animals and trucks if needed, then seal it up with bricks and mortar. It all depended on the northern runs, and what may or may not come from them.

Her radio crackled. “Angela to level one.”

As Angela keyed her mike to show she’d heard, she could feel Marc’s tension from across the camp. He had only slept for a few hours and then got up to help with the transfer. He was currently supervising the lines to make certain the items coming through were approved for this stage, but also to make sure people weren’t getting too tired to keep hefting things along. He was switching them all out every couple of hours, sending them to have a meal or nap. He had no trouble keeping track of where people were or who was supposed to be doing what, but he didn’t want her in the cave while he was up here.

Below them, Theo and Jennifer had control of the cave, with Kyle on their heels as an enforcer and protector. Angela was positive he would end up being labor instead of protection. The people wanted to be inside and feel safe. They wouldn’t goof off or cause trouble during the move. Afterward, when the need to celebrate a great day’s work came, was when Zack and his men would have to stay on their toes. She had that shift sleeping in a large common tent along the cliff right now, hoping if they were over there, they would be undisturbed enough to rest up for tonight’s duty.

Angela made it to the cave entrance before Marc appeared. She entered the cavern without a cord for the first time...

A hand settled firmly around her arm. “Me or the rope?”

Angela grinned. “You, of course.”

Marc kept a good grip on her, especially as they went down the metal fire escape-like stairs that now led into the cave. It took them down the first forty feet, past a wooden floor and then another. This was the main entrance and it led straight to their home. To reach floor one or two, you had to take a

different set of stairs that ran up to each level from the third floor. The stairs circled down another twenty feet.

Angela beamed in delight at the living quarters. She hadn't been down here since assigning the rooms. "Wow!"

Theo and Jennifer were waiting for her. They both wore expressions that said they needed to hear her gush over their accomplishments. It wasn't a problem; Angela was honestly thrilled.

Marc listened with half an ear, scanning the people. Despite grumbles over the work, everyone was in a good mood and they were right on schedule to be able to settle them down tonight at close to the normal time—in the caves. It would be a long evening of walking these tunnels to make sure people were behaving and equipment was functioning properly.

All the builders were now fixers and testers. For the next two weeks, that group of people would stay in the cave and do exactly what the job titles implied. As with any new home, the cave would have problems. Marc thought the first one would be the dampness. Drying things out down here was a key to good health. People didn't do well in prolonged damp conditions. Marc would be glad when the vents and dehumidifiers made a noticeable dent in the moisture. They might even have to upgrade to a more powerful setup for that.

Kyle gave Marc a gesture. He had Autumn snuggled securely in a carrier on his chest.

Marc twisted around to find Shawn and Greg waiting by the stairs. He waved them over, not leaving Angela. "What's up?"

"We got the video to clear a bit, enough to be sure in the count." Billy came down the last few stairs to join them.

Marc took the camera and hit play. He saw the landscape where he'd placed the camera and the edge of the alarm disc sticking out from under the rock he'd used for cover. For ten seconds, nothing moved except the weeds in the wind. Then a bike came into view and behind it, a whole group of them. Marc counted ten all together.

"How many bodies from the house?" Marc didn't say he had already done this with his copy of the film. His men needed the practice.

Billy frowned. "Nine."

Marc gave him the camera back. "We'll handle it."

The men were positive Marc would; each of them put it out of their minds in favor of admiring the huge cavern around them. If not for the tops of the walls and the ceiling, it might have been a basement with paneled walls and carpeting. Everyone had done good work.

"We need a few more hands on level one." Theo pointedly swept the stationary men with Marc.

The men chuckled and went to help.

Theo came over to Marc. "Can you help me with these blueprints? I want to make sure we've left enough room for a few vehicles."

Theo and Marc examined the papers while Angela and Jennifer walked through the main living area. Along the hard walls were bunkbeds that were three-deep. Each had a rail and a long ladder nailed to it. There would be curtains to separate them soon. Then they would finish the couple's area. Within a few days, there would also be chairs and shelves of books and games. If they did get to spend winter down here, they would all need activities to keep from going stir-crazy. Angela

was hoping they might even get to construct an Eagle training area, but that was too far out to count on. If it happened, it would be in the dead of the coming nuclear winter, when they couldn't do anything else.

Autumn woke up and began to fuss against Kyle's chest. Jennifer went to her, cooing softly.

Angela kept going, taking notes and making plans. She dug through her knowledge of setups, wishing she had more experience in this. It was important that they got it right the first time.

Angela eased into the short tunnel off the living area, wanting to see how much they'd accomplished on the bathrooms. Next to the living space, this would be the next most used spot. It had to accommodate hundreds of people, multiple times, every day.

Angela was impressed with the plumbing, the sinks, and the wash area in the center of two dozen small stalls. The Eagle booth next to the washstands already held a guard.

Angela nodded to Brandon.

Brandon returned the gesture, but he didn't take his attention from their surroundings—especially not while the boss was in sight.

Angela approved the room quickly, and gave in to the urge to use the facilities. The stalls were barely wide enough to be comfortable, but it had allowed a well-constructed wall that would have shelves hung on it.

*And a toilet paper roll.* Angela blew dust from one before gathering what she needed. All these stalls would be outfitted with hooks and racks for people to hang guns and gear on

during their pit stop. Hand sanitizer dispensers would also be installed.

Angela acknowledged the sentry again as she left, listening to the fans and engines that were running. Some were pulling air, some were delivering air, and some were bringing power. Lanterns would remain a common item for a few more weeks, and then the cave would have full power—much like an apartment building.

Angela went back to the living area and made eye contact with Marc, able to feel his unease that she had gotten out of his sight. As soon as he glanced back down at the blueprint, she strolled down to level four. Now that it had been secured, cleaned, and had a guard and cameras, Marc hadn't given orders for the sentries to stop her.

She made her way down to the next level, where there was only a guard and little else besides their equipment. This would be a compost heap if they could get the right venting system set up. Next to it, where the tunnels were unlit, would be a garden plot and behind that, a small pasture. Angela wanted a load of dirt spread down here, grass seed planted, and then their calmer animals brought down. The lamps and constant temperature would allow the animals to eat and get fat in comfort. She had much the same plan for the garden, except everything would be in pots and planters so they wouldn't have to be left behind if there was trouble.

Angela scanned the last tunnel—the one she hadn't even viewed pictures of yet—but she didn't enter it. The sentry near the stairs was frowning at her, hand on his radio; she didn't want to listen to Marc's lesson on security. She shined her light into the tunnel, trying to determine the size of the room

it held. She needed a sturdy place to store the gas and water they were collecting.

The cavern appeared to be huge, with a high ceiling and a small stream of water trickling down the far wall. *Perfect.* She shined her light into the other cracks and crevices. *We'll test it and then go from there.*

Angela rotated to leave.

An eerie moan sounded. It came from the cavern she'd just been scanning.

The guard hurried over to take her arm. "Head back up."

"Don't go in there yet." Angela allowed him to guide her to the stairs.

"We won't." Dexter was glad when she disappeared up the stairs. It wasn't safe down here yet.

Angela lingered on the third level, enjoying the time alone. She hardly ever was now.

She spotted a drop-off that should have been covered by now, and took her book out. She spent a moment listing things for this level and then slowly rotated to go up the stairs.

"Boo!"

Angela flinched, dropping the book as she scrambled for her gun.

Marc grabbed her hands. "Damn. Sorry."

Angela let go of the weapon and clutched his arm. She didn't speak, letting him know he'd scared her.

"You've been doing so well, honey. I didn't think."

Angela smiled, a bit sadly. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Then why does it feel like it?" Marc rubbed her cold shoulders.

Angela hugged him tightly; they went up to level one together.

Behind the couple, bright green orbs glowed from the shadows and then vanished.

Before they reached the next level, two people came down the stairs toward them.

Marc stopped, placing his arm over Angela to make certain there was no chance anyone would be tripped. The rails on these stairs were only the basics right now.

Tara and Shawn continued by them with words of greeting, but neither of them sounded happy. Tara was starting her job down here today, helping to prepare the next levels. She looked disappointed.

“Be ready with a new job for her.” Angela didn’t care if the woman heard. Tara wasn’t the type to labor in a dank cave for long, no matter the reason, and Angela was well aware of it. She had Tara pegged now; it wasn’t pretty. *The outcome won’t be either.*

Chapter Twenty

## Teams and Schemes

September 20<sup>th</sup>



1

**B**y evening mess, Safe Haven was half moved in; the good mood made for a calm meal on both sides of the mess. This was likely the last time they would all eat together out here for a long while. Many people lingered after they finished. For tonight, all they were going to do was shower and sleep. Some of the dirtier folks had already chosen the shower campers in place of the meal. Li Sing was scheduled to keep the mess open until midnight so everyone had plenty of time to get hot food. The wonderful cook had made pizzas tonight and the camp was enjoying the topping plates he'd made. Build-your-own pizza was fun.

It didn't take long for Donald and Nancy to bring out their guitars to add the twangs and hums of music. Angela and her long center table group also lingered with the crowd, always surprised that they could have so many people in one place without fights or other problems. Safe Haven truly was a light in this apocalyptic darkness for all of them. For those outside the gates, listening and longing, it was a beacon that would bring in good and bad alike.

Marc scanned the constantly shifting masses of people, uneasy and proud at the same time. They'd accomplished a lot with and after Adrian, and they would continue to do so. Angela had an inherent talent for bringing progress; she knew who was best suited for each job. She was fair, smart, and they now had more brains here than brawn. It was a good mix of people.

Marc lifted his cup to Neil, who had just returned. His team hadn't encountered any trouble. Everyone assumed Kyle's wreck, the three deaths, Shane's wreck, and Marc's lurkers had covered Angela's prediction and then some. The north had indeed been rough, but they'd gotten many things from it.

Marc spotted Tara and Shawn eating together, and then Missy sitting behind him, humming and happily throwing bacon bits at him. Shawn was pretending not to notice. Tara couldn't see it from where she was sitting. Marc hid a snicker. That kid would need a firm hand, but Shawn wasn't up to the task.

Doug came through the crowd to their table. Everyone was surprised when he sat his tray down and joined them. When the stares got to him, Doug shrugged. "I need some *me* time."

There were confused looks as conversations continued. Across the mess, Peggy was sitting with Hilda and Tonya. Marc wondered what was going on there. Tonya said she wanted to have medical skills too, but Peggy ignoring Doug was strange—as was Tonya not sitting with Kenn. That man was at the rookie table, waiting for the new teams lists to be posted. Angela had insisted on doing it after dinner so there wouldn’t be any slacking by people who didn’t like their final placement. When Doug finished eating, he would write it out on the board.

Neil came to their table, but didn’t sit down. “Has anyone seen Samantha?”

Tension fell over the command table.

Neil studied the suddenly uneasy faces in concern. “What is it?”

Marc sighed. “Sam went off mission. They were attacked and one of the team was taken. Adrian and I had to go get him back. We took Samantha along.”

“And she got hurt? Is she hurt?!”

Marc shook his head. “She’s fine. But she feels responsible for the man’s injury and she won’t leave his side.”

“But she’s okay?” Neil didn’t care about the rest until he knew that.

“Yes.” Angela grunted. “But she wants to resign from my team, and she’s demanding a trial so we’ll punish her.”

Neil was now scowling so hard his forehead had almost disappeared. “Are you? Punishing her?”

“I don’t need to.”

“Yes, you do.” Neil knew Samantha. She wouldn’t let something like this go. “If you punish her, she can move on.”

“And if not, she’ll keep on torturing herself?”

“Yeah. She’s hardheaded that way.”

Angela sighed. “I thought so too. But I wanted to be sure by talking to you or Jeremy about it first.”

“Treat her like any other Eagle.” Neil was almost glad it had happened. “The punishments aren’t that harsh, but the embarrassment can be.”

“I’ll handle it.” Angela pointed. “She’s in the medical tent with the doctor.”

Neil quickly moved through the full mess of people, waving to Jeremy. The two men left together with Neil speaking worriedly into Jeremy’s ear. They went straight to the medical tent and found Samantha asleep on the cot between two men that appeared to have had a rough time.

Samantha didn’t wake as Neil went to the doctor.

Jeremy waited by the flap to be certain they had privacy.

The doctor grimaced upon seeing them, but not with the usual hatred he often expressed for the high level Eagles.

“Get her out of here. I can’t take the crying anymore.”

Neil held out a hand.

The doctor stared in surprise at the old book.

“I found it on the last run. Thought maybe you could use it.”

The doctor gaped, dumbfounded, at the pristine manual. “That’s a Forbes Winslow!”

Acting as if he didn’t care, Neil shrugged. “I saw medical words and thought of you.” Neil went to Samantha before the surprised doctor could form a response.

“Samantha?”

Samantha woke quickly and groggily, and immediately surveyed David's leg. She burst into fresh tears.

"Come on. Let's get you settled." Neil gently pulled her to her feet.

Samantha let her men lead her to their tent, where they would care for her.

The doctor stared, forced to admit that he'd been unkind to people who didn't deserve it. He may not like some of the procedures here, but these people loved each other as much as anyone could. He'd become convinced of that while listening to Samantha beg David for forgiveness, even while he wasn't awake to grant it.

The doctor slowly sat down, forgetting about shutting down for the night. He began to thumb through Obscure Diseases of the Brain and Disorders of the Mind, by Forbes Winslow. He'd always wanted one, but could never afford it.

## 2

### Former Eagle Teams

**Kyle:** Chris, Daryl, Shawn, Billy, Morgan, Crone, Denny, Theo, Angela

**Neil:** Jeremy, Greg, Wade, Ben, Daniel, Jake, Tim, Steven

**Zack:** Allan, Donald, Lee, Frank, Ozzie, Brandon, Simon, Pete

**Seth:** Jeff, Rusty, Jack, Ryan, Bruce, Tommy, Joey, Robert

**Kevin:** Ray, Dexter, Logan, Alex, Francis, Scott, Josh, Whitney

**Marc:** Quinn, Shane, Jax, Logan, Paul, Bobby, Howard, Dwayne, George

**Angela:** Jennifer, Samantha, Cynthia, Leslie, Rebecca, Tracy, Tonya, Candy, Crista

**Rookie:** Tyler, Nathan, Cody, Stanley, Olivia, Pam, Lawrence, Gary, Andrew

## New Teams

### Eagle Special Forces

**Team #1:** Kyle, Daryl, Shawn, Morgan, Billy, Shane, Jax

**Team #2:** Neil, Jeremy, Greg, Tommy, Wade, Ben, Quinn

### Eagle Level Teams

**Level 6:** Zack, Seth, Allan, Donald, Brandon, Jake, Logan, Whitney

**Level 5:** Theo, Simon, Tim, Ozzie, Francis, Candy, Gary

**Level 3:** Marc, Ray, Josh, Dexter, Bobby, Howard, Scott, Tyler

**Level 1, team #1:** Angela, Jennifer, Samantha, Cynthia, Kendle, Rebecca, Tracy

**Level 1, team #2:** Cody, Nathan, Stanley, Olivia, Pam, Lawrence, Andrew

**Rookie team #1:** Kenn, Joseph, Charlie, Sheila, Conner, Courtney, Julia, Randal

**Rookie team #2:** Jonny, Kim, Ian, Eddie, Rod, Molly, Harry, Michael

Excitement went up as the new teams were posted, and then came the groans and words about their lost men and women. After that, came confusion.

Angela stood up, getting their attention. “I made a lot of changes. Some people are higher than they would have been. Some are lower. For instance, Quinn was with Marc when he went to take on the government, but he obviously wasn’t at the Special Forces level yet. That’s a huge bump.”

Realizing she was talking about him, Marc’s former teammate grinned widely. “I’ve got no problem with it.”

“Yeah, Neil can train him like Marc has us.” Jax was ecstatic to discover that he had also made it onto a Special Forces team.

“The higher teams took the most losses,” Angela reminded them gravely. “In the spirit that brings us all together, I’ve given those men a few rookies to train as replacements. I’ve chosen those I thought would fit into your groups. Please come to me if that doesn’t hold true.”

It was a warning to those who had gained multiple levels to work hard and keep earning what they’d been rewarded with.

“I’ve switched people around. Candy fits in perfectly with the tinkerers and Tonya has her hands full with the radio and pharmacy. We’re not up to pre-government numbers yet, but that will change as our new arrivals settle in and join up.” Angela didn’t dwell on that part. “We’ll start lessons in a couple of weeks. I want us fully in the cave first, but until then, get to know each other. I’d like teams to have meals together and spend time in the activity and training tents. This will be

an adjustment for everyone, but mostly for our rookies, who have huge shoes to fill. Good luck!"

There was a small cheer and the meal resumed for some, while others went up to view the board. Angela used the time to scan her highest men and be sure they were okay with her choices. They had to work together or it wouldn't work.

"Hey! Is that Conner's name?"

"No way!"

"What's he doing on there?"

"Is he allowed to be a rookie?"

"Yes." Marc didn't agree, but he hoped his support would make it easier for Angie to handle. "His banishment was conditional. If he becomes an Eagle, he won't be a threat anymore. He'll have changed and become one of us."

There were grumbles, but not as many as Angela had expected. She was grateful to Marc for speaking up. People here respected his opinion, which is why the fly-ridden body outside their gate wasn't drawing serious protests. If Marc thought something that gruesome was needed, then it was.

A light shower of flurries began, but Angela didn't order them under cover. This was a normal storm and they had to get used to the cold. Come winter, they would have to work in it.

Angela spotted Daryl and Cynthia having a meal together, but the feel of it wasn't romantic. Angela wasn't surprised when Cynthia stormed from the mess a minute later. The couple was having issues in their relationship and it wasn't hard to guess that Adrian was involved. Add in the hormones and tension from her newspaper being released, and the reporter's frustration was understandable.

Angela turned her attention to the small quarantine zone inside the gate, where two dozen people waited for a placement. Jayson was among those. Angela didn't meet his eye as he stood at the fence and studied everything he could see from his location. Tomorrow, Jayson and the other people from Zone A would be blended into the camp, with settling partners.

"Why did you send me out with Marc?"

Joseph's question was one Angela had prepared an answer for, but she chose not to go with it. She used the truth instead. "You don't like white people. You don't trust us, and you have little reason to feel that way. You met Brittani and her group. You saw how they reacted to us—without animosity. I thought you needed that."

His hand went to his hip. "So I'm a racist?"

"No, you don't hate us or wish us ill. Which is why you're on the rookie teams, but you don't like us because of the past." Her tone sharpened. "Let go of that."

He sneered. "Like no one here feels that way about me."

"That's true. And they'll be taught differently, but you're going to be an Eagle. You have to understand the differences now."

Joseph sighed. "I still feel that way. The trip out didn't change anything."

"I understand." Angela smiled. "Time will help. Stick with the Eagles. We need you there."

Joseph left her to her thoughts.

Angela wondered if that was really enough to soothe him. There were actually several reasons why he'd been sent, but his attitude toward other races was definitely the most

important. He wasn't even kind to Li, and that little man was friends with everyone.

Angela tiredly swept the mess again. Kyle and Neil didn't seem upset with the names on the board, though Neil looked tired. He'd come to her for a sedative that Samantha could take while pregnant. Angela had told him to try a hot shower and a cup of hot chocolate. It had succeeded for two hours and then the evening call for mess had sent Samantha into tears again. She'd stumbled to the medical tent, refusing to be swayed. Neil had come to see the teams list when she fell asleep on the middle cot again.

Angela was glad the doctor had already left and Millie had taken his place over the patients on this shift. She was also happy that Neil had come to the mess. It showed he still wanted his slot among Safe Haven's army.

Jeremy, however, was curiously absent. Angela made a motion to Marc, who sent out his grid.

He gestured. *Front gate.*

Angela went that way. She wasn't picking up bad vibes, but that didn't mean there couldn't be trouble anyway.

The rest of the camp was deserted; she hurried through the icy wind with her shadows. Marc had insisted on her having two of them after dark.

The main gate was heavily patrolled by curious men who wanted to know where they now ranked among the Eagles.

Angela gave them a curt nod that said to pay attention to their job.

Jeremy was huddled on the middle ledge of the gate, staring west. He was wrapped in a thick parka and still shivering lightly.

She climbed up and shoved her cold hands into her pockets. “Things okay?”

“Fine... For the sheep.”

Angela carefully sat down next to him, a bit surprised not to find the ever-present laptop in his hands. “What’s eating at you and how can I help?”

Jeremy gave her a pitiful look. “I can’t live down there. I can’t even go inside.”

Angela tried to remember if she’d seen him today, but couldn’t. “Where have you been?”

“I volunteered to supervise the bathrooms up here while everyone moved.” Jeremy dropped his head. “I can’t go down there.”

Angela placed a hand on his shivering arm. “You need to tell Samantha. After she’s over her meltdown, tell her the truth and don’t leave out why. She’ll understand.”

“You think she’ll understand that I killed my fiancé and the guilt of dying like she did is flipping me into a coward?”

“Yes.” Angela hadn’t known, but it wasn’t something they couldn’t handle. She stayed with him a while longer, cursing fate for making life so rough on her army.

### 3

“I don’t have time for each of you to catch me alone and beg. The time for secrets was before. You’ll all ask me here and now, or forfeit your reward.”

The training tent went cold with tension.

Angela rose from her perch on the center table. “We’re all good, then?”

No one wanted to agree, but everyone was hesitant to speak out in front of the others.

“The secrets will kill us.” Angela gestured. “We are the chain of command. We have to lead by example. That hasn’t been the case in the past, but it’s time for a change.”

Cynthia hadn’t been invited to this gathering. Neither had Samantha, Becky, or Tonya. It was understandable. Those four women weren’t in the top chain of command, even if they did sometimes fill those slots. Seth also wasn’t here, but only because he and Becky were on a run right now. Angela planned to speak with him after their return.

Kenn stepped up first. “I want Adrian let back in. He deserves a second chance. Give my reward to him.”

“I’d like to use mine to block that.” Marc was in the rear corner where he had an eye on Angie and an eye on the camp through the sealed tent window. “Only people who can change deserve a second chance.”

Angela surveyed Kenn as the other people muttered. “Can he be reformed? Does he have a desire to change?”

“He knows he was wrong...” Kenn’s brows drew together. “But I can’t answer those questions. Only he can and he isn’t here to be asked.”

“He isn’t here because he was going to kill us all!” Kyle didn’t like going against Kenn anymore. He assumed Marc had this covered, but his own feelings of betrayal wouldn’t let him remain silent. “If you can’t understand that, maybe you should go live with him.”

“I’ve thought about it,” Kenn admitted without fear. “But that’s no place for a baby.”

Another sign of Kenn's progress was hard to miss. Kyle snapped his mouth shut. *Marc won't let it happen.*

"It's not up to me. And it isn't up to any of you. The camp has to vote to overturn his banishment." She pointed toward the mostly sleeping camp. "They have to be convinced that he can change."

"You're giving me permission to try?" Kenn verified in front of the witnesses, surprised with the answer. He'd honestly been expecting to be blown off, not given a way to accomplish his goal.

"Yes." Angela was aware of Marc's fury and Kyle's shock. "But it won't happen. You have to prepare for that."

Kenn felt the double meaning, but he wasn't sure anyone else had. He moved on quickly before Marc could pull it from his mind. "I have to try. He's the only person who ever believed I could be good. And I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for the way he changed me. I have to at least try to do the same for him."

The fact that Kenn was hoping to reform Adrian went a long way in soothing some of the anger. He was showing loyalty and caring for another person, even though he wasn't going to get a reward for it. He also reminded them of what Safe Haven was supposed to stand for.

"Who wants to go next?" Angela marked Kenn's name from her list. "Uh... How about you, Neil? You know what you need, don't you?"

Neil nodded as everyone got ready to hear a request to have Samantha to himself or maybe even to have Angela peer into the future. He opened his mouth. "How can I help Becky?"

Angela smiled in gentle, beautiful approval. “A pure soul is so attractive.”

Neil blushed, shaking his head. “I need this guilt to go away. I don’t care about her.”

“Liar,” Angela accused without rancor.

Then the warm tone fell away and Neil was facing the witch.

“What would you sacrifice to help her heal?”

“What will it take?” He wasn’t going to make the offer.

“Love. She needs love and time. Give it freely and fully, and possibly destroy your other life. Deny her and watch her fall. The best thing you can do for yourself is to stay away from her.”

Neil couldn’t accept those answers. “Tell me what’s best for both of us.”

“The third choice walks a line that mere mortals cannot maintain. Love and time between friends is powerful magic. And dangerous. Heed my advice. Stay away.”

Neil grunted and got up without arguing further. He left the tent; a cold wave of wind swarmed in to compliment the mood.

Angela braced. “Who’s next?”

“Me.” Kindle stood up. “I can’t take being in here with all of you.”

Angela gestured. “Hit me with it.”

*Like you don’t know.* Kindle glared. “I want to go home. I hate it here.”

“You mean Pitcairn.”

“Yes. Adrian said you would help me.” Kindle locked eyes with the woman, unable to imagine ever being friends

with her. “You want me gone and I want to be gone. Will you make it happen?”

“Yes. But not in the way you mean. I need someone to take a team south and secure something for me. It’ll be dangerous, but if you succeed, you’ll be able to go home.”

“Can I get details?”

“A small crew of people also want to go to that island of yours. They’ll be going along, but you won’t be leading them. You’re too unstable right now.”

“Will Marc—?”

“No!” Angela’s eyes blazed. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Kindle dropped her head before she could accept that hard challenge. She needed to get home. “I’ll go. As soon as possible...please.”

Angela marked Kindle’s name from her list. “A few days. Get ready for it.”

Kindle left without staring at Marc as she went. She wanted him, but she needed peace more.

“Almost finished.” Angela scanned her list. “Let’s have...Kyle.”

Silence fell as attention switched to the couple sitting together near Marc.

“Was Autumn the good twin?”

Jennifer gasped. She hadn’t known what he was going to ask for.

Kyle covered her hand with his, sharing her pain.

Angela hadn’t suspected that either. “Does it matter?”

“Not to me, but to the future it might, and as her parents, we need to know.”

“I’ve sensed no evil in Autumn,” Angela stalled. “She’s a sweet baby.”

“She is the bad one, right?” Jennifer jerked her hand from under Kyle’s. “Just tell us!”

“No. She’s not evil *now*.”

Everyone understood the difference.

Angela’s tone became grave. “The future isn’t set. You can keep her from turning bad by filling her with love and kindness. Don’t let your personal hatreds fill her mind with thoughts of vengeance. Make sure she gets to be a child.”

Daryl was unable to keep quiet any longer. “Is the same true of Cynthia’s baby?”

“No.” Angela sighed regretfully. “We’ll witness signs of it from the beginning, with the death of its mother.”

The tent went icy as Daryl demanded to know what she meant.

“Have you seen the Omen films?”

“The first one,” Daryl answered distractedly. “Couldn’t take the rest.”

“Then find someone who has. You’ll need to fight hard and in the end, some stupid detail from that series might save Cynthia’s life.”

“Why can’t you just tell me?! I hate this!”

“Because you shouldn’t even have a warning!” Angela was extremely tired. “Magic was never meant to be used this way and other than Neil, everyone has asked for something selfish! Ask your reward and do it now.”

“What should I do?” Daryl asked helplessly. “I already want them both.”

Unlike with the others, Angela couldn't offer any hope here; she told him the last thing he wanted to hear. "Convince her to abort and then refill her with your seed. In time, the wounds will heal and all three of you will be happy together."

"She won't do that." Daryl's face reddened in shame. "I already tried. I mean, its Adrian's kid. We already know they go bad too easy."

"They've had bad beginnings." Marc felt the need to defend descendants in general. "If they'd been raised by loving people, it might have mattered, right, Angie?"

"In most of the cases, yes." Angela shrugged. "But some mixes of DNA will always create monsters. Without knowing it, Cynthia and Adrian have done exactly that."

"What if it isn't Adrian's?"

People jumped at the unexpected voice, some reaching for weapons.

Cynthia fastened the flap and went to a seat by Daryl. "I don't know. Matt might be the father."

Angela's eyes narrowed at the lie. "We can't test for parentage until after the birth."

"So we'll test it then." Daryl felt like he'd just been given oxygen after almost drowning. "And until then, we hold out hope for good to come out on top."

"Agreed." Angela didn't mark Daryl's name off yet.

"That leaves you two." Angela scanned Jeremy and then Zack. "Gentlemen?"

Not wanting his mountain weakness revealed, Jeremy chose to tackle his second biggest fear. "Is Samantha with me out of pity? Would it be better if I got out of the picture?"

“Samantha adores you. If you left her, nothing would be good for any of you.”

“Is it wrong?” Jeremy asked without knowing he was going to. “Our setup?”

“Wrong by whose standards?”

“By camp standards.” Jeremy was glad Neil had left but curious if he’d wondered this too. “Does the future include couples like us?”

“Of course.” Angela was glad she could ease his worries on this one. “And no, by camp standards, you’re not doing anything wrong because all of you are consenting adults. But what you want to know is more about morals and ethics, right?”

“Yes. The world was going down a bad path with the free love crap and I worry that I’m helping to restart it. We don’t need more problems.”

“You three are committed. We all have the right to pursue happiness, as long as we’re respectful of other people’s freedoms. You’re doing that. Don’t worry about those who might look down on you for it. You’ll be happier than most of them.” Angela glanced at Zack. “You’re up.”

“I have a yes or no question. And it’s for you.”

“Okay.” Angela gestured for him to go ahead. She’d been counting on this moment.

“Marc hasn’t pulled your tent down and there’s no leader spot for it belowground yet. Are you moving into the cave with us?”

She had been waiting for this moment. “No, I’m not.” Angela let the gasps and mutters die down. “In a few weeks, I’m going south, and then I’m going to Kendle’s island. I’m

set to tell the camp next week, but I want you all to know about it now. Half the camp will vote to stay here, but I'm not going to be swayed. And if you're my chain of command, like you claim you are, you'll all be with me when I go."

## 4

Angela waved as the tent emptied of the unhappy people. "Hang around for a minute, Kenn." Word would begin to spread now, but she wasn't going to change her mind. Choices had been made, the future had shifted, and the tide would come their way. She had no choice.

When they were alone, Angela turned to Kenn. "Adrian told you to account for your mistakes during the last bugout, so that when it happened again, you'd be ready for it."

Kenn hated the reminder of his failures that night.

"Did you?"

Kenn nodded. "I went overboard on it, I think."

"Good. Please have it to me by evening mess tomorrow. My eyes only."

"You got it." Kenn left, not asking for details. Her bombshell about leaving here in a few weeks was still exploding throughout his mind.

As Kenn left, Kyle returned, positive she was ready for their next update session.

Angela took a seat and got her notebook out. "Okay."

"Cynthia is lying. The dates don't add up."

Angela knew most of the things Kyle was about to tell her, but she wrote them down to be able to compare to her notes later and mark them off. Keeping track of the futures of three

hundred people required a lot of writing to avoid missing details and effects.

“Neil and Jeremy don’t know Samantha was sick or what Conner did for her.”

“She’ll tell them herself at some point. Next?”

“The first crate of supplies for Samantha’s crew to hide is ready. I’ll make sure it gets into their vehicle.”

“Good. Have your men pack the next crate right away.”

“I will. The vet has left without permission three times. We keep losing him in the darkness.”

“Let me know if you ever discover where he goes.” Angela was certain they wouldn’t. The vet was slyer than the Eagles.

“Kendle didn’t help with the move at all. She stayed in Adrian’s camp all day.”

“She has a huge fear about being underground. The man who hurt her held her underground in a tunnel and then inside a cave. She’ll never step foot in ours.”

“That’s awful!” Kyle had finally got the explanation for what had caused her scars and now, he wished he hadn’t. “I’m sorry the other men don’t like her much.”

“I don’t like her much either. What’s next?”

“Jennifer wants me to get her pregnant—now.”

Angela took in his red profile. “Nervous?”

Kyle nodded quickly. “And scared it won’t go well, terrified she’ll actually get pregnant so soon after Autumn, and well, I’m a bit worn out with all the attacks and action. I may have missed some details.”

Angela wasn’t concerned over that. “I’ll cover it. Take tomorrow off, alone somewhere, and figure out what you

want. When you do that, the drama and choices always get easier.”

“My wants don’t matter now. I have to do what’s best for Jenny and the baby, and I’m not sure this is.”

“Only you can determine that, but I wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. She’s coming to you, asking you to heal her. Don’t deny what both of you need because you’re scared she won’t like you afterwards. Make sure she does. Do it right.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Yeah. Maybe you should talk to Marc. The Ghost is everywhere, you know.”

## 5

North of Safe Haven, a small group of men rolled into the debris littered parking lot of the train station that Adrian had destroyed. The bald man Vlad had sent for help was behind the wheel of the jeep. He pulled to the edge of the damage and unlocked the doors.

A man came from the shadows to climb into the empty front seat.

“Welcome back.” Vlad smiled from the rear. “Good hunting?”

The man held out a Polaroid of two people bound to a tree, both bloody and wearing all black. “Two here, two being tracked.”

Vlad enjoyed the images as the bald man, who preferred to be called Blade, pointed them toward the mountains. He’d picked Vlad up a mile from here. Now that they were

complete, except for the hunters, Blade drove them to the location Vlad had given him.

“When are they coming?” the front passenger asked. He was Marc’s loose lurker.

“A week to ten days.” Blade leaned back against the warm seat. “The trains have to be unloaded before the troops can roll.”

“Looks like snow coming.” Vlad frowned. “Keep to the secondary plan we made. If our troops fail, we’ll be ready.”

Blade obediently rolled them along without giving their informant more information. These lower-level men would be eliminated after the attack. Only their top men would enjoy the spoils of this war, but it was one that Blade found himself dreading.

He and Vlad had decided they would gain a hold over Safe Haven during the winter and come spring, send them out to toil in fields and on farms. They needed those slaves and caves. A new country, one where descendants ruled, wasn’t going to build itself.

## Chapter Twenty-One

# Other Plans



### 1

Dog pushed his heavy warmth down on the two shivering mutts, trying to lend his heat. With little fur and no outdoor experience, the tiny animals had no business traveling through a blizzard at night. *Neither do I.*

The engine roared to life under them. Sally shouted in triumph as her dogs whimpered in fear. She had stopped to fill up the gas tank. It had taken a long time to accomplish against the driving wind. Sally lowered her goggles and pulled the large tarp back over the two cars, creating a vacuum of space that would fill with the heat of their bodies. She quickly tucked it under gear to hold the ends down, leaving a hole in it for her

head. Then she gunned the engine and drove them straight into the snowstorm.

Once again covered, the three canines huddled together miserably and waited for the endless ride to be finished. It was dark. A full day had gone by without Sally stopping for anything except bathroom or fuel. Dog was positive he'd now passed his female.

The bumpy ride smoothed out suddenly. Dog braved the cold to poke his head out of the hole. It put him in Sally's lap.

She nuzzled his soft fur like a pack mate while studying the house ahead of them in the headlights. She hadn't been here since before the war. It looked exactly the same...except for the missing sight of her mother staggering down the front stairs to greet her as she got off the school bus each afternoon.

Dog swept the log house and then the small pond. Frozen, there were three furry shapes sliding across the surface. The area around the house was a mix of woods and suburbs; the large cabin appeared out of place among the fabricated homes. Dog stayed quiet, hoping Sally's pets would too. They couldn't assume the people or the animals were friendlier in the north.

The snow shifted. Shapes vanished in the darkness. The furry forms reappeared near the garage of the home Sally was trying to reach. She saw three big birds land on the roof. The vulture's aggressive stances suggested they now ate more than roadkill. She swept the other rooftops and found too many shadows glaring toward her headlamps.

Dog whined uneasily, increasing her anxiety.

The storm began to calm as the animals milled around. The wind dropped low enough to hear the sounds of nails clicking

and tapping. Animals snorted and huffed; frozen ground cracked. "Not good."

Dog nudged her arm. *Come on!*

Sally slowly took out a small box. Finger on the red button, she gunned them forward. Wind and snow battered the vehicle.

The wolf ducked under the cover, regarding the two shivering dogs. *Stay down.*

The two dogs didn't respond. They'd stopped speaking shortly after the ride started. Dog was positive they were on the verge of vomiting again.

Sally hit the button, hoping the fresh batteries would respond. To her shock and pleasure, the garage door began rolling up. She'd honestly thought she would have to go through it.

Sally slowed, trying to keep them from slamming into the house as they plunged inside the garage. The ATV did thump against the wall of the cabin as it stopped.

Sally winced, hoping it hadn't done real damage. She hit the button again to lower the door.

It didn't respond this time.

Sally climbed from the lightly smoking ATV and hurried to the door to do it manually.

Dog stayed with her, ready to bite anything that came too close, but none of the outside animals reacted to their entry except the vultures that flew away. It was almost as if the other creatures hadn't even seen them, but Dog knew differently.

Sally stared through the tiny garage window for a long moment, noticing the same things as the wolf. The animals out

there hadn't reacted to their arrival, but they glowered at the house. She rubbed Dog's fur. "Let's get fed, huh?"

Sally made sure the door to the house was secured and then set up camp for the night. In the morning, when there was light to see by, she would explore the cabin. For now, the garage was a smaller space to heat.

Sally quickly had a small fire vented through the garage window and a hot meal bubbling in a pot over it. She hadn't been able to bring many of the things she needed, but this home had been setup for survival the last time she'd been here. It was where her father had taught her to hunt, to fish, and to cower in fear of his belt.

Sally curled into a corner in her sleeping bag. The three animals slowly joined her after sniffing and relieving themselves. She didn't mind the smell, though in the morning she would make it clear that only this room would be used for that purpose. If the backyard still had the tall privacy fence around it, this room could be kept clean too.

Sally let sleep pull her under as Dog's heavy body settled onto her feet. The small mutts were already on her chest and stomach.

The woman was more animal than human. Dog found it comforting. Life had been much like this before Marc had started chasing his own mate. The wolf went to sleep feeling safe despite their surroundings. Maybe this could be home while he waited for his female to catch up.

Jeff shrugged in the darkness. “Leave her alone. Wait for her to go.”

“She had a remote for the garage.” Kevin was nervous. “She lives here!”

They’d been enjoying a cup of hot chocolate with Musketeers bars melting in them when they’d heard the engine and spotted the headlights.

Jeff was busy scanning the woman, wondering why she felt familiar. “Hang on...”

Kevin stared apprehensively at the garage door from the dark kitchen, trying to recover from hearing an engine and then having it actually come to the one home on the block that was occupied. They’d hurriedly shut off all the lights and noises. Kevin had almost wet himself after two weeks of peace and quiet. With all the snow, neither of them had thought to see people so soon.

“Trouble.” But after Crista’s death, Jeff didn’t have the heart to hurt the woman. He sighed. “We’re having company.”

Kevin’s brows came together in confusion. “Someone we know?”

“One of them. Gather the weapons and take a watch. We’ll make contact when I get up.”

Kevin had no trouble following Jeff’s orders. The man was a survival whiz and he’d already kept them out of bad spots more than once. He had also found this home, which had an amazing setup for this lifestyle. Once Jeff had added his touches, it had become a good place to lie low for the winter.

Jeff climbed into his warm hammock in the back bedroom, eager to grab a few hours of sleep. He was positive he would need them once the woman discovered she wasn’t alone. He

examined the pictures on the wall and grimaced as he flipped off his headlamp. He recognized the images. In the middle of an apocalypse, he'd picked a house that still had an owner.

### 3

Sally woke to the smell of frying meat. She leapt to her feet, startling all three animals. They'd already smelled it and begun to drool.

Sally ran to the garage door as voices echoed from inside the home, but the sight of a huge black bear on the front lawn convinced her she wasn't better off outside. Hoping in vain that she hadn't been noticed yet, or that the people had arrived after her, Sally got her gun and approached the door. She was hoping to listen and determine what to do next.

She wasn't prepared for the door to swing open as soon as she leaned on it.

Kevin quickly snatched the weapon from the surprised woman and pointed it at her. "Who are you?" The tall woman was bundled up in jeans, boots, and a black coat that went all the way to her knees. Her hair was hidden under a mask; all he could see was that she had brown eyes and no lips.

Sally slowly stood up, not sure what the bristling wolf at her heels would do. "This is my house. Who are you?"

When she didn't rush them or even appear angry, Jeff lowered his weapon. He signaled for Kevin to remain trained on her in the dim morning light. "We've been here for two weeks, waiting out storms. When this one breaks, we'll go," Jeff had thought about keeping the place, but it was her home.

If they turned her out, where would she go? After Crista's death, Jeff just couldn't do it.

Before Sally could reply, the wolf padded into the room, followed by the two bouncy little dogs that squeaked as they landed. Tiny claws skidded across the kitchen floor and vanished into the rear rooms.

The wolf stopped in front of Kevin, golden eyes on the gun.

Kevin slowly lowered the weapon, gaping. "Dog?"

Dog snorted and followed the two smaller mutts to keep them out of trouble.

Sally's scowl covered what they could see of her profile. "Safe Haven?"

Jeff and Kevin both took offense at the way she spat the words, but neither rebuked her. They had their own issues.

"Not anymore." Jeff didn't like the impression he was getting. Suddenly worried they'd let in a big problem, he ignored the flinch to haul her over to the nearest chair. Jeff jerked her mask off and dropped it in her lap. "Who are you and what do you know about Safe Haven?"

Kevin thought to protest, but he remembered how many assassins and traitors they'd dealt with and lost people to over the last months. Was the brown haired woman one of the few who had escaped Angela's justice? Kevin had no sympathy. He wanted them all dead. If not for the government and Mexicans hounding them, Cynthia wouldn't have shot anyone and turned to Adrian for an outlet. She wouldn't be pregnant and he would be the one sliding into her at night—not Daryl.

Kevin winced at his thoughts. He'd been trying hard not to consider it at all.

Realizing she needed to be careful, Sally frowned. “I had a home until some of *those* people came through. This is...was, my father’s house.”

*That explains the young photos.* Jeff settled into the chair across from her, considering their options. He had a bad feeling about letting her stay, but he was also reluctant to send her out to a frozen death. And Dog was with her. Jeff had always found the wolf to be a great judge of character. “We’ll leave after the storm breaks,” Jeff repeated, gesturing for Kevin to close the garage door. “You’ll stay here in the living room, where we can keep an eye on you.”

Instead of the pleading or rage he was expecting, Sally rubbed at her arms and glared. “You have to sleep sometime.”

Jeff lunged forward to place his gun against her temple.

Sally glared. “I’m not afraid of you! Shoot me!”

Startled by the rabid response, Jeff holstered his gun and took out the handcuffs. “I have other plans.”

Sally screamed.

Dog came running, followed by the two squeakers.

Kevin drew his weapon, not sure who to shoot.

“The wolf!” Jeff struggled to cuff Sally’s hands in front of her. “Damn, lady. I didn’t mean it that way!”

Sally continued to scream until Jeff moved back and then the noise cut off abruptly. An eager grin came over her weather-beaten face as he rotated to find Dog snarling, fur in full bristle.

Jeff, running on instinct because there wasn’t time to think, lifted his gun. “Tell me she’s safe to leave loose and I’ll cut her free.”

Dog growled again, but couldn't follow through. The woman was definitely dangerous.

Jeff walked away.

Kevin holstered, already tired of the drama. *The last two weeks were so peaceful!*

Dog padded to Sally and sat down in front of her, head swinging between the two men.

Kevin went back to his post at the front window of the house, unable to count all the animal tracks in the light snow that had come in overnight. While Jeff slept, they'd had a migration come through. The variety in it had been astounding. What was more shocking was that the creatures had been going north, not south like when Safe Haven had come across moving herds. It was as if the animals were being drawn by something.

Jeff resumed their morning ritual of breakfast and music, flipping on the iPad he'd connected to a nice speaker system. With Kevin on duty in the front and the wolf now here, Jeff felt safe enough to increase the volume a bit and enjoy what so many of them had taken for granted nearly every day of their old lives.

The deer steaks didn't take long. Jeff made three plates. The animal migrations provided a steady diet. With winter here and the herds coming through, he and Kevin already had a nice stock of meat. They would continue to add to it.

Sally studied the two men, glad of the warmth in the room and the wolf settling down on top of her cold feet. The trip here had numbed her. When she woke, she hadn't had time to notice how cold the garage had become. Her toes were icy.

Kevin spotted a nice buck and slowly eased the window open. He picked up the Winchester from the window ledge. “Baggin’ one.” Kevin eased the window open. He quickly took aim and fired.

Sally flinched at the report, as did Dog. The animals outside stared in avid hatred as the body fell.

“Headin’ out for it.” Kevin pushed the window open to climb down.

Jeff set the spatula aside and came over to cover Kevin from the window. He would take the carcass to the cleaning area they’d chosen to set up in the backyard. From his position, Jeff could observe him until he shut the gate.

Instantly sorry that he hadn’t grabbed his coat, Kevin ran to the buck and grabbed it by the hoof to drag away. He slipped and slid, but it wasn’t hard to transport the warm body across the icy ground. He was quickly into the backyard with it and had the gate locked. Too stubborn to stop and go in for his coat, Kevin began skinning and cleaning the deer. He and Jeff had gotten quicker at it. He was confident he would be fine for the ten minutes it would take to get done and hang it up.

In the other corner of the snow covered yard, a small tunnel under the fence glared in unnoticed danger as furious animals studied the man hungrily.

#### 4

Inside the cool house, Jeff hurried toward the kitchen without reacting to the cuffed woman’s flinch or Dog’s low growl. He could smell the steaks burning. He chose to leave the window cracked to vent the harsh odor.

Sally stuck out a foot as the intimidating man went by.

He tripped, falling into the wide coffee table with a loud crash. Jeff groaned as his head struck the corner; he slid to the floor.

Dog leapt to his feet, startled.

Sally rose, going to the prone man. She slid his gun and knife free, then dug for the keys to the cuffs.

In the front of the house, the black bear returned, coming straight for the front window where the rifle was laying. The smells and sounds of people were not supposed to be here.

Sally rushed to the garage door with the knife in her teeth and the gun in her cuffed hands, struggling to open the door and not drop either weapon. She stumbled into the garage and shut the door to protect her pets, then ran to the ATV. She hadn't found anything in the man's pockets, but she'd brought her own cuffs and, her own keys.

She was loose a minute later. The smell of smoke drew her notice. Something was burning. She remembered the cooking food and reluctantly went back to the door. She didn't want her pets to burn.

Sally saw the man on the floor and hurried to shut the propane off. As she spun around, she realized she could hear the other one screaming from the backyard. Guilt slapped her. Terror followed as she saw the huge bear in the open window. The gigantic head was inside, lips drawn back as it scented the room.

Dog was in front of the bear, as were her pets. All three of them were growling but not barking.

Sally hesitated. The Winchester was on the ledge under the window, but she didn't think she could get to it without being bitten or clawed, and if the bear chose to climb—

The bear began to heft itself through the window.

Dog growled harshly; the two small dogs yapped furiously.

*Close the window!*

Sally rushed forward and slammed both palms into it, hitting the bear in the nose with the glass.

The bear flinched in confusion as Sally snapped the lock in place, lungs burning from the air she'd forgotten to take in through her terror.

The bear roared angrily, rattling the pane as it pressed against the cold glass.

Sally stumbled backward, panting in fear.

A hand wrapped around her ankle...

Sally screamed.

Jeff jerked the woman down as the vulture swooped. It had come in the window while Sally was in the garage. Jeff hadn't been able to see anything for a minute due to the head bump, but he'd heard every noise—including the bear trying to enter their den.

Dog lunged as the vulture dove again.

Jeff covered the woman as the two animals fought for dominance. He awkwardly retrieved his sidearm from her waistband. There wasn't a clear shot, however. He finally had to roll them out of the way and under the protection of the kitchen table.

The two small dogs joined the wolf, snapping and growling, biting where they could reach. The two main rooms

were heavily damaged with splintering bookshelves and chairs.

A piercing cry echoed and then silence fell.

Jeff scanned the chaos and found Dog's teeth clamped around the vulture's face. He hurried over to put his gun against its head and signaled Dog back.

Used to laboring with the Eagles, Dog responded immediately; Jeff pulled the trigger.

The vulture slumped to the floor as blood pooled.

Jeff dragged the carcass to the window. He picked up the rifle. "Get over here. When I tell you to, open the window, but swing it easy. I need all the time you can give me."

Sally didn't think of arguing. She took the place nervously, flinching as the screams from the backyard increased in volume.

"Now."

Sally flipped the lock and gave a firm push.

The window swung open, a bit too quickly.

Jeff tried to narrow his aim as the bear immediately crowded into the opening. He ducked in and shoved the gun under the bear's thick neck.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Jeff kept firing even after the animal stopped advancing to make sure it was dead. A 30-30 was light for a bear this size.

Sally retreated from the bloody, damaged room, shocked and angry. *My house!*

Jeff spun toward the backyard, aware that Kevin's screams had stopped.

## 5

Kevin kicked at the vulture when it tried to follow him under the picnic table. He'd been swarmed with the birds before he could even draw his weapon.

The big bird lunged forward again, snapping violently.

Kevin kicked, aiming this time, and caught it across the face. He heard a crack and a whine, but he had to spin around in the snow to kick at the other side as a second vulture tried to bite his arm.

Finally able to get his gun out, Kevin scrambled toward the shed that was next to the table and rolled free. He gained his feet as the two vultures gave chase, cawing loudly.

Kevin fled into the shed and slammed the door on the aggressive bird, cracking another part of the hard beak. He didn't want to open fire and bring anything else to his location. He wasn't sure why Jeff wasn't helping him after all the screaming, but he assumed there was a problem inside too.

Kevin put his back to the door, needing to know he was safe here for the moment.

"What...?" He ducked as spiders threw themselves from the ceiling.

Kevin slapped at the arachnids and yanked the door open as two shots rang out. He looked down at the gun he hadn't fired and then at the dead vultures Jeff had handled. "Nice!"

He holstered and began pulling his shirt off as the spiders that had landed on him started biting.

Jeff covered Kevin from two new vultures that had flown to the fence. The men hurried inside the house through the rear patio. As they locked the door, the sound of wood splintering echoed.

“Was that the side gate?” Kevin was trying to remove his clothes between slaps and itches.

“Yep.” Jeff watched a slightly smaller bear charge into the yard. “But there’s a meal waiting, so we’re good for the moment.”

“Uh...” Kevin cleared his throat, fighting the need to scratch. “Maybe not.”

Jeff rotated to find Sally holding a 9mm and the handcuffs.

“Your turn.”

“No.” Jeff grunted in annoyance. *I’ve about had enough of this chick already.* “Shoot me.”

Sally blinked. “What?”

“You’re not cuffing me, lady. Shoot me or put that gun up and work on the mess.” Jeff gestured. “It’ll take the three of us hours to straighten things up.”

Sally examined the mess at her feet and then the two angry men. Reluctantly, slowly, she holstered.

Kevin let out the breath he’d been holding and allowed himself to scratch until he had skin under his fingernails.

Jeff got the medical kit and spent a few uncomfortable moments helping Kevin apply ointment. The arachnids weren’t poisonous, but the wolf spider venom often caused an allergic reaction. To be sure they were covered, Jeff insisted Kevin swallow a capsule of Benadryl. He wasn’t in the mood to perform a tracheotomy.

“I’m gonna fall out.” Kevin swallowed it. “Been up all night for my shift and now this. You won’t be able to wake me if things go crazy again.”

Jeff shrugged, grinning. “So? You won’t feel them eating you.”

“Oh, man!” Kevin snickered. Jeff was forever popping off with something like that.

“Grab something to eat and go to bed. The woman and I have it covered.”

“Sally!” She glared from her stance in the middle of the destruction. “Before he goes, we have to shove this body outside.”

“Work around it.” Jeff was already gathering what he needed. “I want that hide and a chunk of the meat. We’ll store some of the rest for dog food.”

“Uh...maybe we should change plans.” Kevin stared through the cracks in the boards they had nailed over all the other entrances. “The yard is filling up. We should shut that window and get some cover on it.”

Jeff took a moment to judge it for himself. He was astounded by how many creatures were roaming the property. “Yeah, we’ll shove it out now. I’ll carve it later.”

The three of them heaved the cooling corpse out of the window, glad the big bear had only made it half inside. They never would have been able to do this otherwise. Jeff kept track of the shadows moving through the light snow as they tossed out the biggest part of the gory mess. Deer and wolves were mingling, along with goats, a moose, a whole line of ducks, and a list of other animals. All of them could be a threat or a meal.

Jeff tried to judge the situation from a survival aspect. Unless the moose charged their door, none of the other animals out there could get through to the rear room of the home where he had chosen to make a stand if it was needed. However, they

had to eat and the food and the outhouse were in the back. “We have to repair that side gate.”

Kevin shook his head, scratching at his neck. “I’ll fall asleep on you. Take the...Sally. I’ll stay at this window with Dog until I can’t stay awake.”

“Okay. Coffee’s on the stove.”

“Good idea.” Kevin took the rifle along.

Sally gawked at them. “You’re doing what?” She wasn’t as upset over the two men being here anymore. If she’d been alone, the vultures in the yard would have attacked her the first time she stumbled to the bathroom. Sally hadn’t realized how bad things had gotten with nature and the vendetta against mankind.

“I have to get my things.” Sally leaned down to comfort her two shivering pets.

Dog took a seat near the bloody window, observing the front yard.

Jeff watched her from the door, partly out of caution of a stranger and partly because of the feeling that things weren’t finished yet.

Sally hefted her bags and kits over her shoulders and wrists, wanting it all in one trip. She let him hold the door open for her, but said nothing—not even thank you.

Sally awkwardly strode to the second small bedroom in the dusty hall, glad to discover the men hadn’t been in here. She dropped her gear and went to the oil lamp on the mantle without using her flashlight. She knew her way around blindfolded.

“Can you use that gun?”

“Yes.” Sally pulled on her gloves with the tips missing, loving the mobility. “And that 30-30 you’ve got.”

“Good. The gate on the house next door might fit. I have to measure ours, then go over and take the new one off the hinges. You’re covering me.”

Sally didn’t argue. The sooner he got the gate replaced, the sooner she could use the outhouse. She’d needed to since she woke up.

## 6

Jeff eased through the front door with his toolkit in hand, hoping the woman really could use the Winchester. Despite her height, Jeff doubted she was strong enough to carry the gate.

Sally stayed close, scanning for threats. Jeff had decided only the small pack of wolves was actually dangerous. He’d told her to watch them more than the other creatures. The tracks in the ankle-deep snow said bigger animals were nearby too; he tried not to make much noise as they hurried to the side of the house.

Jeff studied their damaged gate and saw he’d been right about the fit. However, the frame was severely damaged. He wasn’t going to be able to replace it quickly or easily. Jeff swept the block for something to fill the area instead.

Pocketing his toolkit, he signaled at a minivan across the street. “Come on.” Jeff knew the battery wasn’t going to have power. He was glad the driveway that housed it was atop a short, steep hill. He busted the window with the butt of his rifle, wincing at the noise, and opened the door.

“I’ll wedge it in there. You stay back a little, but not too far. When I hit the alley, the vultures will probably be drawn back to us.”

“I’ll do it.” Sally shoved the rifle at him. “You won’t fit through that window.”

Jeff didn’t argue. He’d much rather be the one with the gun anyway. He slung the rifle over his shoulder. “Hold the brake and shift it into neutral. Don’t let go until I tell you to.”

“Okay.” She slid behind the wheel.

“Once it’s rolling, don’t use the brakes at all. Steer it straight into the street. It’ll be going fast enough to roll up the yard and make it to the alley. I may have to push from there.”

“Okay.” She didn’t have a problem with his plan. The animals were all around them, but not acting aggressive. What bothered her was the way Jeff’s eyes seemed to glow at times. “I’m ready.”

“Me too.” Jeff braced to push from the rear. “Let’s go.”

Sally forced the van into neutral; Jeff pushed.

## 7

Standing in front of the reopened window, Kevin kept a steady scan of the area going, already fighting drowsiness. He was glad the itching had faded, though. He watched the van roll toward the house.

Next to Kevin, the wolf and the two small dogs also listened.

*Crash!*

The house shuddered as the van slammed into the alley between the homes, sending the small dogs into the rear room to hide.

The van jammed into the space, scraping loudly. Sally barely had enough room to wiggle through the driver window. It wouldn't keep all of the animals out, but it was unlikely that a bear would try to climb over the van.

She joined Jeff at the bumper. He had the rifle ready, but there was no sign of the big birds or the wolves.

Jeff glanced around and realized there wasn't an animal in sight now. That was odd. "Are you okay out here for another ten minutes?"

"Yes." Sally curled icy fingertips into warm palms.

Jeff gave her the rifle and strode determinedly toward the slowly stiffening bear carcass. The block around them was frozen in white silence, with snow coming down again. The wind had faded, but the temperature was falling fast. Jeff tried to hurry as he collected the hide and other parts. Behind him, he could hear Sally shuffling from foot to foot as she tried to keep warm.

It was bloody, stomach-churning labor for most people, but Jeff didn't mind. What sometimes bothered him was the sound the hide made as he ripped it up or the small splash of fluids that often sprayed as it came free. He usually remembered to turn his face away in time, but sometimes, it still splashed up his arm or cheek.

Sally was impressed with how fast Jeff took the hide from the carcass. He was forced to leave the bottom half, as they couldn't roll the animal over, but he managed to claim a long

enough piece to fashion a nice blanket or several smaller items.

While she waited, Sally studied the neighborhood around them that she could see through the dark and the snow. She remembered when it had been her house. The one further down had belonged to her aunt. Her father had brought his sister here to start a new life and in some ways, they absolutely had.

“But the abuse came along too, right?” Jeff flipped on his headlamp. He’d been scanning her thoughts since she arrived.

Sally froze for an instant. Then dismay and hatred flashed. “I can’t get away from you bastards!”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Jeff didn’t pause in cutting off chunks of the meat. He’d brought a garbage bag for hauling it.

“What?” Sally was no longer observing their surroundings as she caressed the rifle.

“You’ve got a thing against people.”

“Descendants are not people! All you do is hurt others!”

“Then why haven’t I hurt you?” Jeff glanced up at her, feeling the goose egg on his skull. “I believe you tripped me...”

Sally flushed and didn’t respond.

“If I were evil, you’d be raped and dead by now for something like that.” Jeff bagged his loot and stood up. “You’ve got a few seconds to make the choice, lady. Once I shut that door, you’re out here with the rest of the wild things that can’t be trusted.”

Sally wanted to refuse, but the cold and the sense that the man wasn’t a threat convinced her to follow him.

Around the pair, nothing moved except the snow.

Jeff held the door for her—it was ingrained.

Sally darted under his big arm to quickly get out of the way.

Kevin glanced over at them with glassy eyes. His shoulder was against the glass, window latched. “All sset?”

Jeff gestured toward the bedroom. “Hit the rack.”

Kevin grinned and staggered that way without even a peek at Sally. He wasn’t sure what had happened while he was outside, but it was obvious the woman had done something wrong. He expected Jeff to send her on her way.

Jeff pointed toward the dim hall. “We rigged up a temporary john for use during the storms.”

Sally disappeared down the hall without anything except a frown.

Jeff shook his head. “Some people...”

He went to the door to scan the backyard, aware that she still had the rifle. The yard was empty of pests, though Jeff wasn’t sure when the smaller bear had wandered off. The hole in the fencing was there. Jeff quickly slipped outside to cover it.

The icy ground crunched under his boots. He hurried forward, grabbing the stone planter as he went. A few other pieces of furniture made a decent barrier. Jeff tugged the heavy picnic table over to finish it off. Even a bear wasn’t coming through here.

Jeff locked the shed door, and then made a fast stop in the outhouse. He was relieved not to find any spiders.

After her pit stop, Sally began cleaning the mess, piling most of it into the corner to be bagged. Paper towels were a

thing of the past. She reluctantly used a few of her father's old white towels that could be bleached.

The two small dogs sniffed and yapped happily beside her while Dog lingered near the window, uneasy. Nature had given up too fast.

## 8

By late afternoon, Kevin was back up. The two men reinforced the windows and doors. The feeling that bad things were coming was heavy in the air.

Sally also felt it. She held nails and tools while the men prepared the cabin. She also hated every moment of it and had to fight to keep her scorn hidden. She wasn't certain that both men were descendants, but it didn't matter. The first chance she got to leave, she would.

The two small canines mostly stayed under the kitchen table, shivering and scratching on the rug. Dog wandered the cabin, searching for a way out. If he could find one, then the other animals could get in.

Kevin studied the two layers they'd already nailed over the rear door. "Another board?"

"No. Let's go get a few things from our freezer. We'll use the bathroom setup in here when it gets dark."

The men hurried to the coolers they'd strategically hidden to bring in the food, still not spotting any animals. Jeff had the bear meat in the house, but they also had deer, pig, and turkey out here. They'd spent the first week doing almost nothing but collecting food and gear.

Jeff saw the hole was still covered with his furniture barricade and the fences were free of birds. It was almost as if the migration had shifted in a new direction, which was bad for them. Jeff had been counting on meat for a few more weeks before winter forced them under cover.

“Oh, shit. That’s trouble.”

Jeff followed Kevin’s line of sight; his stomach dropped. “That explains the animals leaving.”

“Yeah.” Kevin hurried toward the house. “We gotta seal this place up, like now!”

Jeff lingered for a moment, awed. The snowstorm was almost upon them, even though the wind here was at a standstill. Huge, roiling masses were rushing their way, obscuring everything under it. The next block was still visible, but not beyond. It astounded Jeff that nature could fire such a deadly shot, but none of them had heard it. Even a suppressor allowed noise, but this was a vacuum of silence. It was amazing.

Jeff grabbed a few more items and lugged it inside, where Kevin and Sally were sealing cracks and crevices with towels and old clothes from the dusty dressers. He joined them, sure they were wasting time. When that storm hit this house, they might have to huddle in one tent for warmth and hope it was enough.

Jeff’s thoughts went to Safe Haven, He quickly scratched the idea of calling to warn them. Safe Haven had Samantha and a few other people who could sense these things coming. *Why didn’t they try to warn us?*

*You left, his demon answered. In her place, would you have warned people who fled?*

Jeff hated that voice. He liked the uses and he'd chosen to accept it in his mind for that reason, but he still hated it.

*Why? the demon questioned, hurt. Because I tell you the truths you don't want to hear?*

*Because you can't bring her back! What good is power when it can't bring her back?!*

The demon had no answer for that, only more painful emotions from adding another failure.

Jeff didn't care about the demon's feelings. He understood he could control the power, but not be bonded at all. That was how he preferred things.

Dog came to Jeff's side. *There are cracks and holes. We are not safe here.*

"Yeah. We'll be in the main room, probably in tents. I'll try to secure it."

*The snow is not the problem. Another herd has come ahead of the storm.*

Jeff hurried to the front window and discovered the ground alive with rabbits. Every size, shape, and color was represented. Jeff gaped.

His reaction drew Sally and Kevin; the three of them stood there contemplating what it meant. Witnessing hundreds of rabbits flee northward brought all of them to the same conclusion. When the prey migrated, so did the predators. After the storm, this area would be covered in packs of hungry, cold, desperate animals hunting for anything to eat.

Dog whined suddenly, making the humans flinch, but he couldn't stop the noise as he spotted the female and her pack chasing the rabbits ahead of the storm. Brute was still with her, but that was the only familiar face. Dog studied them intently,

almost able to feel the cold on the pads of his feet, the crunch of the hare between his teeth.

The female stopped, her bloody muzzle swinging toward the house. She spotted the people in the window. Her snout drew up in an ugly snarl they all felt. She wanted them dead.

Jeff closed the blinds and the curtains. He motioned to Kevin. “Get the tape. We’ll seal this up now.”

Kevin retrieved the thick role of duct tape. He and Sally held the boards and plastic in place as Jeff secured the window. In the center, they left a small hole in the boards to shoot through. They could rip the plastic open when they needed to get to it, but right now, it wasn’t a good idea to draw attention.

“We’re gonna pretend this is a zombie apocalypse,” Jeff ordered, making Kevin snicker. “No noises, and that means you have to keep *those* quiet.” He pointed at Sally’s two little dogs.

“They’re small, they get excited easily.” She scowled. “I won’t use muzzles!”

“If they bark, we’ll be attacked.” Kevin wished the woman wasn’t so hostile. “Do they obey you?”

Dog snorted, expressing his opinion.

Sally crossed her arms over her chest. “I rescued them.”

“So?”

“So, they didn’t need to be beaten into submission!”

“I don’t beat animals.” Jeff knelt down and snapped his fingers. “Come.”

The two little dogs immediately rushed over with excited bounces and wiggles.

Jeff regarded Dog as he pet them. *Do they understand us?*

*Very little. The wolf chuffed. They have no control. May I suggest a muffled cage?*

*When it starts, can you get them into the bathroom?*

*Maybe.* Dog looked up at Sally, who was fingering the butt of the gun in her holster. *I think it would be best if she went in with them.*

Jeff peered at Sally, taking Dog's suggestion seriously. He didn't like the vibes he'd been getting, or the crazy thoughts she seemed to keep flowing continuously. If she was lying about being able to shoot, he would indeed lock her up. If she could be helpful during a battle, he preferred to leave her loose.

Dog whined; his big head swung toward the rear of the house.

The next instant, the storm hit their block. The afternoon light faded as snow enveloped the house. The temperature plunged as wind slammed into the buildings and snow rained down in thick, deadly sprinkles.

"Get more layers of clothes on." Jeff's breath streamed out in front of him to prove the temperature had dropped instantly. "Load it up and bring the rest of the winter gear in here. It's about to get very cold."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# Cold Shoulder



### 1

“We’ve got snow.” Marc ducked into the warm canvas. He quickly secured the flap, wondering how healthy it was for Angela to be sleeping in a tent in this weather while she was pregnant.

“Women have been doing it for a long time.” Angela stretched out on the bedroll. She’d just woken.

Marc had felt her sight go over the camp and linger on him. She had over an hour before her shift began.

She slowly sat up. “Has Samantha sent a weather warning?”

“Not yet.” Marc handed her a lit smoke and a bottle of water. “She’s still in the medical bay.”

“I’ll handle that soon.”

“We got about an inch of snow. It came in after midnight. I opened the trucks and outfitted the night shift.”

“Good.” She yawned. “Have Greg cover it for everyone else. People will want to play in it and they’ll need good coats. Pass out the Gore-Tex bibs and parkas for the working.”

“No sweat. Billy’s group brought trucks of winter stuff. Almost all of our crews are home now. Did you already know we’d get snow early?”

“Of course.” She yawned again. “I look as far ahead as I can. So will you.”

That implied he would run Safe Haven at some point. Marc frowned. He’d thought of that over the last couple of months and it had even been mentioned, but he hadn’t honestly thought she meant it.

“You’ll have to be in charge when I get further along.” Angela slowly stood up as her stomach insisted she was hungry. “And for at least the month after, but I’ll be there to help. It should be fun.”

*Unlikely.* Marc held her coat and then her arm as she slid her shoes on. “Size seven snow boots?”

“Yes.” She smiled at his accuracy. “Thanks.”

Marc escorted her to the restroom and waited, scanning the snowy landscape. Most of the camp was sleeping soundly belowground, with security up here being rotated every half hour to help them adjust to the cold. Tomorrow, he would make it an hour. After that, he would add an hour a night until they were able to handle a full shift in this weather without frostbite. The gear he’d passed out would help. The top Eagles

would patrol in the extreme winter gear kits from the bases that Adrian had been scouring along their trek.

Marc saw the usual early morning crews—mess, medical, and security—groggily coming from tents and the cave to discover the snow. Many of them went back in to layer on more clothes, but some people immediately began to play, making snowballs and sliding. Marc let them go despite the noise. Laughter was fine to be woken by in most cases.

They were on normal schedules now that the cave was habitable. The rest of the work would happen while they were inside. Marc saw more shadows coming through the snowy topside from the cave and wondered how many members were already awake. This was the first large test of their bathroom setup and mess down there, as well as the power, water, and security. Marc keyed his mike. “Update in ten minutes. I’ll come to you.”

Marc felt the wave of nervous activity following his call. It meant he would be inspecting areas to see if security was handling things correctly. He’d been down in the cave once tonight to check in with each Eagle on duty. He’d found a tranquil camp that was grateful to be in the warmer environment. For the evenings, he’d put Kyle in charge of cave security and kept Zack topside. Both men were good. Marc had spent the evening planning defenses between handling the new arrivals.

Angela joined him. “Many of those?”

“Two groups. One went into Zone A for you to sort through. The other had slaves. I said no.”

“And sent the message?”

“Yes. I expect a response shortly.”

“Good. We can’t let them go, no matter what the camp thinks.”

“I agree. We do it now, so we don’t have to do it later.”

Angela knew he considered it to be like the sniper work he’d done before the war, but Marc had chosen the targets and sent out their killer himself this time. Was that bothering him? Angela didn’t want him to be ruined the way she was.

“You’re not ruined! Unless you do it again.”

Before she could respond, Marc kept going. “I don’t feel guilty over the call. They had slaves on actual chains. America doesn’t need that in any form.”

Angela winced. Hilda and Peggy were currently alone in the medical supply truck discussing that possibility.

“Angie?”

She looked at him regretfully. “I’m sorry. I am, but it may go that way and I’m not going to interfere if it does. Women deserve the same chance that men have squandered.”

“Do you blame men for the war?” He wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“For all wars,” Angela’s witch intoned. “Battles over women were fought by the men who wanted them. Men are driven to claim, to own, and it has destroyed society time after time, throughout history. Men cannot change.”

“I don’t believe that!” Angela was angry the witch had interrupted her answer. “All men are not evil. Go away!”

Marc was more concerned than he let on. “Rough night?”

“She’s bitter over being fooled by Adrian.”

“Aren’t we all?” Marc muttered, thinking of his own short-lived fondness for the leader. It did make him feel a little better

that the witch had missed it completely. Angie's demon had fallen hard.

Their radios crackled with Kenn's tired voice. "More new arrivals."

Marc keyed his to show that he had heard, and then kissed Angie's cold cheek. "Call if you need me."

Her shadows stayed close as Angela went to the mess truck that was now so deserted it appeared to be just another relic of the war. Angela was a little sad when she compared it to her memories of first joining Safe Haven. The well-lit mess, with great smells and strong company, had been one of the best areas.

Angela entered the truck, latching the door, and found Li Sing and Doug playing Hob Jong.

She grinned at the men. "Good morning so far?"

"Not until I get my knife back." Doug laid down a faded card.

Angela helped herself to one of the plates marked for leadership, enjoying the biscuits and gravy while watching them play. The plate was quickly emptied.

"Have more." Li gestured without glancing away from the cards. "We had flour come in. I made extra."

Angela happily took a second plate and a mug of coffee, starting to feel awake. Her stomach was settled now. She finished the meal in peace, staying until the hand was over. She finally left when Doug's grumbles became shouts and Li's cute laughter echoed. The two men were becoming fast friends. Angela was glad Doug had initiated it. "Wish he'd do that with Peggy."

Angela pulled her coat tighter, buttoning the top one as she went to the gate to determine which refugees would be allowed in today. They would have to rotate the zones again. All medical people would pull doubles. *And it won't be enough.* Angela sighed, shutting down her grumpy morning side. They would do the best they could. Fate would cover the rest.

She joined Marc at the gate. They stared together in surprise at the two Amish buggies struggling through the snow toward them. The buggies were overloaded with people in long, plain coats and plain hats. They waved frantically at the guards when the gate spotlight flashed on from the motion sensors being activated.

The small buggies slipped and slid on the icy hill. Lanterns guided the straining horses. Angela studied the families deeply. It only took a moment to see that they were simply desperate. She signaled for the guards to put them in the empty Zone B that Brittani's people would occupy later. "Wake everyone up."

The call would get the rest of their medical people going early, hopefully resulting in the Amish group being cleared for the inside by the time Brittani's group got here. If not, Shane would explain why they had to wait for an hour or two. Angela didn't think it would be an issue. Marc already liked Brittani and Angela was looking forward to actually meeting her.

"Come along?" Marc held an arm out.

"You know it!" Angela sent a lusty leer his way.

Marc snickered.

Angela took his arm as they went to the widened cave entrance that had been temporarily covered with multiple

layers of thick plastic. Crates sat outside, holding down the ends while a tarp protected the piles of gear in the center. Before they could go inside, fast steps crunched in the snow, drawing attention from those already coming and going.

Samantha stopped in front of Angela and leaned in to whisper. Around them, cold people went still and quiet, instantly worried.

“We’re ready.” Angela smiled calmly. “Have Kenn announce it as soon as you’re certain of the time.”

“Four days,” Sam blurted. “I’m positive of it.”

Angela patted Samantha’s arm soothingly. “We’re ready. Go to sleep now.”

Samantha scowled at her and stormed back to the medical bay, not sure why she was angry at Angela. She did need to rest, but each time she let the darkness pull her under, David’s screams were waiting. The guilt over his injury was devastating.

“Is she okay?” Marc waved curious people along, including Tara. The new man—Jayson—coughed and followed her.

Angela sighed. “She will be, in time.”

“Hormones making things worse?”

“Oh, yeah.” Angela entered the cave that still had a slight odor of bleach. “She’s coming out of it, though.”

Marc held the plastic covers aside layer by layer, hoping that was true. They needed all the warning systems they could get, but Samantha was also a strong fighter and a good hunter. All of her skills would be missed if she flipped out. Not to mention what it would do to the Eagles through Neil and Jeremy, and her team.

Nearby, the parking area was already alive with activity. Marc didn't scan it, positive that Angela had. He didn't need to see Kindle mooning over him.

*Kindle now has other things on her mind. Angela snuggled closer to Marc as they got started on rounds. I made sure of that.*

## 2

Bundled against the cold wind, Kindle skimmed the list again.

*Two vehicles will be delivered. Collect:*

*2 weeks rations.*

*1500 rounds mixed ammunition.*

*A winter gear crate.*

There was more, but Kindle was still on the first few items. The tired parking lot sentry, Logan, had directed her to the assigned vehicles. She was happy with the identical, gray Tahoes. Now she needed to find out how much room the crate would take. She already had a list of her own to gather along the way, including sailing manuals. She had no idea how to captain a ship and she doubted any of these people did either. Paddling a canoe down a river wasn't the same as taking a ship across an ocean.

Assuming she should go to the supply trucks to gather the rations, Kindle trotted there, trying to keep warm. The covering of snow was already sinking into her boots as the icy wind chilled her exposed skin. This environment was the exact opposite of Pitcairn.

“Hi!” Tommy was already at the trucks, along with a small group of people who all waved, smiled, or echoed his greeting.

Kindle stopped, not expecting the friendliness. Even the camp members had learned to avoid her. “Uh, hi.”

“I’m Tommy.” He came forward with his hand out. “The boss said you’re my XO.”

Kindle shook hands in surprise. She hadn’t expected Angela to give her authority of any kind.

“I was told to keep you busy. Do you mind?”

“No, I like that.”

“Good.” Tommy intended to follow Angela’s orders to the letter. If there was a person worth saving inside all those scars, he would find it. “I have a list for you.”

Kindle took the sheet and got on it before her bad side could come forward. She didn’t make eye contact with the rest of the people gathered by the trucks. It looked like there were a dozen coming, counting her and Tommy. It gave Kindle hope. Twelve was ten more than she had guessed would show up for a trip like this.

Kindle spotted Kenn and Tonya switching shifts on radio duty, kissing and joking cheerfully. It was sickeningly sweet. Kindle kept track of the Marine. She saw the anger of the gate guards when Kenn pointed to the latch. He exited without insults, but the disapproval was clear. *Adrian won’t have anyone left soon. That should make Marc happy, but I wonder how Angela will counteract it.*

Tommy watched her march away, wondering if Angela was reading it right. Kindle was supposed to be a killer if it was needed, but she wasn’t threatening at all. Her scars made her seem vulnerable, instead of a monster. *Hope we don’t need*

*to test her.* Tommy turned to the others. “Okay. Let’s get rolling on those lists!”

Next to the parking area, other crews were also preparing for their trips out. One large team was going down to strip the mall Samantha had tried to explore. Another crew was going north for more rock salt. A third team was set to finish collecting the gasoline from the refinery.

Radios lit up with Tonya’s cheerful voice. “This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. Good morning! We have a weather alert for everyone in the eastern half of the United States. There is a massive snowstorm coming. Take precautions now. The storm will hit Georgia in four days. I repeat: This is a winter weather alert. A massive...”

Kendle tuned it out, instead watching the first fuel load of the day come through the gate near the cave entrance. Kendle shuddered. She had carried updates to the guards there, but she hadn’t gone inside and she wouldn’t. Ethan had convinced her that hell was indeed belowground.

According to the mess board, the workers would be filling equipment and devices today, meaning the bathrooms would have full water, as would the mess and animal areas. Generators would also be stocked, stoves and all the hanging lamps could be used, and the fire team would act like cats in a room full of rocking chairs as they waited for something to spark or overheat. Kendle approved of having a fire team. She liked Ray, the team leader. She now suspected that Teddy, another member of the fire crew, had left the bouquet of wildflowers in her tent yesterday. She remembered him being on duty at that time. The way these people patrolled this place, there was no way anyone had been able to sneak by security.

She'd thought about asking if he had, but she hadn't followed through. She didn't care about gifts, flowers, romance. If she couldn't have Luke or Marc, Adrian's roughly knowing hands would fill the void until she could go home.

*Crash!*

*Bang! Bang!*

Kindle spun toward the main entrance as the Eagles there opened fire. The sound of a vehicle coming echoed; the ground shuddered as something big crashed into the gate.

Kindle was knocked to the slushy ground. She watched in blurry pain as men flew from the rafters and landed around her, screaming and bleeding. The gate held, barely.

Eagles rushed toward them from every direction as the occupants of the truck began to climb the gate. The barbed wire wasn't a deterrent. The small group dropped into Safe Haven with grins and guns. The six men were from Zone C. They'd gone out last night to find a ramming device,. Now they admired the inside of the camp eagerly, running off in different directions.

"Breach!" radios blared. "We have a breach at the front gate!"

The nearest sentries were dazed, injured, or dead. Only the lack of speed had prevented a complete slaughter. Debris and bloody snow sprinkled the ground as Kindle staggered to her feet and ran forward.

More refugees from Zone C followed the men from the truck, climbing over the semi's smoking cab. Some of those from Zone B also entered illegally, hoping to be overlooked as one of the previous day's cleared arrivals.

Kendle ducked behind one of Marc's new bunkers, where he'd stored ammunition. She took aim on the men who had made it furthest inside their perimeter. If she ran out of bullets, she would use her knife. Moments like this were what she lived for now.

### 3

"Kill them all!"

Every Eagle who heard Adrian's command obeyed him. Refugees streamed over the idling, smoking semi, but few of them fired weapons. Until the order came, the Eagles had been reluctant to shoot. Two weeks of relative peace had re-sensitized them.

Kenn and Adrian stayed in the tree line, with Conner in the branch between them. The trio aimed for those by the gate, but the tide of determined people never looked their way. Adrian wasn't certain they even realized someone else was shooting at them. Thanks to the timing of the attack, the Zone C gates had been wide open.

In the other zones, refugees stayed still and low, hoping not to be confused for the enemy.

More gunfire came from inside Safe Haven, along with a fresh scream—this one female. Adrian grimaced, but didn't fly toward her. He'd been banished. It would take more than Kendle to get him to break that.

Kenn kept firing and so did Conner. The wave of invading refugees slowly diminished as the stacks of bodies grew. Down the hill a bit, the ants came to the entrance of their cavern and observed eagerly.

“Behind the medical bay!” an Eagle shouted.

“Over here!” another man called.

Fresh gunfire swept across the mountain, loud enough to finally get the attention of the dozen or so remaining people climbing over the semi. As the shots continued and more screams echoed, many of those chose to drop from the smoking cab and flee.

Kenn and Adrian hit the retreating forms too. These threats wouldn’t be left to haunt them later and the two men didn’t need to speak it, to agree on it. That was how Adrian had taught his army to handle moments like this. Untrained, Conner did what the mentors on either side of him did, enjoying every second of killing.

Adrian lowered to reload, letting Kenn and Conner finish the chore. His gaze went to the small parts of the camp that he could see through the damaged gate, staring in longing. It appeared that Angela had implemented all of his suggestions and quite a few more. It was devastating that he would never actually get to walk the new Safe Haven on rounds.

“She wants the bugout plans,” Kenn muttered without knowing he was going to.

Adrian wasn’t surprised and didn’t respond.

“We can’t stay here?” Kenn didn’t want to leave. “We can’t make it work?”

“I’d like to keep lying, Marine, but I don’t have the strength.” Adrian shrugged. “Safe Haven’s time here will be brief and harsh.”

Hating fate, Kenn reloaded his gun. “Figures.” Kenn trotted to the gate, where the harsh smoke made his nose burn. He climbed into the cab of the truck and got it far enough from

the damage that they would be able to work, but he didn't take the truck any further. It would provide a bit of cover while they repaired the gate. Then Angela would want the fuel it was hauling... Kenn wondered where the fuel team was. He hit his radio in the brief instant it cleared from orders and requests for help. "Front gate is clear!"

The radio returned to silence for an instant and Kenn hit it again. "All teams report in person. Send a man to the front gate!"

Clicks came in response. The radio stayed clearer as order was slowly restored. Kenn remained on the outside, keeping watch until Angela sent relief. They were vulnerable to another attack.

In the tree line, Adrian and Conner did the same. The soldiers with them were staring in shock at witnessing Kenn and Adrian in action together. For these drafted men, their heroes had just become legends.

## 4

"Please follow the Eagles." Jennifer raised her voice over the hammering and other noises as she pointed. "They will take you to a larger tent; you will be given full access to the supply trucks and the mess for food. Come along."

Jennifer led the twitchy group toward their waiting den mother escorts, glad when Cynthia took over bringing the quiet Amish group inside. The repair on the gate was ongoing, as was the QZ rotation that Angela had insisted on after the attack. Outside the gate, three full teams of Eagles now stood watch. After three of their men being killed, everyone was

tense. Jennifer hadn't known any of them personally, but she still felt their loss.

Jennifer waited until her entire group had been herded away from the inside zone, and for Cynthia's clan to be brought into that area. Then, she went outside to Zone A, where the dozen refugees coming in were lined up with possessions and nervous expressions. The rest had been told it was Zone C or nothing. They were currently walking back down the cold hill, shouting curses. "Your turn, folks! Come on now."

It was a cold, long afternoon for everyone. Jennifer kept the zone rotation going, aware of Kyle tiredly trailing her as he'd insisted on doing until the gate was fixed. It gave her an extra boost of confidence. She was pleased with herself when the chore was finished. Zone C was also being repaired while it was empty, and a roof was being added. The chicken wire would only slow determined people, but it was a resource that Safe Haven had an abundance of, with little use due to its weakness. There was also a second gun tower going up. Jennifer hoped it didn't have to be used like she'd dreamed about. Kyle had been merciless, but the flood had been unstoppable.

Jennifer signaled to Shane as he helped the new group settle into Zone B, where they were next in line for testing and admittance. She estimated there were three more groups in trucks and cars still waiting to be evaluated. She beckoned Greg over. "I don't know where she wants the rest put."

Greg handed her a note, profile uneasy.

*After Shane's group, tell everyone else there's a two-day wait. They can camp outside Zone A.*

Jennifer didn't argue. The people had to be tested, observed, and then questioned. That took time.

Jennifer gave the message to Morgan, who had taken over as point man on the gate for this shift. "Keep repeating it until everyone out there gets the message. Then send it over the air."

Morgan recognized Angela's handwriting and did as he was instructed.

A few minutes later, the outside speakers blared. "There is now a two-day wait to be evaluated for entry to Safe Haven. Please camp around the gates marked with the letter A."

In front of the main gate, three teams of Eagles retreated and raised their guns. The shouts and curses that came from the announcement were intimidating after the calm behavior of their own people.

Jennifer waited with the rest of the Eagles to discover if there would be a fresh attack; the shouts quickly faded to mutters. Jennifer honed in on some of these.

*"They're gonna stop takin' people in!"*

*"Yes. Not enough room."*

*"Or food."*

*"We got here just in time."*

*"You think so?"*

*"Yes. Survivors have been thinking about coming here, but everyone has to come now or risk not making it in before winter sets in. This place is going to crawl with desperate survivors."*

*"Will we be inside before then?"*

*"I hope so. Camping out in the open like this won't be safe."*

Jennifer marked the people who had been talking. They were in a small blue truck and had a small child. She saw Kindle standing nearby, also guarding the gate while covered in blood. If not for her own foray into the gruesome, Jennifer wouldn't have understood the pain the woman was feeling. It was never easy to face what lurked inside.

Jennifer scanned the pile of bodies around Kindle and then the crew coming to carry them outside. Her gaze went to the line of ants already dragging off the corpses there. Feeding them such an awful diet wouldn't result in anything good. Jennifer hoped Angela had a solution planned. The ants were getting larger and each batch of hatchlings that emerged was smarter than their parents. It was terrifying, but also fascinating. The earth was undergoing a massive change because of the war. Species were evolving at rates that people rarely witnessed. Jennifer knew of a few insects that would spontaneously mutate during a scarcity of food, but it was unheard of in humans. She didn't think the chemicals released in the war could have produced such extreme reactions. Even the instincts of the animals were changing.

Jennifer kept tugging at those mental threads while she patrolled the area. Marc and Angela were in the medical bay now that order had been restored, but Jennifer didn't want to be there. It still reminded her of giving birth to two babies, but only having one to hold.

## 5

"Samantha, you're being suspended from Eagle duties for a week as a punishment for your lack of caution, which

resulted in the injury of a teammate. Do you accept this decision?”

Samantha nodded stiffly, cheeks bright red. She was standing next to David’s cot, fists clenched in her pockets.

Around them, injured men stared in surprise at the punishment. David had refused to tell anyone exactly what had happened to cause his injury, which usually meant the infraction wasn’t officially handled.

Angela knew that and she didn’t like it. She never had. “Is there anything you’d like to say?”

Samantha shook her head as tears welled.

“So be it.” Angela didn’t let herself soften the blow. Samantha had to learn to follow the rules, but she had paid enough without the suspension. It was being used as an example to their new recruits. Angela regarded David, tone not softening. “You’ve been cleared to remain in Safe Haven. If you go back to Adrian, you’ll have to stay there.”

David patted Samantha’s arm as he carefully stood up on the crutches the doctor had reluctantly given him a few minutes ago. “I’m leaving as soon as I’m cleared here.”

“You’re cleared,” the doctor stated curtly. “Take the medicine, change the dressing, let it heal.”

Samantha helped David out, torn between him and her duty to Safe Haven. Maybe Conner could help him too, but she doubted David would ask. The former soldier was more stubborn than even she was.

Angela gestured to Marc and followed him to the brig, where they were holding the man he had rescued from the house of horror. The man wasn’t locked up, but there were two guards inside the shelter with him.

Their brig was a long hallway with a row of cells welded and nailed to a wooden frame. It was drafty and uninviting, which was perfect for its purpose.

Angela let Marc go in first. He sat down on the small stool in the corner of the middle cell. If the stranger tried to hurt her, Marc would handle it.

Angela swept his recovering pallor and empty food dishes. Though he'd been held hostage, he wasn't injured. With Marc's stories of lurkers, she'd expected much worse. "Who are you?"

The man slowly sat up on the cot, aware of Marc's big body in the space with him. He pushed up against the wall and kept the blanket around as much of his thin frame as he could. "Who do you want me to be?"

Angela had no door into his mind.

Marc gave a shake to indicate that he didn't either.

"Not being trouble for me would be a great start."

The man smiled regretfully, stroking his long beard. "I'm afraid I bring that to everyone. It's just your turn."

"Turn for what?" Marc glared. "Who are you?"

"I'm the Keeper." He held out a hand. "My name's Chauncey."

Angela knew Marc wouldn't like it, but she leaned forward and placed her hand in the stranger's chilly grip.

"Ah..." Chauncey shut his bright green eyes and smiled wider. "I didn't know that power was female. I sensed you months ago."

Angela pulled her hand away, worrying over the black void that came up when she tried to penetrate his mind. "Angela."

Chauncey looked over at Marc. “Then you have to be the Ghost. I wasn’t completely sure. You do an excellent job of dimming yourself, even during sleep.”

Marc grunted, studying and evaluating.

“What is a Keeper?” Angela played innocent. “We’re new.”

“That, you are.” Chauncey chuckled. “A Keeper does exactly that—keeps things. Myself, I track descendants.”

“How?” She settled onto the stool outside the open cell door. Marc didn’t want her inside. She could feel that.

“I scan vast distances and determine where descendants are. In the old world, I kept track of the little red dots on my radar.”

Marc tried to read the man’s mind again. “And now?”

“Now, I search them out and place a name to that red dot.” Chauncey stared at Angela. “It’s your turn to be...recorded, if you will, in the official registry.”

“The what?” Marc and Angela echoed together.

Chauncey chuckled again. “Someone has to keep track of things, you know. That’s my purpose.”

“Who gets the information?” Angela asked before Marc could threaten or demand.

“Why, the highest bidder, of course.” Chauncey’s tone switched to that of a slick salesman. “If you pay the price, the information is nice.”

Angela’s eyes lit up. “How about I kill you instead? And any others like you.”

Chauncey tiredly leaned against the wall. “I wish someone would. I’m sick of bringing death.”

“How long until it arrives this time?” Angela used the man’s power as she motioned Marc out of the cell.

Chauncey responded gravely. “Four days and your soul. I’m also here to record *that* in the official registry.”

Angela gasped, filled with sudden dread.

Marc locked the cell door, scowling. “What?”

“That Maker Call put you on every radar in the world.” Chauncey grinned at Angela gleefully. “I’m here to witness your fall from grace.”

“Witness for who?” Angela needed to hear it.

“The Creator. My dreams insisted that I get to Safe Haven and deliver his message. I didn’t expect to be giving it to a woman.”

Angela braced as Marc listened in disbelief.

Chauncey’s face became alive with fury! “Murderers will never be forgiven!”

Angela laughed.

The harsh, bitter sound rang through the small jail and chilled even those outside who heard it.

Chauncey and Marc stared uneasily, uncertain what was going through her mind.

Angela slowly calmed down, wiping away tears. “I’m...sorry, but...it’s so funny!”

Marc realized the hormones were helping. He waited patiently for it to pass as Chauncey began to glare.

“It’s just that, I was expecting a real threat, like my son or Marc.” She was still chuckling. “My soul is already damned.”

“What of your unborn child?” the Keeper asked slyly.

Angela lunged toward the bars, letting her rage be seen. She had lost three rookies—three fine men—who hadn’t deserved their fate. “Be careful.”

Chauncey flinched away from the menace.

She sent a scornful gaze over him. “I’ll kill you before I let you sell your gifts to even one more person. Pick a side or die. You hold no power here.”

“You’ll never know.” Chauncey kept his distance as he taunted her. He had already figured out that Marc wouldn’t attack unless he threatened Angela. “You can’t get into my head.”

“Well, I can.” Jennifer was in the doorway, personal shield glowing pale red.

The sight of her sent Chauncey into an immediate panic. “That’s not possible!” He scurried away from the bars and into the corner, but his eyes never left Jennifer. “There are no enforcers left!”

Surprised by the reaction, Angela called her witch forward. *Enforcer?*

The witch began to cackle. *That explains it! Enforcers ensure that the Keepers stay in line. She’s an enforcer!*

Angela smiled a bit at the new information. She swung toward Chauncey with it playing on her lips. “Would you like to change your answers?”

Trapped, Chauncey quickly nodded.

The radios crackled again. “New arrivals!”

Angela headed that way. “I’ll want a full report.”

“You’ll get it.” Jennifer glowered at Chauncey. “He’ll talk or I’ll gut him like a fish,”

Following Angela, Marc smiled proudly. *She got that from me.* Safe Haven's women were not to be trifled with now; all of the males here enjoyed that. It let them sleep without worrying their heart would be ripped out, like Jeff's had been.

## 6

“Got a minute?”

Shane spun to find Brittani behind him; he stumbled around the tent peg, tripping in the slush.

Brittani laughed, but quietly, so he wasn't as embarrassed. She was trying to get her people settled into the fenced zone as quickly as she could so the tests could be handled.

Shane flushed and quickly picked himself up. “I do.”

“The doctor is coming for tests. What happens if he finds something?”

Shane gave her the truth. “Depends on how bad it is. If you're worried about Gus, don't be. We only screen for stuff that can spread.”

The woman gave a relieved smile and returned to her assigned tent. Shane had told her to skip unpacking, that Angela had already approved them, but they needed to stay at least one night and it would be cold. The light flurries currently splattering them said it would stay below freezing.

“Comin' in, base,” the radio crackled with Ryan's voice.

He was leader of the missing crew. Shane turned with everyone else as engines sounded and five bikes carrying the crew drew cheers. They no longer had anyone unaccounted for.

The gate guards were ecstatic. Safe Haven had roughly a hundred refugees waiting. They needed all their men to provide defenses if things went crazy again. They couldn't afford to keep sending them out on rescue parties, or worse, losing them.

Kenn came to Angela's side and extended a small notebook.

Angela placed it in her pocket as Kenn slipped away to join the group of rookie Eagles carrying supplies to the men still repairing the gate. When the others saw him, they would work harder.

"Something good?" Marc was already positive it wasn't.

Before Angela could answer, Shawn walked by with Tara and Missy on his heels. Their quiet conversation drew her attention.

"If it had been going faster, that truck would have made it through!" Shawn gestured excitedly. "Being at the top of a hill has advantages."

"But isn't the den vulnerable to things like explosions and cave-ins?"

"Sure, but we have escape tunnels. I'm sure you've seen the guards on them."

"Yes, I have."

The trio left earshot, with Missy kicking dust against Shawn's boots.

Angela sighed. "I love you."

Marc caught the tone and grimaced.

Angela took his arm and led them to a secluded corner of the chaos, but before she could explain anything, another voice broke the cold air.

“I want justice!” Darian came stomping up to them. “I demand to know the result of the moral board’s vote on the charges!”

“There was no vote.” Marc faced the man coldly. “Your sister was going to create a world of human slaves. We stopped her.”

“You had no right to make the choice!” Darian pointed. “You killed her before she even committed a crime!”

“Did I?” Angela asked icily. “Had she never taken an innocent life?”

Trapped, Darian glared. “Murderer.”

Around them, Eagles and camp members had stopped to gawk in surprise and disapproval.

“I think it’s time you left our hospitality.” Marc looked at Angela. “Yes?”

She grunted. “I had hoped he would realize it’s wrong to enslave people.”

“Humans are inferior!” Darian revealed his true nature. “You’re a traitor to your own kind!”

“That’s enough!” Marc moved forward. “Be out of Safe Haven by morning or I’ll make you go.”

Darian wasn’t intimidated by Marc. He didn’t know that he should be. “Traitors! Both of you.” He stomped toward his tent.

“He feels the way his sister did.”

“Will he come back to haunt us?”

She sighed. “Don’t they always?”

“Do you want me to—”

“Yes, but not you.”

Marc loathed using Adrian for anything, but being the executioner was what he deserved.

Angela saw Cynthia staring toward Adrian's site. "Have her deliver the order. She's going there as soon as we're finished with the repairs on the gate."

Cynthia needed to do the next interview for her paper and she'd requested that anyone but Daryl accompany her. Marc wondered about the conversations that wouldn't go on the record, but he wasn't overly concerned. Nothing Adrian did would earn him forgiveness. If they did leave this country, regardless of the situation, Marc wasn't going to let the former leader on the boat. Adrian might make it to the island anyway, but it wouldn't be on a free ride. Those days were over.

## 7

More refugees came in overnight, but there was no room in the zones. Brittani's group was inside the gate, and the Amish people had been released into the population with settling partners, but the outer zones had filled up as fast as they'd emptied them.

Marc and Zack got the new arrivals settled as quickly as they could in the blowing snow. Most of the other refugees were asleep as the new group came in. Marc was glad when respectful people emerged from their vehicles and asked for sanctuary. He put them outside Zone B after a scan with his demon, then came into the main camp to warm up. The flurries had stayed through the night, as had the stiff wind. Marc recorded the temperature at 27°.

He and Charlie had also done a workout together where the boy hadn't had much to say. Neither had Marc. They were both too cold and tired for personal drama, so the hour had been peaceful. Tracy had even joined them for the last few minutes. Marc had spent the time studying them. Other than anger over Tracy's injuries, they were okay. Marc had left them alone in the tent without a chaperone. They didn't need one now.

Marc swept the tent area, nodding to Howard, who had point over that location. Since Safe Haven was so big, there were now three supervisors for each shift and one boss.

*That's me.* Marc hadn't wanted the job when it was given to him, and he certainly hadn't been trying to earn it, but he doubted he'd be satisfied any other way now. He was too good at this. To do less would be wasting his skills.

The hours before dawn came slowly. By the time the sun started to lighten the sky, another inch of snow had fallen. Marc hoped some rock salt came in today. A few more inches and they would truly be dug-in for the winter with no way down the mountain unless they wanted to go by foot or ski. The salt was going to mean the difference between mobility and death. If they couldn't get up or down the main road for a year, they would starve.

Marc spotted movement from his perch on the front gate's top rafter and groaned. "Great. Just what we need."

In the distance, a line of vehicles was coming. There were at least fifteen cars and trucks. Marc could already hear the horns faintly echoing up here. In a few more minutes, it would be loud enough to wake the entire camp hours early, which meant surly attitudes all day.

“Fucking great.” Marc beckoned Zack over. “Come on. We’re gonna meet some assholes at the bottom of the hill.”

Zack saw the coming people and also groaned. “More?”

Marc didn’t tell him this was the tip of the iceberg. Safe Haven’s population was about to triple and they weren’t even close to ready for it.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

# Hot Flashes

September 22<sup>nd</sup>



## 1

“I’m not waiting any longer.”

“You have to. There’s a big storm coming.”

“More snow doesn’t scare me. It’s time.”

“A few more days? Please?”

“No, not even for you.”

Theo rounded the corner of the cavern; the two people broke apart guiltily.

“Is everything okay here?” Theo was on his way to fix an issue with the electricity, but the conversation had pulled him.

“Its fine.” Tara sighed. “I’m trying to convince Jayson to wait a bit longer on his plans.”

“And what plans are those?” Theo didn’t like how many new people were already running loose without a guard.

“He wants to leave. I want him to wait until after the storm.”

It was a perfectly reasonable answer, but Theo didn’t buy it. “What are you guys up to?”

Before Tara could reply, Jayson shoved by them both. “Leaving.”

Theo started to go after him, but Tara put a hand on his arm. “I’m sorry. He isn’t adjusting well.”

“Do you know him?” Theo shrugged off her touch. “You didn’t come in together. And where’s Missy?”

Tara frowned slightly. “We’re both new. I made friends. Missy is with the other kids, eating breakfast. What’s your problem?”

Theo was uneasy over her attitude. Until now, Tara had been meek. “Are you signing up for the Eagles?”

Tara shrugged at the quick topic switch. “I’m not sure.”

It relieved him to hear that. “Maybe next time?”

“Maybe. I need to start my shift on stocking things down here. Can I go?”

Theo waved her off. He continued on his way, but the woman stayed on his mind. She was probably just having a bad day, but he found her responses to be out of character. When he reached his working area, Theo made a note on it for the next shift. He wanted someone to keep track of her whenever she worked down here.

Theo studied the notes left for him by the previous shift, trying to ignore the creaks and shifts, the low moans of the stone around him.

*Plumbing is 89% complete.*

*Power is 73% operational. Battery banks are cool and calm so far.*

*Two reports of the moaning in the bottom levels by guards.  
Checked it out. No evidence found.*

Theo scowled when he saw the names of the guards. Ozzie and Francis weren't the type to imagine things. There was honestly something down here with them.

Theo made remarks on the paper and then hung it on the clipboard. The sounds of the camp moving to the mess and bathrooms echoed loudly throughout the cave. Down here, that noise was a reminder that he wasn't alone. Theo was glad their people were inside. The doors to the cave would be installed soon and then those living topside would be encouraged to come down and join the rest. Today would be a great test of the cave utilities. Theo expected to stay busy fixing minor issues.

More noises echoed from outside the cave. Theo didn't envy the patrols. Not only was it still snowing, but the number of refugees had doubled from yesterday. The Eagles were busy rotating zones and trying to handle the influx.

As if conjured by his thoughts, the radio crackled with Tonya's slightly harried voice. "This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We are now closed until the storm is over. Hole up where you can. I repeat: We are closed until the storm passes. Please stay where you are and keep warm."

Theo doubted many people would listen. The crowd outside the gates was going to grow and Angela was going to keep evaluating them. Winter had arrived early, coating the

land with deadly snow and cold. People would flood to their gates as long as they could travel.

“But they aren’t coming up the main hill.” Their first load of rock salt for the day had been picked up, but it wouldn’t arrive until this evening. That meant more snow accumulating, melting a bit in the brief glimpses of sun they were getting, and then refreezing into ice. Theo wasn’t certain even the rock salt crew would make it up here even though the call had said they were in a city truck. Nature was merciless. Survivors across the country were about to be hit with another blow.

Around Theo, the walls shimmied.

He thought he was imagining it at first, and then he realized an entire section of the wall was shivering like Jell-O.

Dust and debris began to fall, and then the noises caught up, revealing the grinding and pounding of a tremor. The cave wall bulged out from the pressure; a wide crack split from the bottom and began running upward.

Theo clutched at his mike as he fell, sure it was already too late for him. “Cave-in!”

The call sent terror through everyone who heard.

Eagles rushed toward the sound as camp members fled. The panic and chaos made it difficult for them to navigate the steep stairs down to the area. People fell and rolled, knocking others over. The tunnels echoed with screams and fear.

“This is a mandatory evacuation!” The radio blared with Tonya’s terrified voice this time. “Everyone out!”

The only section of the cave affected seemed to be this bottom part, but they didn't know for sure how much damage had been done. The pile of stone and debris was huge, and the dust still hadn't settled. Marc and Kenn supervised the digging as the Miller family did the hands-on work. They were used to this sort of tragedy.

"Do we have a count yet?" Marc hated being down here while Angela was outside the gate, handling new arrivals and rotating zones.

"Right here." Kenn gave him the sheet. "Just Theo's first shift team. They were down here to handle minor repairs."

Marc didn't need to read it. He knew who was on Theo's crew. They now had five missing people and Marc was determined to recover every one of them as quickly as possible. He stepped forward to help physically.

Kenn followed his lead.

Behind the workers, a small crowd of friends and loved ones gathered to wait for any news. Candy and the other women drew strength from each other, trying to be hopeful, but as the minutes passed with no sounds, it was hard.

### 3

Kendle didn't want to be here anymore. There was a bad feeling coming over these mountains. She was eager to be on her way. The vehicles were packed, the team was ready, and all of them expected to leave in the morning. The problem was that they were all viewing the massive crowd of refugees on the doorstep and worrying. Safe Haven clearly needed them here right now. What finally tipped it was a comment from

Jennifer as she stopped by the parking area on her way to deliver an update about the cave-in.

“Happy hunting. We’re gonna need that boat.”

Kendle hadn’t realized the boat was important. She’d honestly thought Angela was getting rid of her and a few of the others who wanted to be on the island. Kendle hadn’t considered that it was for Safe Haven.

“But I should have.” Angela didn’t do anything that wasn’t going to help her damn sheep. “What am I walking into?”

Kendle finished loading the rear floorboard, then shut and locked all the doors. Only she and Tommy had keys.

“All set?” Tommy joined her at the front end of their Tahoe. He could smell her shampoo from the recent shower.

“Yes.”

Tommy had witnessed her battling the refugees coming through the gate, and been impressed. When Angela had said Kendle was a killer, she hadn’t been exaggerating in the least. “We’ll get the word to go soon.”

Greg came over to them with a slight frown. “Boss said to get rolling down the rear path.”

Tommy grinned happily. “See?”

Kendle allowed a tiny smile to crack her lips. “Cool. Let’s go.”

They rolled down the rear road mostly unnoticed a short time later. Kendle didn’t glance at Adrian’s site or at the cave where Marc was helping free their trapped men. She hadn’t said goodbye to either male. She was on her way home. There was nothing here for her now.

## 4

Angela read the update, then gave Jennifer the next sets of notes to be delivered. There was too much going on for any of them to spend time talking, so the short messages were ideal. The radios were clogged with calls from people begging them not to shut their gates until they arrived—despite the transmissions that Tonya was repeating each hour. Desperation to avoid the cold would keep survivors coming their way and there was little Safe Haven could do to stop it.

The two hundred refugees already here were unruly, angry that they had to be processed, sullen about the rules and requirements for entry. They wanted in. Angela was positive they would try to get through soon. The Eagles were also certain. They were carrying extra ammunition and wearing double-vest setups. Things were on the edge of ugliness.

Angela realized her plans would have to be sped up. This would be one of the last few days that she and Jennifer could come outside the reinforced gate to sort through new arrivals. With that thought in mind, Angela dug into the evaluations harder, trying to get more of the good people cleared before evening fell. Marc would handle their den. She would handle the door.

## 5

Theo moaned as he came to. Pain crushed into his legs and continued to build until tears slipped from his eyes. He didn't bother to open them. With the dark and dust, he wouldn't be

able to see anything, but it was a small comfort to hear work going on. They were trying to dig through.

The rocks on top of his legs suddenly shifted. Theo screamed.

“That’s it! Lift!”

Theo continued to scream as the rock was moved; the sound echoed throughout the cave. It cut off abruptly as he passed out.

The men laboring to free him were grateful. The creaks and groans of the mountain were too much for their nerves. Screams were more than they could handle right now. This area could collapse at any point. They wouldn’t know until the engineering team could come in and evaluate.

Marc and Kenn, exhausted and filthy, were there to help lift Theo’s body from the rubble. They’d found Tim and Gary a little while ago. Both men had been rushed to the medical bay. Theo made three.

Marc was determined that number would go higher. He wasn’t leaving anyone down here. The fact that all three men were alive gave him hope that the other two would be as well.

Shouts from topside echoed down to them; Marc gestured for Kenn to call in the next crew to dig. “I’ll be back.”

Marc walked behind the team carrying Theo, noting the empty cave. The camp had been sent to the main tent area topside until it was declared safe. Marc wondered how many of those would now refuse to live below. As he neared the entrance, the noise of a huge crowd was loud enough to drown out everything else. Marc frowned, moving faster. Surely, Angie had come inside the gates...

Greg pointed when he saw Marc. “She went to the medical bay!”

Relieved, Marc went to the main gate first, needing an update on their situation out here. The feeling vanished as he stared at the mob. Groups milled around the area, talking and arguing over space for tents and vehicles. The four zones were completely full, and each of them were surrounded by tents and clans waiting for an evaluation. Behind those, more people waited on foot and in long lines of clumsily parked cars that would prevent anyone, including their teams, from getting through.

The Eagles were nervous. Each man and woman had a finger ready to pull the trigger as the crowd below shouted, screamed, and fought. Despite Angela’s predictions, Marc hadn’t thought it would get so bad this quickly. His added defenses were good. They might even hold off this crowd for a few days, but eventually, Safe Haven would be out of bullets and get overrun.

“We have magic.” Angela joined him. “We’re never trapped.”

Marc hoped she was right. At some point, one of these desperate refugees would figure out the rear road existed and then they would have a flood of people at both doors.

“We have to keep them off our ass. We’ll need that route out of here.”

“What about the cave paths?” Marc leaned in so she could hear him. “That one tunnel is blocked now, but the others aren’t. I checked it.”

“Good. If we bunker in here, it’ll come in—”

“We have the last two!” Kenn’s happy shout came through the radio. “Everyone is accounted for and all of them will live!”

Marc and Angela both thought it was early for Kenn to give that notice, but it was too late to worry over. Cheers echoed from waiting members and Eagles, drowning out the gate crowd for an instant.

Angela studied those she hadn’t gotten to before Morgan had taken her arm and led her inside. He hadn’t asked or given any warning, and Angela hadn’t argued. The sense of bad things coming had been hanging over the refugees all day. Assuming she knew what it was made Angela worry about her timeline of events. That feeling said it was coming sooner than she’d anticipated.

“How’s Theo?” Marc knew she’d been there when he was brought in.

“Rough. Same for Tim. Gary will be released tonight. He only has a concussion and we need the cot. The medical area is filling up.”

“Is that something I need to discuss with the doctor?”

“Actually, no. He’d like half of them to be cleared and out too. It’s just hard to get the tests done, treat new people who’ve been admitted, cover people who had regular appointments, supervise the students, and act like an ass all at the same time.”

Marc snickered, but he heard her silent plea. “Maybe you should go help him? The sooner he clears people, the quicker you can get some of the new ones in here, right?”

The idea of her being safely busy in the medical bay below was appealing to Marc as he kept track of several fights that were ongoing. Most refugees disappeared into their tents or

vehicles as soon as they arrived, trying to avoid the weather, but the troublemakers were out roaming and causing problems. The safe people were those in Zones A and B. Zone C didn't have a gate. Angela had ordered it left off during the repairs, but she hadn't said why. Marc knew. She wanted the ants or Eagles to be able to get in there and clean it out as needed.

"I don't like this." Marc hoped she had something else up her sleeve for controlling all these strangers.

"We have three options." Angela pulled her coat tighter as the wind blew harder. "We can run and let them have it. We can open fire and kill some innocent people. Or we can wait and let fate handle it."

Marc didn't like fate any more than he did the government. "What happens with fate?"

"My men and women don't have to carry this on their soul. I do, and I'll shoulder it willingly." Shivering lightly, she scanned the people, picking out murderers, rapists, traffickers. Some of the worst dregs of humanity were mixed into the crowd below and more were on the way. If even a few of those got inside these gates, Safe Haven's light could be lost. "We'll wait. Until after the storm."

"Do you think it will cool them off, make some of them leave?" He gently helped her down from the rafter that he hadn't heard her climb when she'd joined him. Her hands and face were like ice as he checked her out.

"No. But they'll be just as gone."

Spooked a bit, Marc led her to the topside mess to warm her up. As far as he knew, she and Jennifer hadn't taken a break, which meant they hadn't eaten either.

Angela let him guide her, mind sliding far away. Things were spinning faster; it was almost impossible to keep up with each change as it happened, let alone each ripple that was created. Foretelling this way was fascinating. Missy was going to be amazingly gifted. Shawn didn't know it yet, but he was a lucky man.

## 6

Missy glowered at the rocking couple from her hidden perch in the bottom of the diaper cabinet. She'd stayed here when Hilda took the other kids to dinner, letting herself be counted before ducking back inside. She'd heard Tara tell Shawn to meet her.

"That's, um... Could you lift up a little?"

Missy's anger grew as Shawn resumed grunting. In the dark and with some clothes on, she couldn't see much but she knew what they were doing.

Missy lit the fuse on the firecracker and tossed it onto the couch with them. She had a small pile, gifted to her by Li Sing's youngest daughter. Missy lit a second one as the first exploded in a loud crack.

"What the...!"

"That hurt!"

*Crack!*

"Stop it!"

"Who is that?!"

*Crack! Crack!*

Shawn batted away the next firecracker, knocking it into Tara, who was trying to get dressed.

The lit fuse dropped into Tara's blouse. She danced herself out of the shirt, shouting. "Help me!"

*Crack! Crack!*

"Stop it!"

Shawn flinched from the loud noise by his ear and dove toward the cabinet where he'd glimpsed the spark of a lighter. Holding his pants up, he grabbed the only place he thought someone could be. A small fist slammed into his groin.

Shawn dropped to his knees.

Missy kicked, catching him in the ribs. She ran for the door, shoving Tara aside as she went.

Tara recovered and tried to grab the girl but missed, instead falling down the steps of the camper in her skirt and bra.

Missy ran faster, shoving through the crowd of camp members and guards who rushed over. She ducked, and was swung into strong arms that refused to let go.

"Enough!" Marc used the alpha power to break through the child's struggles.

Missy stilled, realizing who had picked her up. She instinctively leaned against his chest and began to cry.

Marc had the sudden sense that he was comforting a grown woman. He patted her shoulder awkwardly. Unhappy that something had upset the child so much, Marc cast a nasty glare toward the couple hurriedly moving around inside the camper door. He noticed Tara's exposed skin and the burnt smell next, scowling. "I want you both in the brig office in five minutes!"

Hidden against Marc's chest, Missy smiled.

“I can’t live in the cave.”

Samantha found Jeremy standing in the drafty hay room behind her. She’d come here to work off some of her anxiety and guilt now that David was back with Adrian. “What?”

“I can’t even go in there.”

“You haven’t been inside the cave?”

Jeremy shook his head.

Samantha frowned at herself, adding more guilt. She’d been so wrapped up in her own issues that she hadn’t checked on her men. Was Neil having trouble too?

Samantha motioned toward the bale next to her. “Come and tell me about it.”

Neil listened from the doorway, glad to hear Samantha being reasonable. Jeremy had confessed to him a short while ago. Neil had recommended that he do the same with Samantha. Where they would live was a group decision. Neil yawned, not ready for his upcoming shift on the gate. He’d helped unload the first truck of rock salt and spread it around.

“I have some good news for you.” Samantha smiled at Jeremy. “I don’t care where we live. I doubt Neil does either. Try to relax.”

Neil approved, leaving them to work it out. He would prefer to be in the cave for the warmth and safety, but she was right that it didn’t matter enough for him to argue. Not splitting them up or letting petty issues come between them was more important to the former state trooper.

Jeremy figured he might as well unburden himself all the way. “Are you okay now? We know something happened.”

Samantha smiled wryly. “I should have known you guys would notice. Yes, I’m fine.”

“Conner helped you?”

“How did you come up with that?”

“Doug told us that you and Peggy had gone to Adrian. I added the rest.”

“You guys were snooping on me?”

Jeremy grinned. “Yeah. Problem?”

“Considering the circumstances?” She snorted bitterly.

“No. And yes, Conner helped me.”

“Because you wouldn’t let Adrian?”

“Because Adrian couldn’t, but yes. I could accept Conner doing it. Not his father.”

“We would have gone with you.”

“I know.” *You two would have fought with Adrian the entire time.*

Jeremy seemed to hear the thought. “I’m sorry.”

Samantha shrugged, leaning against his heat. “It’s done now.”

“And it won’t return?”

Samantha tensed, understanding Jeremy knew it had been cancer. “He couldn’t promise that.”

“Then I guess we should make sure he stays alive.”

“He’ll be here for rookie lessons at some point. He’ll be monitored.”

Jeremy knew that would cause concern. He chose to make sure Samantha’s future health was covered. “Maybe he should be forgiven for a mistake.”

Samantha sighed. “Maybe, but I don’t think that’s what the boss has planned for our powerful peeping-tom yet. I saw

him and Adrian's soldiers preparing to leave earlier. I think he's headed south."

## 8

"I'm not going."

Adrian didn't have time to argue with his angry son. His own orders had only come a few minutes ago. He needed to leave immediately.

Conner dropped the kit his father had tossed to him, not caring that the soldiers almost had the camp packed up. "I won't go."

Adrian frowned. "Tell Angela. She's planning to bring you inside after this, so I'd be polite when you spit in her face."

Conner realized Angela was giving him a way to keep atoning and earning his way back in. His attitude changed. A smile spread over his young face as he bent down to retrieve the kit.

Adrian grunted. Kids were a pain in the ass most days and this one was no different. Conner would do about anything to be allowed inside with Candy. The women had been fooled so far, but Adrian knew Conner's obsession was growing worse. This time away would either make him or break him.

"What will you be doing while I'm gone?"

"Working." Adrian slid his rifle over a shoulder. "Tracking down future problems."

Conner didn't want more details; he let his father leave without saying anything else. All he could think of was getting inside Safe Haven to Candy. She needed his love and his protection.

Adrian stayed to the tree line, glad the crowd hadn't noticed his site yet. Conner and most of the soldiers would be gone in a short while, following Kindle's team. Adrian was grateful to Angela for not leaving them all out here. Anyone around the gates now was in eminent danger.

Adrian spotted his target being ushered from those barely cracked fences and went dim, studying the man. Angela had sent orders for Darian to be removed before he could join another group, but Adrian wasn't certain why. Jobs like these were maddening in that aspect. Adrian planned to ask the man why he had been marked before he killed him. It was the only link into Angela's personal activities that he could get.

Adrian stayed still as the man passed the zones and milling crowd, not answering any of the questions about why he was leaving. No one tried to stop him, but Adrian was confident that would change too. The three largest groups that had come in this week were all gathered together in Zone C. They had physically removed the other people already there. Those angry folks were camped outside that zone. It was ugly and getting worse.

He would have to pick a new location for his site soon. Overcrowding after an apocalypse wasn't an issue that most people ever considered, but Adrian was positive his former camp was doing that now. The sound of so many threats on your doorstep had a way of changing a person's priorities. The *take them all* attitude of Safe Haven was about to shift forever.

Putting everything else from his mind, Adrian subtly followed Darian down the mountain, eager to discover why he'd been marked for death.

## 9

“So... Who wants to tell me what happened?” Marc shifted the little girl to a more comfortable position. He was in the tiny, chilly office of the brig, with Tara and Shawn sitting anxiously across the small desk. He’d made them wait for an hour while he handled other things.

“Missy had a stash of firecrackers.”

“He was on top of my mommy!” Missy shouted in Marc’s ear, making him flinch.

Tara turned scarlet, telling Marc she’d been willing.

“You two were having a moment...in the kids’ camper?”

Shawn nodded, unable to hedge or lie with Missy curled onto Marc’s chest like Angela might have.

Marc scowled. “With Missy watching?”

“I thought we were alone,” Shawn muttered, staring at the floor.

“She was in the mess, with Li Sing’s children.” Tara was also staring at the floor. The cold draft coming in couldn’t cool her cheeks. “Seems like the kids here can wander off at any time.”

Shawn and Marc both frowned.

“Weren’t you supposed to be helping with the kids?” Marc demanded coldly.

Tara flushed darker and refused to speak.

Marc felt Missy grin against the bare skin of his neck. For some reason, she was enjoying this. “I suggest you do your work and keep a better eye on your child.” Marc was bothered by her being here. He hadn’t nailed down a reason to ban Tara,

but he knew one existed. Marc glanced at Shawn. “Suspended. One week.”

Shawn’s face fell, but inside, he was relieved. Being in the kids’ area for something like this was a serious offense. He’d expected to lose rank at the least.

“Is that what you need?” Marc demanded. “Because I’ll give you that and more.”

“No. It won’t ever happen again.”

“Good.” Marc gestured at Tara. “You can go.”

“Should I—”

“I’ll drop her off.” Marc dared the woman to protest after the scene she and Shawn had made. “I’ll make sure she eats and brushes her teeth.”

Tara stormed out, not looking into the one occupied cell.

Shawn lifted a brow. “Was that right? It’s her kid.”

Marc shrugged. “She doesn’t act like it.”

Shawn couldn’t argue. Tara often handled Missy like an afterthought. It bothered him too. Enough that he was certain it was why the sex wasn’t that good. He’d been having trouble getting into it even before Missy’s interruption.

“You *are* stupid!” Missy pushed herself off Marc’s lap. “I knew it!”

Before either man could respond, Missy grabbed Marc’s coffee mug from the desk and threw it at Shawn.

Shawn caught the metal travel mug easily, snickering. “The lid was locked.”

Marc thought to tell Shawn not to taunt a female of any age when they missed a target, but it was too late. Missy neatly slid around the desk and kicked him in the shin. Then she stomped on his foot, grinding down with her little boot.

“Ow!” Shawn twisted around in his chair to see the child marching toward the door, rubbing his leg. The toe, he wasn’t touching yet. “Why did you do that?!”

Marc dropped his head, trying not to laugh at them. He’d figured it out now and it was hilarious.

“Why are you always so mean to me?”

Missy stopped, putting small hands on her hips as she twirled around in her blue dress. “Because you’re stupid and I didn’t ask for a stupid mate!”

And with that, she flounced from the brig, leaving Shawn in a state of shock.

“Mate?”

Marc’s chuckles filled the cold air.

Shawn stared in disbelief. He had assumed Tara was his future, though Angela hadn’t confirmed it. “But...she’s a little kid!”

Listening from outside the door, Missy stomped her foot, crunching through the ice. “Stupid! Take him back and give me a puppy. You can train *those*.”

Even Chauncey laughed this time.

## 10

“All teams are now grounded.” The radios crackled with Marc’s tired voice. “Return to base if you’re out, via option B. I repeat, all teams are now grounded.”

Seth and Becky exchanged worried looks, but they didn’t stop to discuss it. Angela had told them to complete their mission no matter what.

“Over here.” Seth hated the dark shadows of the Amazon warehouse. This fulfillment center held crates, bags, and boxes of supplies that Safe Haven needed. Seth had been astonished to find it undamaged. The next shock had come at the abandonment of the town around it. There were no kicked-in doors or signs of looting here. The people were simply gone, leaving the clear roads. *Creepy.*

Becky held the light as Seth got the crate open with the mini-pry bar that was standard Eagle equipment. They hefted the lid to the floor instead of shoving it over and making noise. Angela had also said to be as low key as possible. It implied there were people or problems around, despite them not spotting any.

Seth held the bag open for Becky to dump the packages into. They read the labels in concern.

*Potassium Iodide Tablets*

*14 tablets, 130mg*

They didn’t speak their fears, but thoughts roamed with terrible suspicions as they emptied the crates. Angela had three items on her list, but this one was underlined and they’d decided to procure it first. The other two items were nearby.

It took a few minutes to empty the crates. When the couple finished, they took the big canvas bag of tablets with them to find the next items. In the stillness of the fulfillment center, Seth finally broached the subject he’d been avoiding. “Are you happy with me?”

Becky paused. *He’s going to do this now?* “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Seth shrugged, leading them around by the map he had taken from the front office. “I know you’re not. I can feel it. I need to know if it’s me or the past.”

“Can this wait? At least until we’re camped for the night?”

Seth hated that answer. It meant there *were* things to talk about. “Sure.”

Becky wasn’t relieved. She hadn’t known Seth was watching her. She’d thought she was doing a great job at hiding her chaotic mind.

Seth reached out to take her hand for a moment where sparks flew and their hearts calmed. He didn’t say I love you or I’ll do whatever you need, but she felt it.

Becky squeezed his hand, wishing she had more love to give him. Seth was one of the good men, but her heart was often an empty void or a screaming lava bed of regret. There wasn’t much room for anything else.

Outside, light snow flurries whipped against the warehouse. The wind sent drafts of icy winds over the town that chilled even those in winter clothing. The evening sky was dark and dreary, the moon not visible through the clouds, and few creatures were stirring. Seth liked it that way. He had chosen to do their hunting at night and sleep during the day. They had been able to avoid several groups of people, spotting the fires in time to take cover. Seth didn’t want to be seen by anyone if he could help it. Having only the two of them along made for bad odds in a fight.

Becky stilled. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” Seth was comparing the crates in front of them with the id numbers on the sheet in his hand.

“Like a...growl, maybe?”

That got Seth's attention. He scanned the area with his light. There were a dozen places for someone to hide. Uneasy, Seth gestured toward the crates. "You open 'em."

Becky got on it as Seth did another slow sweep with his light. If she thought she heard something, then she probably had. He rotated to study another direction, and found multiple shadows behind them. "Heads up!"

Becky pulled her gun as she straightened. The feeling of danger swarmed, making her ease over to Seth's side. Their problems were animals, not man, but the reactions would be the same. Neither of those enemies was forgiving.

Seth motioned her behind him as he grabbed the bag they had filled. Seth quickly walked toward the office where they could make a stand, not sure why the dogs weren't attacking yet.

Seth locked the office door and put the bag in a corner, flying over plans to handle their problem. He didn't want to use guns. It might draw more dogs, or worse, people.

Becky stared through the dirty glass at the small pack of wild dogs that had followed them, wondering what type of life they'd had before the war. Thanks to nature and the apocalypse, animals hated humankind. They attacked and chased, even stalked in some cases, but Becky remembered when they had been best friends with people. Did they? Did the dogs also long for a return of the old world?

She concentrated, trying to push inside the mind of the smallest mangy animal. She found a dark voice and an almost scary shadow in every corner of the dog's mind. Shaped like windy warriors, they whispered awful things about the humans in the glass room.

Becky realized the animals weren't under their own control. It was terrifying; she turned to tell Seth what she'd discovered.

"Shh..." Seth was staring down a wiry dog they hadn't noticed under the desk. Seth had his knife out.

A low growl rumbled from the dog's chest.

Becky watched the dog leap at Seth, saw his knife come up...

Seth fell from the weight as Becky rushed forward with her own blade and stabbed the dog in the throat. Her knife sank through and she jerked on it, hoping she hadn't gone far enough to hurt Seth.

Seth shoved the hot corpse off, slinging blood from his arm. He'd been bitten.

"Damn." Becky hurriedly dug out her medical kit as Seth retrieved his blade from the dog's chest. She handled the bite on his arm like she'd learned in Angela's class, but her stomach twisted harshly the entire time. The wound didn't want to stop bleeding, even after she'd bandaged it as tightly as she could.

Seth tolerated the actions because they couldn't get a fire going right now without suffocating. Cauterizing the wound was preferable to him over a two-week injury that would require stitches, daily inspections, medication... Seth studied the dogs that were now lying outside the door, then Becky's kit. "Do you still have that vial?"

Becky went still for an instant, then understood what he had thought of. "Very bottom."

Seth didn't ask why she still had it, but the question went to the top of his mental list as he dug the vial out.

Becky got the small jar of peanut butter they'd almost finished with lunch and held out small gobs for Seth to coat in the white powder. She didn't know exactly what it was, but Seth appeared to because he frowned the entire time. Becky didn't ask. She knew what it was supposed to do, and that was too much information.

Seth took each coated peanut butter ball and rolled the drug up tight, then lined them on the window ledge. He wasn't certain what reaction ecstasy would have on the wild dogs, but he knew that when they calmed down, they would sleep. He and Becky would then kill them. After being bitten, Seth wasn't as worried about drawing people. If strangers came to cause trouble, they would shoot them too, but he didn't want to lose the items they'd come for. Angela had made it clear Safe Haven needed them. However, if the drugs didn't work on the dogs, Seth planned to open fire and handle whatever came from it. The pain in his arm was a hot fire, making him angry that he'd been bitten at all. He hadn't searched under the desk, putting them both in danger. He deserved to be bitten and it pissed him off. Seth nodded to her. "Easy and only a small bit."

Becky opened the door.

The dogs lunged forward.

Seth's toss was good. Two of the balls landed on noses poking through the door. Tongues came out; the two balls vanished.

While those dogs were busy prying their jaws open around the peanut butter, Seth tossed the rest of the balls, being certain all of the animals got at least one.

“What now?” Becky studied the dogs that were no longer snarling in rabid hatred. They were watching the door for more treats.

“We wait. How about a nap?”

“Too wound up. You go ahead.”

Seth had the same problem, along with the fire in his arm. He swallowed two Tylenol, but shunned the painkillers Becky offered from her medic kit. He had to stay alert. The Tylenol would knock it down enough for him to function.

The dogs reacted to the party drug faster than Seth expected, whining, growling, snapping. They fought with each other, chased their tails, puked, and forgot about the humans they had trapped. Drool puddled on the floor, mating took place, and time slowly passed.

When the dogs began to lay down, some cleaning themselves, some shuddering, Seth motioned to Becky. “Take the right.”

They eased the door open.

Two of the animals were nearby. Seth quickly shot them before they could lunge. The suppressed noise still echoed loudly in the warehouse. The sounds of nails running madly across concrete came to them.

Becky and Seth were ready, easily hitting the wild animals as they scrambled down an aisle of boxes. The three canines fell together, sliding into shelves of merchandise that buried them.

Seth and Becky retrieved their bag from the office and then returned to the crates, listening for anyone who may have heard the shots. Arm now throbbing, Seth held the light this time, staying alert. Five was a small pack for wild dogs. On

the ride here, they'd witnessed small herds of canines with numbers in the dozens.

It took them half an hour to gather the rest of the items and then load the truck they'd pulled inside one of the bay doors. As they prepared to go home, Seth looked over, admiring her fiery hair in the dome light.

Becky felt it coming, but didn't try to stop him.

"Should I give you space? Is that what you don't want to tell me?"

"Not even close." Becky snorted, fastening her seatbelt.  
"Why do men always assume the worst?"

"Because the vibes you women put off are always bad."

"I hate myself." She knew he needed to hear it to understand where she was coming from. "I'm trying to forgive me, like the rest of the camp, but it's hard."

"Yes." Seth had his own mistakes haunting him, some from before the war. Not being able to save his daughter was always the cause of his nightmares and that was after getting a pickaxe through the leg by people who wanted to eat him.

"I kept the vial to remind me of my mistakes."

"Not to use it sometime, maybe on Neil?"

Becky flushed.

Seth frowned, but he'd known all along that he was a substitute for what she really wanted. He'd just thought he could fill those shoes.

"No." Becky put a hand on his good arm. "I wouldn't betray you that way, no matter what screwed shit is in my head."

"You'll end it with me first, right?"

“Yes.”

Her answer broke Seth’s heart. He eased them out of the warehouse without saying anything else. This was what he deserved for falling in love with her. He’d known it when he rescued her from Rick. Becky’s heart belonged to Neil, whether that man wanted it or not.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

# Buttons to Push



Page 1

### **Refugee Crisis Hits Safe Haven Refuge!**

by Reporter Cynthia Quest

**September 24<sup>th</sup>**

There are hundreds of them. We can't sleep without hearing the shouts and fights, the gunfire. The flood of refugees we all expected after the war has finally arrived and if not for these mountain walls, we would have already been overrun.

There are too many for our Eagles to go out and gain control, and more people are on the way—hundreds or maybe even *thousands*. Think about that. Daily assaults are already taking place and we can't stop them. Someone has died out

there every day this week. Women are being hurt, supplies are being stolen, wolves are trying to sneak in with the sheep, and more are on the way. What are we supposed to do? I agree that we have a duty to our fellow man, but we don't have a duty to killers or anyone who will destroy what we've built. Most of those people can never be allowed in here. Let me explain why.

**Reason One:** We don't have the room for that many people. Look around these caves and tell me we can fit thousands down here? We're already cramped and our new numbers of official members are at four hundred and ten. Why haven't they set up their own settlement? We did. Why can't they go do that? There are simply too many of them. We will run out of everything and none of us will survive. The majority of these people are scavengers. They have nothing except needs.

**Reason Two:** Their lack of morals and ethics will bleed into our camp. We will have a crime rate for the first time. There are thieves, rapists, murderers, pedophiles, and even cannibals in these groups. That came straight from the boss, folks. Evil is on our doorstep. Do we want to welcome it with open arms? We're almost safe down here. These strangers will change that.

On a side note, not following rules, hurting, killing, and betraying has resulted in people being barred from our peaceful settlement before now, including Adrian. If we allow these killers in, why did we bother to banish our former leader? If we do this, I say Adrian has to be given the same chance to reform. I also think there's as much chance of that, as there is of these strangers obeying our laws.

**Reason Three:** Many of them are ill. We haven't experienced the outbreaks that most people have because we're careful about who joins and because we've been lucky, frankly. With so many people coming in, the odds of missing something deadly are huge. And what about the people who refuse to be tested? We don't have any laws that force them to. We could all die of the measles or even the plague. It could happen. We only have two doctors. Imagine thousands of refugees here. There's no way we can keep up with that many people at once. We'll be out of medical supplies within a month. When we can't help them anymore, our doctors and nurses will be assaulted or even killed. We'll have to run constant foraging trips, even during the winter weather, and it won't be enough. We'll kill ours to save them, but many of these coming refugees won't survive anyway because they've been breathing in the ash. We can't help them.

**Reason Four:** There is no way that Safe Haven can rehabilitate that many people at once. We don't have the guards or the resources to patrol them. People have been caught trying to sneak in here by cutting holes in the fences. You know of the attempts to get through, the semi that was used to ram the gates. These people are desperate and bad things always come from that. Some of them are innocent and need our help, but how do we tell the difference?

In my opinion, we can't. I want the gates shut to refugees until spring. We've fought hard to get where we are. I say we let them do the same.

What do you think?

## **Are We Ready?**

Winter is coming, and with it—a whole host of new problems. Are we ready? I've talked to our XO, Marcus Brady, about that subject. Here's what he had to say.

**Cynthia:** Are we ready for winter?

**Marcus:** No, but we have a little more time to gather what we need. We just have to keep working.

**Cynthia:** Won't that be hard with all those refugees at the gates?

**Marcus:** Yes, but we have more than one way off the mountain. In fact, we have several.

**Cynthia:** That's good to know. How far behind are we on gathering?

**Marcus:** Only a couple of weeks. The coming storm might add to that.

**Cynthia:** Are we expecting a lot of snow?

**Marcus:** Yes, but the wind and cold will be the real issue. We're prepping the cave for it.

**Cynthia:** Are you confident we can make this work?

**Marcus:** Honestly? No, not as much as I was when we got here. There are too many people waiting to get in.

**Cynthia:** So you agree we shouldn't let any more people in here with us?

**Marcus:** I think we have to be careful about how many come in, but the boss wants our people and some of them are that.

**Cynthia:** Is it worth the risk?

**Marcus:** Life is always worth the risk.

**Cynthia:** That's true. Do you have any advice for people concerning the weather?

**Marcus:** Keep your feet and hands warm and dry. Frostbite is not your friend. Stay inside as much as you can. We have plenty of work in the caves that needs to be done, including installing the showers and helping monitor the animals that have been brought down.

**Cynthia:** The animals we're leaving topside because of their size, will they survive the winter?

**Marcus:** Yes. We'll be building a large barn that will shelter them, along with the supplies and food they need. We'll be melting snow for them to drink, like we'll be doing for ourselves at some point.

**Cynthia:** Filtered and treated?

**Marcus:** You know it.

**Cynthia:** Do you think the cold weather will convince some of the refugees to leave?

**Marcus:** It might make them more desperate.

**Cynthia:** Are there extra guards on the gate?

**Marcus:** Yes. It'll stay that way.

**Cynthia:** What about the rumor that this winter could last twice as long as what we're used to?

**Marcus:** Yes, that's been confirmed now. All of our weather trackers agree that this will be the longest winter any of us have ever experienced.

**Cynthia:** Are we ready for that?

**Marcus:** Not as much as I'd like to be, but once we're in the cave, we have to tough it out.

**Cynthia:** That brings me to the final questions. Is this mountain settlement a mistake? Should we have gone south? Is Kindle searching for a boat for us, despite what we were told about making a stand here?

**Marcus:** Wow. Let's see. No, it's not a mistake. We have to try this. No one wants to leave our country...except Kendle. Yes, she is searching for a ship, but just for herself and the few people who've chosen to go with her. When she returns, we'll have an idea of what things are like along the coast. Eventually, we'll have to go there to gather supplies. It'll be nice to have a firsthand account.

**Cynthia:** That's all I have for you at the moment. Is there anything you'd like to say?

**Marcus:** Don't get rowdy at the party. We've put the brig on the bottom floor with the ghost.

**Cynthia:** Cute. Thank you for the interview.

**Marcus:** My pleasure.

### **Reporter's final thought**

I feel snowed. We all know Marc can be charming and that he uses it to distract people. We usually approve, but in this case, it could cost our lives. Personally, I trust Marc. I also believe Angela wants what's best for us. But the reality is this: The long winter, combined with all those refugees, could kill us. Safe Haven might no longer exist. Is that worth the risk for a few more good people? We already have enough men and women here to rebuild our lives. Let the rest of the refugees do the same—somewhere else.

Page 3

### **Pick up a potted vegetable plant or two!**

Food could become scarce if this winter gets as bad as people are worried over. Do your part and grow a vegetable! Pick up a potted plant at the topside garden area and take it to

your bunk. The pots are bio domes that you close in the evening to provide protection and hold in warmth. These plants require little light and only a little water, so it will be easy for everyone here to grow their own favorite vegetables. Stop by and get yours today!

\*Area will be open from 9am to dusk.

### **Get your winter gear!**

All supply trucks now have winter gear. They will be open from 7am until dusk. Don't take chances with your health. Get set for the storms before they arrive.

### **Contest Reward Party!**

48 hours from now, we are having a party to celebrate moving into the cave. Details will be posted on the boards in all mess areas. This is a housewarming party, so bring a treat and join your fellow survivors in triumph. We made it. We're here. Let's party!

Page 4

### **Safe Haven Code of Conduct**

- 1.) Abuse (Mental, physical, and verbal) is forbidden.**
- 2.) Fighting, property damage, and violence for any reason but self-defense is not allowed.**
- 3.) Sexual Assault is a capital offense! Punishable by death, or branding and banishment**
- 4.) Killing for any reason other than self-defense is a capital offense! Punishable by death.**
- 5.) Child abuse is a capital offense! Jury vote. Guardian will overrule any decision but death.**

**6.) Rape is a death sentence.**

**7.) Treason/ Mutiny is also a death sentence.**

*Leadership will only change by camp vote. When more than half of the camp agrees, a new leader will be voted in.*

### **Crime Reports**

To report a crime, simply tell any Eagle. They will handle things from there.

## **2**

“She’s still letting people in!” With David recovering in a guarded hammock behind them, Justin had stepped up to be XO. He and two of the others would remain here to watch over David. They had orders to bugout if the refugees came up.

“Yes.”

“Is she crazy? Listen to them! Look at it. Those are bodies!”

“Yes.” Adrian’s heart was breaking for what Angela had to be feeling. “She’ll keep taking them in until the camp, or Marc, puts a stop to it.”

“Why would she take that risk?” Justin was getting angrier as bottles and debris were thrown toward the main gates and the more docile zones. “I’d use the Ma Deuce in that tower and kill them all.”

“Those are Americans, soldier!” Adrian snapped at the suggestions of using the .50 caliber gun Marc had installed. “She’ll never throw them away lightly.”

“They don’t have the room or the supplies for that many people. There has to be five hundred refugees down there!”

“Shh...” The masses were staying by the gates right now, but as they got more desperate, Adrian expected them to spread out. He didn’t want their conversation to be what triggered that behavior.

“Does she at least have a way out of there?”

“I would imagine that she has several,” Adrian narrowed in on a fight at the entry to the evaluation area. Most of the scavengers here were armed, but the physical fights were common, whereas the gunfire had been light. Even in the frenzy, the mob was saving their bullets for the guards inside the gate.

“What are we supposed to be doing right now?” Justin needed to vent his frustrations. He was an Adrian supporter, but he was also fond of Safe Haven. He wanted both to do well.

“We have to finish clearing that road.”

“That’ll take months. And it’s making it easier for people to reach us.”

“No. None of these people came from the south.”

“How do you know that?”

“When winter blows in, you migrate. But when you’re already south, you stay put.”

Female screams echoed and then gunfire came as the men guarding Safe Haven’s gate began shooting into the fighting men by the evaluation area. The fight had broken through the first gate and caught a woman in the chaos. Once she was down, the fight had shifted to a gang rape, but they’d forgotten they were in range of the Eagles.

Adrian was proud of himself, proud of Angela, and yet, terrified for both of them. Safe Haven would leave after this,

he hoped, and their sacrifices would finally be proven worthy. The flood of misery surrounding his former camp was going to be more than they could handle. Angela would make sure they got to see the worst of it, to convince them that leaving was the right thing to do. It was likely the hardest thing she'd ever done. Adrian mourned and celebrated for her. He understood what it was like to fight this hard, to never relax your strict plans. Because she had the strength to follow through, their country would survive. In time, the ripples would spread out and relight this dark land with fierce hope and pride.

“We’ll go down the rear path.” Adrian went toward the site that had been camouflaged. The road had only been cleared for five miles. That was just far enough to get them trapped.

### 3

“We have a tail.” Tommy stared in the mirror as Kendle drove.

“It’s Conner.”

Tommy frowned at her calm reply. “He’s been banished!”

“We’re not in camp.” Kendle shrugged. “Angela owes him for helping a member.”

“Conner was in camp to help someone?!”

“No.”

Tommy considered what that meant. Conner was doing good work, probably for the boss. Before it all went to hell with Adrian, that had meant the person was trying to earn forgiveness.

“Does he deserve it?” Tommy held on as she steered around a garbage truck that appeared to have been loaded with furniture when the war came. The mold on the truck was defying the cold to remain alive. “Can he be trusted?”

“For this run, he’ll shine like a new penny. In Safe Haven, around Candy? Hard to guess at.”

Tommy wondered what would happen if he said no to the boy joining them. If Conner was here, the boy would have proof that Angela had approved it. Tommy sighed. If he did, they would accept the boss’s wishes for now and complain upon their return.

“That’s what I chose to do. This is important. I won’t let Adrian’s son interfere in our mission.”

That was what Tommy liked to hear from his teammates. “Pull over.”

The vehicle behind them also pulled over, driver and six passengers staring curiously until they saw Conner. Then the stares became scowls and mutters floated through cracked windows.

“What is he doing here?”

“Get rid of him while you can!”

Tommy didn’t scold his team. The boy had a right to know how people felt.

Conner flushed under his helmet and chose to leave it on. He didn’t talk, just handed Tommy a note. He’d read it before leaving his father’s site.

Tommy read it. “Says it’s up to us. If we can’t use him, he’ll be assigned to Zone C.”

“Wow.” Kindle was speechless. She couldn’t believe Angela would do that.

“Guess she always knows what buttons to push.” Tommy wondered how best to tell the people behind them. His own passengers were remaining silent out of respect, but Tommy could feel their disapproval. “Take the note to the driver behind us. Tell them I said to vote. Then come back to me and wait.”

Conner went quickly.

“We’ll vote too.” Tommy twisted around to scan those in his vehicle. “Keep him or send him to his death in Zone C?”

It was a tense ten minutes for Conner. Tommy’s vehicle had all agreed to let him come along, but the other seven people were still arguing it out. If all of them said no, the vote would be theirs and he would be sent to live in the zone for bad people. It meant this was his forgiveness vote. Angela had done it in such a way that no one had known it was coming. There was also no one here on his side to speak for him, which kept Conner a nervous wreck while he waited by Tommy’s open window.

Whitney flashed lights to let Tommy know they were ready.

Tommy jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Go find out.” Another part of atoning was facing the people. The way Conner was handling himself so far was good.

Everyone turned around or observed in the mirrors, curious as to Conner’s final fate. It could all end here.

Whitney glared at the boy. “Take off that helmet.”

Conner removed it to reveal pale skin under scarlet cheeks. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think anyone wanted to see me since I look like my dad.”

It was a reminder that he wasn't Adrian, but Whitney didn't need it. "We voted to let you come along, but you'll be watched until we know if we can trust you."

"Thank you." Conner smiled. "I'll be helpful. I promise."

"That's why we agreed, so be sure that you are." Whitney frowned deeply. "But as far as we're concerned, your banishment has been lifted, with conditions. This trip is the first step in your probation. The next part comes when you're in camp and Candy walks by. If we witness one leer, we'll shoot you and pike your skull on the front gate like Marc did that woman killer. Watch your six, rookie."

#### 4

"Have you found out anything about her?"

"No, and I've tried. She's great at deflecting questions."

"I noticed that. Other than Shawn, does she have any friends here yet?"

"She's had lunch twice with that new guy—Jayson, but that's it. Even the den mothers have given up."

Angela listened from outside the door to the main medical bay. They now had three wide canvas shelters connected for their medical needs. Hilda oversaw one, Dr. Brooke supervised one, and Millie and Mandy were occupying the third. Those two females had chosen to work together. The doctor was staying busy moving among the three areas.

In the wing nearest to the main flap, Theo and Candy were talking. Theo's leg had been casted, but there was no sign of life in it. Dr. Brooke had declared it paralyzed. Candy had come as soon as Theo was allowed visitors. Candy was

keeping him busy with chatter and questions, trying to prevent him from dwelling on his injury, but Angela expected that to fail soon. Theo wasn't the type to be distracted from the future, no matter how grim.

"It's a chore to keep watching her. I'm always so tired!"

"I wondered if she should be roaming free. I'm glad she isn't, but there are a lot of new people. I don't recognize enough faces at meals."

"Any idea how to keep all those assholes outside the gate?"

"Angela and Jennifer are picking through them. It takes time. How are your shifts with Conner around?"

"Awkward, but getting better. I heard he went with Kendle, so I won't have to worry about it for a while, I guess."

"The boss will feel better when the rest of the teams return."

"They all copied Marc's order."

"Yeah, he still sounded pissed. I can't believe Shawn did that."

"And in the kids' camper. Peggy was furious."

"I heard Angela laughed."

"Well, didn't you?"

Angela resumed walking. She'd gotten an update on a few things and she was confident that Candy would keep Theo occupied for at least another day. After that, life would distract him. As it was, the crowds outside the gate were making Safe Haven people extremely uneasy. Several of them had come to her this morning to express their concern. Angela had explained about the reinforced gates and the patrol that was staying tripled in that area, but her camp wasn't stupid. If she

kept pushing them to take the refugees, they would rebel with an emergency vote, which was the goal.

This was how their future would be for years if they remained in these mountains. Some of the people had even suggested she get rid of the refugees through magic, giving her the sign that she'd had to wait for. Her camp was turning away from the idea that Safe Haven could shelter everyone, concluding that there wasn't enough food and water for that many people, let alone enough Eagles to provide security. Cynthia's newspaper had brought the topic front and center.

Right now, she had to supervise the gate while Marc tried to sleep through the noise. Knowing she would be out here with the Eagles would prevent him from resting. He would be up long before he should be to verify that she was okay. Angela waved off her two shadows in favor of both Special Forces teams. This was the first active duty she'd scheduled them for and all fourteen men were lethal. Even the rookies she'd assigned to their teams would shoot first and talk later—exactly what this situation called for. If the mob chose to attack while she was outside, people would die.

Angela waited for Ray, who had point over the gate, to unlock it, not reacting to his frowns or mutters. She could hear the wildness out there and understood his concern, but this was her job.

Angela entered the first gate and waited to hear the lock click before she entered the reception area. The crowd around this fence was patiently waiting to be evaluated, but the groups behind them were loud and angry that they had to wait in the cold. There were no less than six hundred people here. When Angela scanned them with the witch, she was disappointed to

discover that more than half couldn't be allowed to join them and that was just from obvious problems. The bright glow of thievery, abuse, and corruption was unmistakable, especially in the group that had moved up during the night.

Angela read the guards' notes on them, frowning as she found out they'd taken over two smaller camps and forced them to give up locations by Safe Haven's gate. The women in the captive clan had been abused before the Eagles could interfere. The offenders in the large group had been grabbed, shot, and added to Marc's gruesome display, but the notes said he wouldn't do it again. Sending men outside at night was a big mistake.

Angela sat down in the middle of four Eagles with rifles in their hands, glad of the fencing between her and the mob. As she looked at the next notes, the noise pushed in on her. This crowd was dangerous. She couldn't let her medical personnel come outside today. It wasn't safe, even with the patrols and fences. As it was, Angela wanted to go back in now, but it might trigger a negative reaction. She needed to appear in control. She signaled the next group of refugees forward through the cold wind.

"No, you won't be able to carry a gun unless you're an Eagle."

"Then I want to be an Eagle!"

"That'll be a while. We have to make sure we can trust you."

In the next little cage over, Jennifer sounded like she'd almost had enough of repeating the same answers. Angela understood.

Jennifer sighed, pushing a paper under the small gap between the fence and table. “Fill this out.” She placed a yellow card on the table as well. “You’re being assigned to Zone A. If you can follow the rules and prove you’re a good person, you’ll get into a better zone soon and maybe make it inside.”

Jennifer’s words told Angela the man probably wasn’t capable of being reformed, but it was clear that the teenager was tired of sending people to Zone C.

Angela frowned. “Take a break.”

“Thank you.” Jennifer rose right away. The tension out here, combined with the noise, had given her a nasty headache that interfered with reading people’s thoughts. She also kept getting snatches of a conversation happening inside Safe Haven, but the words about C-4 made no sense to her. They couldn’t blow up six hundred people.

Angela studied the man in front of her without any change in expression at the burn marks and bruises. The wild expression and knife clutched in his grip said whoever had done it to him was still a threat. Angela dug deeper to be certain of her choice. She found no issues with the man that Safe Haven couldn’t help, and passed him an orange card. Earl would become an Eagle and then he’d never have to feel this way again. She would see to it. “Zone B. Fill this out.”

The noise increased as Angela processed people at a faster rate than Jennifer. Refugee groups moved up as she sorted, but the line behind them kept coming. It stretched down the hill and out of sight. As the groups rotated, fights broke out among those moving too slowly and those who were in a hurry. Vehicles were damaged as inexperienced drivers tried to

navigate the small spaces, hitting tents as well as people. It was chaos.

Angela felt the tension increase among her guards as the next group came through the steady wind to be evaluated. The ten men were quiet, alert, heavily armed, and wearing smirks that warned of bad intentions. They strolled toward her in a line that cleared a quick path through the refugees.

Angela's Eagles stood up, glowering.

Angela didn't need to scan the men, but she did anyway to be positive later. Without someone to beat her plans off, she was having doubts in a few areas. The refugees were a part of that, mostly because of the women and kids. Behind the men, but still a part of that smirking group, were four females Angela hated to assign to the same zone, but she had no choice. The women appeared to be as corrupt as their men. No amount of survival skills or pregnancies were worth letting that type of evil into her peaceful herd. "You'll all be in Zone C or you can leave." Angela got ready to dive for cover if it was needed. Since being shot, she could no longer depend on her own gun to save her life. The arm worked, but not always the way she needed it to.

"Wait." The leader of the men, tall and lean, stepped forward with a pathetic grin. His long coat was tacky with dried fluids that Angela didn't want to identify. "Are you sure? We're good at what we do."

Angela shook her head, denying him. "Zone C or go. We have no room for you."

The man scanned Zone C, where an unruly mob was lining the fences to observe the guards instead of going out to scavenge for their needs like Angela and Jennifer had advised

everyone to do. “Maybe we’ll stay a bit. See if you change your mind.”

The group left slowly, arrogantly. Refugees scrambled out of their way before the killers reached them, but Angela didn’t notice. A blond man with furious blue eyes had just appeared in the tree line across the mob of refugees and she couldn’t look away.

Adrian stared in shock at the scene. The noise and cold weather had brought him in early, and now he wished he hadn’t left at all. Angela was outside the gate, *without Marc*. There were hundreds of possible threats here and all that stood between her and them was a few dozen Eagles and some flimsy fencing.

Furious, Adrian whistled. Around him, the remaining soldiers came from the trees to take his flank. Adrian marched his men through the mob toward Angela, glowering.

Angela tried to look away then, realizing what Adrian meant to do. She couldn’t; she swept him miserably instead. She didn’t reach out or even smile, fighting to control herself. She’d missed him in so many ways over the last month.

Adrian knew. It was the mirror of his soul, the other half that was almost close enough to complete him. The struggle she was going through was easier for him because of his fury at her being out here.

“You don’t belong here!” Morgan growled from his place by Angela as Adrian approached the gate.

“Neither does she!”

“We don’t need you!” Kyle insisted from her other side, though he certainly didn’t feel that way.

“I’ll go when she does!” Adrian barked, stopping in front of Angela. He wanted to say a hundred things, to touch her hand and tell her not to blame herself for the coming unhappiness. Instead, he took a sentry position between her and the crowd. His men lined up on either side of them.

Angela immediately felt better. So did the Eagles, though they wouldn’t have admitted it. Traitor or not, Adrian was a force that commanded respect. When he only stood with his back to them, the Eagles stopped protesting.

Angela beckoned the next group forward, heart thumping. She was outside the gate. The bubble wasn’t between them out here. If she wanted to talk with him, she could.

Adrian felt it. He wanted to lock gazes and fall in love all over again, but he resisted those urges. She was in danger. He had to stay alert.

Angela felt his attention shift from her and return to evaluating the new arrivals. She understood this wasn’t a good time, but as the afternoon wore on, she began to sting a bit from his lack of communication attempts. *If he doesn’t care anymore, it’s for the best. I’ll walk this line forever before I betray Marc. I’m not bad.*

Adrian winced at that blow, stomach churning. As soon as he’d seen her outside the gate, he’d shoved into her mind. Hearing her doubt his need actually hurt.

Adrian swept the remaining people, not liking many of them. He listened to their stories and picked out the details they hadn’t wanted to speak, but so far, there were only a few good apples here. It was exactly as he’d suspected it would be after the war, when he’d first started keeping notebooks. The worst of humanity was tough, enough to have survived for

almost a year now, and most of it had come upon the backs of others.

Adrian was certain there were good people left all over the country, but they weren't going to come here yet. Safe Haven had defeated the government, but they had also replaced them in ways. Patriots were leery of that type of control. In time, they might realize Safe Haven was good, but for now, only those who were either desperate or hoping for a free ride would continue to flock here. Adrian knew Angela wouldn't let many of the bad apples in, but he had no idea what she planned to do about the others. He hadn't covered this in his notebooks because he didn't have a solution. Truly bad people didn't leave just because you told them to, but Safe Haven wasn't ready to see their army gunning down hundreds of survivors. Nor was Angela, though he assumed he would be busy later. None of those she'd assigned to Zone C had chosen to leave. There were several ongoing fights there now for control. There was no way he could pick them all off, but he would try to get the worst of the lot.

No.

*She must have a plan. Good!* Adrian's pulse leapt as he realized she was also in his mind, listening. *Okay.*

Angela didn't send more.

Neither did Adrian. It was enough that they knew they were connected. The feeling was as incredible as they remembered.

Angela winced at fresh screams from Zone C, but she didn't order her army to interfere. Only the worst of the worst were being sent there. Even slightly innocent people were being loaded into and around Zone A. Those Angela wanted

were going into Zone B, which was next to the main gate. The mob had noticed the placement quickly. It was clear by examining the zones what type of people were in them. Zone B was quiet and happy, cleared for entry. Zone A was nervous, but also quiet, hoping to be found worthy. Zone C was chaos as those who'd been denied refused to leave. Angela had only mentioned the chance of reform to a few of those rough souls and Adrian approved. None of them deserved to enter.

Gunshots rang out from Zone C.

Adrian retreated a bit, providing a better shield for the cage. He gave Kyle a harsh glare that the Eagle responded to with a curt nod. It was time to go in.

When Kyle sent a signal to the men on the rafters, Angela didn't interfere. The sun was setting, which meant she would have only had time for a few more evaluations anyway. Once the crowd realized the day's assigning was over, it would get unruly—more so than what it already had been. Angela made a note for the Eagles to remind people over the speakers to lock their gates and doors, and to post patrols against the crowd of men and women in and around Zone C. Eagles were not coming back out here. Neither was she.

Another gunshot echoed, drawing attention and fear.

Adrian raised his rifle and took aim. He no longer had to worry over his camp's approval or wait for orders. He opened fire at the group now charging toward the gate; the soldiers around him did the same.

The other Eagles followed Marc's strict instructions for a possible moment like this—they tackled the boss and waited for him to arrive.

Angela was yanked from the cage and shoved down, then covered with heavy bodies. As they piled on top of her, all the vests provided layers of protection that she accepted gratefully as more gunfire echoed. Even muffled, she recognized the sound and stayed still under her guards as that distinctive noise grew louder. Her arm was curled over her stomach bump as she smiled. *Daddy's coming.*

## 5

"Leave it open and watch your line of fire!" Marc and Kenn hurried through the gate.

Marc did a fast scan and found a body-pile of firing Eagles, with Adrian and his men surrounding them. Marc went that way, shooting at the advancing group of refugees he assumed had been refused entry. He shot the closest man and then did the same to the woman behind him. The bodies fell together as Marc aimed for another charging, shooting, screaming target.

"Get inside!" Kenn fired at two women aiming for Adrian. He got them both, but missed the man behind them who fired. The bullet tore into Daryl's shoulder and punched through to slam into the gate.

"Son of a bitch!" Marc's face was splattered with Daryl's blood. He shot the offender in the throat as the man charged forward.

"Get inside! Everyone inside!"

Their outside team did as they were told, rising from the body pile as Eagles on the inside helped Daryl down from the rafters.

Angela was yanked up and shoved into arms she had never thought to feel again. Even in the din, her skin came to life at the contact, trying to draw from him.

Adrian held her tightly, spinning so that he was between her and the gunfire that continued to blast across the area. Another large group she'd denied had chosen to join the battle and more were doing the same. The other two zones had locked their gates, but tents were little protection from bullets.

Adrian stepped inside the gates and put Angela on her feet. His hand clutched hers in a jolt of energy that soaked in for a brief second and then he was gone.

"Hey! He can't go back out—"

Adrian slid out as the gate was slamming shut, ending Kenn's protest.

Gunfire continued to echo as Angela hurried Daryl toward the medical bay. She hadn't expected things to go crazy so quickly. She was glad Jennifer had already been inside.

"Nice!" Kenn was now watching from the rafters.  
"They're leaving!"

The Eagles cheered as Adrian and his men continued to pick off the people who had started the fight.

Others who had considered joining the fray now cowered at Adrian's fury. He was astounded that Marc had let her outside the gate alone. He took his anger out on anyone he considered a threat, including firing into Zone C to lessen that remaining population as well. He wasn't a member of Safe Haven. He didn't have to play by the rules.

The Eagles observed the slaughter in admiration that would have bothered Adrian and Angela had they been aware of it. The war had changed everything.

Angela led Daryl to an empty cot to sit down while she and the doctor worked on his arm. She expected Marc's reprimand at any point. He'd been on her heels since Adrian set her down in the bloody slush. She could have let one of their medical supervisors handle Daryl, but her guilt wouldn't allow that. She'd known having people outside the gate wasn't a good idea, but she couldn't refuse everyone who came. *Some of those sheep are mine!*

"Angie."

Marc's tone said he was livid. She lowered her head as she cleaned Daryl's wound. "I'm sorry."

"You told me you wouldn't be out there long. You said the Eagles would keep everyone away. You said you'd viewed the entire day and nothing happened!" He glared. "So what happened?"

"I needed a good reason to bar our doors to new people for a little while. I didn't see the shootout, though. I also didn't see Adrian coming back early. Darian must have been an easy target."

A few cots over, Chauncey began laughing. He had been brought here, under guard, until Angela decided what to do with him. She hadn't had time to go over Jennifer's report yet, but spending time in the drafty brig wasn't healthy and she hadn't decided what would happen to him.

"What's so funny?" Marc glared at the Keeper, noting the books near his side. The man liked to read about the ocean...or he'd heard of Angela's plans and assumed he would be along.

"It's amusing that she trusts the one who is out there killing so many, but not the one he was assigned to remove."

Angela froze.

Marc's fury filled the tent. "Are you saying Darian isn't dead?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Chauncey chuckled. "I have him on my radar, bright and hot."

Angela's rage swarmed over the man, effectively shutting down his mirth. He went still and quiet as she pinned him with a harsh glare. *Where are they? Tell me right now!*

Suddenly terrified that he wasn't going to survive captivity, Chauncey spilled his guts without more prompting. Safe Haven people were truly ruthless. *It's too bad they insist on being the good guys. They excel at many of the skills the other side requires.*

## Chapter Twenty-Five

# Population Boom



1

**S**afe Haven wasn't happy.

There was a mob on their doorstep. It was cold, but they were afraid to go back into the cave. The Mickey Mouse boots and fleece layering was protection, but not comfort or security. Daryl had been shot. They'd had a cave-in. Their gate had been attacked repeatedly. It wasn't the peaceful mountain living that they had envisioned; with every negative thing that happened, the camp grew more uneasy. They'd been waiting for Angela to take care of things the way she had been since assuming the mantle of command, but now, the camp had had enough. As soon as they stepped from the medical bay, Marc

and Angela were surrounded by angry members demanding that she do something.

Angela knew what they wanted, but she denied the renewed requests to use magic. “Some of those people belong here. We have to try to get a few more.”

“I say we take a vote!” Li called from the rear of the small crowd. “Let camp decide.”

*Yes!* Angela gloated inwardly. Outwardly, she shrugged coolly. “That’s the right of every person here. During lunch mess okay for you?”

Surprised by her acceptance, Li tried to apologize. “It’s just, there’s so many! You know? Barely have enough to feed those here.”

Reaching a population limit was a pivotal point for any refugee camp, but it was also heartbreaking to realize there wasn’t enough of everything to go around—not until a true settlement could be built, anyway. Once that happened, Angela planned to expand their numbers as much as she could, but the masses outside their gates right now were almost useless. From constant killing over food and ammunition, to rapes and fanatical control, they were trouble she couldn’t allow in. Tonight’s meeting would cover it. *And more. I have yet another bombshell to drop.*

Marc led Angela toward the cave, knowing that’s where she wanted everyone to be tonight. So did he. If the gates were overwhelmed, the cave was where they would make a stand. Marc agreed wholeheartedly with closing their gates to more people. They’d already taken in over two hundred refugees since coming to these mountains, and each day, the food

portions had shrunk. Things were tight and it would only get worse.

As they went to the cave, a few people followed, including guards. They also knew the camp needed to get below; they began telling members to collect their things and come along. It wasn't a hard choice for most when they saw Marc and Angela heading down. The sounds from the zones were loud and ugly. Before long, there was a steady stream of people going into the cave with their gear.

The radio lit up. "There will be an emergency meeting during lunch mess. Attendance is mandatory. Those on duty will turn radios off to keep this meeting private. You will be filled in at the end of your shifts. Use the alarms if there's a problem. Everyone else is required to attend."

Tonya's words had a calming effect on Safe Haven's people that would allow Angela time to reconsider what she wanted to say. She already had her lines picked, but there was always the chance of a wildcard being tossed in. That had been one of Adrian's most common notes in his books.

*Watch out for the wildcards. You can't plan for them, but they can destroy everything.*

Angela had taken that to heart and developed secondary plans for the meeting. She was controlling hundreds of people now, manipulating them into doing what they should have already known to do and it was exhilarating. It was also exhausting. She was looking forward to a long, quiet boat ride where she might have time to straighten out her personal life. She was tired of being avoided. As soon as this mountain farce was over, she would try to repair her relationship with Charlie. She'd come across this country for him and that love hadn't

diminished with leadership. In fact, it had made her more determined to take these people to a place where he could finish growing up in peace. That wouldn't happen here. The United States was now a death trap that few would escape.

## 2

"You're up." Angela gestured for Kenn to go to the front of the meeting area that now held the majority of their camp. The tables had been traded for holding plates in hand as they all stood around, listening to the angry refugees shout and fight above them.

Kenn scowled. "I don't know what you want me to say."

Angela stared coolly. She assumed Adrian had given him details, but she didn't think it mattered. Kenn was the mouthpiece of Safe Haven. He knew what she needed.

Kenn slowly walked to the front of the wary crowd, now able to hear his steps echoing on the rocky ground. He had limited information, but he knew he didn't want to be the one up there taking the heat.

"That was mean."

Angela shrugged at Jennifer's comment. With Kenn, she preferred to use what did work, not what might. He wasn't someone she could give leniency to most days.

Kenn took the microphone from the stand; the softly muttering people quieted expectantly. He cleared his throat, thinking the acoustics down here were awful for being a cave. He'd always thought they echoed no matter where you stood, but that wasn't the case. "This is an emergency meeting. We have more trouble coming our way. The boss has insisted

everyone be informed so they have time to make their own choices.”

“Must be something big.” Peggy didn’t look at Doug as he stood security duty near Kenn. She was still avoiding him. She would until the next step in her plans with Hilda had been taken.

Kenn nodded, sighing. “That’s what I figured too when I heard emergency meeting. Seems like we can’t ever get a break, you know?”

Some of Angela’s council frowned, but she approved. Kenn knew how to get them venting before his boss took center stage. That was what a mouthpiece did—manipulated the crowd into the right mood to hear the news, whatever it was. “We’ve survived all of it so far. We’ll survive this.”

Many people added their agreement; the tension went down a tiny notch. Knowing they had so much magic was indeed a comfort...as long as they didn’t think about it too hard.

“We’ll hear it from her in a minute, but I think we all know this meeting is related to all those refugees.” Kenn pointed upward as the sound of gunfire echoed again. “We’re not safe here.”

“Then we’ll go further east,” someone shouted from the rear of the four hundred people crammed into the largest cavern on the second floor. Later, it would once again be the mess, but right now, it held enough people to make even the Miller boys feel the claustrophobia that many of their builders had been complaining about.

“No, north!”

“East!”

Kenn resumed control. “The boss will tell us the safest places and then we’ll vote like we always do.”

Angela walked to the front; the crowd went still and quiet, waiting. Some were tense, a few were glaring. Her mind went straight to the 17%.

“Always a margin of error,” she muttered, making those who heard it worry more.

Kenn stayed by the table as Angela hopped up to stand on top of it. Her other guards came closer.

Marc subtly gestured for the snipers mixed into the crowd to stay alert.

Angela held up a thin stack of paper. “Neil and Jeremy printed these from the satellites. They’re images of Yellowstone. It did blow. We were right.”

She handed the pictures to Kenn, who studied each one before he passed them around. The last graph showed a curving, narrow plume of something reaching from the volcano all the way to Maine and beyond. Kenn assumed it was a volcanic cloud.

“We’ve been getting the ash mixed with snow. That’ll hang around for a couple more weeks, but that’s not the problem. The problem is the effects.” Angela gave them a minute to view the images, studying thoughts. Even those who hadn’t voted for her were confident that she had a plan. “In the areas around Yellowstone, they can’t grow food or raise livestock. They had to get on the road to survive. We know how that was for the last nine months. There is another wave of extinction happening across our country and starvation is leading it. Now, all those desperate refugees are coming to the only light left in the darkness.”

Angela stared at their shocked, dumbfounded expressions in sympathy. “I’ve estimated we could get as many as five thousand over the next three months. After that, we’ll all starve together.”

The camp erupted in a loud clamor to deny entrance to any more survivors. Some calls were for mercy, but the majority could predict how ugly things would get. Safe Haven couldn’t support one thousand people, let alone five times that.

Marc wondered why Angela hadn’t told them the number could be much, much higher. Was she afraid of the camp fleeing now?

“We’ll hole up in here!”

“We’re fighters. They don’t know who they’re messing with!”

“Those are our people!” Samantha’s suspension was forgotten as she scolded them. “Stop being selfish!”

Angela put a hand on her gun. Marc came to her side; the crowd gradually quieted down. The small reminder of authority eased some of the concern. Safe Haven had descendants. These other groups didn’t.

“Some of them may have their own special people,” Angela warned, removing that myth. “Not all of those who were called came to us. Some of them couldn’t, and others chose not to. They’re not all our kind, but we’re being careful of those we do take in.”

“Close the gates!”

“It’s murder to leave them out there!”

“We don’t have the room or the food!”

Angela held up a hand to stop the shouts. “We’ll get it all out now. We have three problems from this. The first one and

the largest, is too many people for this shelter. The second is possible starvation. This first winter isn't going to be over in March or even June. It's going to be cold, and it's going to snow. Even without all those new people, we'd still have to be careful with our rations and the hunting teams will be tripled. We'll use seed vitamins and everyone will grow food, but in the end, it may still not be enough. There's no guarantee our plants will grow underground and even the thought of carting a thousand pound cow into this cave makes *my* balls shrink up."

The levity wasn't just for them. Angela was intimidated by the chore. "The third problem is location. Anyone can spend a few months in a cave and survive with the right supplies. We're talking about a year. That will lead to a new list of illnesses we can't treat right now. I've estimated only half of this camp will come out of these mountains alive next year."

In another part of the cave, the new refugees that had been admitted listened in concern, unsure if they would be ejected even though they'd been cleared. Among the hundred people, were the Amish group and Brittani's clan. Shane was lingering in the tunnels between them and the mess hall, still hoping to catch her attention.

The crowd continued to argue and worry. Her predictions had never been wrong.

Angela denied the Eagles who would have stepped in to settle them down. Everyone was right to be scared. "When we come out next year, we will no longer be the power we were and there will still be thousands of refugees from the west surrounding us. As soon as they realize how weak we are,

we'll be overrun and there won't be anything I can do about it. Descendant gifts will be too weak to use. We can't take energy from you once we're dug into these tunnels. You'll need every bit you have. Living underground is no easy thing that you've chosen."

Now the fear was almost visible. Many people had assumed they were about to get a long, peaceful rest. Few had considered farther than that.

"I'm going south."

Angela's statement froze people. It stunned Marc, who knew what came next, and brought terror to the throng.

"I'm going to find a ship and leave. Adrian was right. I'm going as soon as I get the rest of you bunkered in here."

Panic swept the crowd.

Angela sat on the table to wait it out. She didn't glance at Marc.

"When will the next refugees get here?!" someone shouted, obviously not caring about her bombshell.

*There's one of my haters.* Angela didn't lie. "Every day. We won't get another break."

The crowd grew more upset.

"That's not enough time to get ready!"

"We need more guns!"

"We have to leave too!"

"We can't be without your magic!"

The shouts went on for a while.

Angela waited patiently. Her choice had been made a while ago, but it hadn't been any easy one. She loathed few things more than the thought of abandoning her homeland.

Zack caught her eye. "Are we having a vote on leaving?"

Angela shook her head. “This isn’t a majority rules choice. We will get these tunnels and caverns set up for those who are staying. We’ll split supplies and other items, and do our best to make sure the cave group has a fighting chance.”

Her wording implied she already knew what choice Zack would make. He frowned at the realization.

“Can you see that future?” Peggy asked from Doug’s side. She’d automatically gravitated toward him for comfort. “Will we survive here?”

Angela splayed her fingers, letting them see the energy force. The witch was drawing from the crowd’s emotions to keep her filled.

They all stilled to watch and listen.

“That has not been revealed.”

More panic flew at her.

“That’s why I can’t stay,” Angela drew them back. “I won’t give birth here if I can’t predict the outcome. I won’t give my child up for people who refuse to believe, or who simply don’t want to travel anymore. Survival doesn’t stop just because we’ve reached this mountain. Survival is making the hard choices, again and again, until you get to true safety or you die. I haven’t forgotten that. I didn’t call a vote on it because we don’t need to. This will be a full settlement before I leave. You can stay or go, and each individual will have to make that choice. There is no *we* on this one. Do what’s best for yourself. For me, that’s Pitcairn Island. I’ll create a settlement there and hopefully feel safe, but I won’t assume that, ever, until I’ve made certain of it.”

Zack frowned deeply. “What about leadership?”

“Same as now. People will vote; the winner will do their best to make sure everyone survives, as each of Safe Haven’s leaders have done. Talk to each other, figure out who can do the job, and then get them on it.” Angela got down from the table, now trying to send comfort and common sense through her terrified people. “I believe we have to leave. There’s a tropical island waiting for us and that’s where I’m going. I hope all of you will join me, but I understand that it’s your choice to make.”

And with that, the meeting was over. Angela walked up the stairs to the cold, topside tents, leaving everyone stunned. Their leader was fleeing. Marc would go where she did, as would most of the Eagles and many of the people who hoped to become Eagles. She was taking the best of her camp and leaving the rest of them to die.

### 3

“I need a minute.”

“Okay.” Angela held the flap on the chilly training tent for the man behind her, then strode toward the chilly hay room where several punching bags were waiting for her abuse. She stripped her coat as she went.

“What are you doing?”

“Splitting the herd.” Angela didn’t remove her guns.

“Why?” Zack glared at her. “Haven’t you done enough already?”

“Apparently not,” she muttered, pulling on the thin gloves Marc liked her to wear when she used the bags. The gloves

didn't do much to pad her, but she didn't mind making him happy.

“Angie!”

“Zack, what are you?”

Zack was confused. “What am I, what?”

“You were an abusive trucker when you joined Safe Haven,” she reminded brutally, swinging.

*Thud. Whap.*

“Now, you're a leader. You got there because you work hard and you follow the rules.” Angela swung again, judging her readiness for the hitting she really wanted to do.

*Thud.*

“So?”

“So, either group will be lucky to have you and *both* will want you. Stop worrying over what won't happen.”

Zack flushed, but didn't deny that his future was his biggest concern. The camp could take care of themselves better than they'd been able to before the war.

“Yes, they can.” Angela swung again.

Zack lingered, positive there was more. “Why are we leaving without a vote?”

With that, he'd declared his intention to be with her as she rolled out. Angela didn't respond to the sign of loyalty. “You heard the meeting.”

“Some meeting.” Zack gestured. “We're used to having choices and votes.”

“You can't vote on death. And it's coming for us again.”

“More people would go if you told them that, if you explained everything that will happen.”

Angela swung again. *Thud!* “I can't do that.”

“Why not? Are you giving up on them?”

*Thud!* “I’m covering the future, like I’ve always done.”

*Thud!*

“Theirs or yours?”

“Neither. There has to be a camp still here, Zack. Not all of us can go south. Some people have to stay and face the ugliness.”

“Why? Why do we have to have people here?”

“For those who come after. We need to be here for them to join or they’ll die. We’re their salvation.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about family, Zack. Some of these people have family still out there. There has to be a place for them to go.”

“Then why not stay and wait for them, tough it out with strict security and rationing?”

“We have the same question.” Marc was in the flap, with Neil and Jeremy right behind him.

“Because I can’t plant half of you! I can’t kill any more of my army. I can’t watch them die. I won’t.” *Thud!*

“You’re leaving others to do it?” Marc knew it was eating her up to make that choice.

“Worse than that. I can’t see an outcome. It could all be for nothing. They may all die.”

“Who are the people?” Neil didn’t mind leaving so much, but he had to know who they were missing. “Who’s worth you doing this?”

“All I know is there’s a group of travelers fighting all the things we have and more. When they reach this area, things are bad and they die. As soon as that happens, darkness covers

the land like nothing I've ever seen. We have to leave people here or the future will be lost."

"We have to tell them everything." Marc tried not to be angry with her for the bombshell. "Including the other dangers."

"Yes, you should. Make sure it spreads. Everyone needs to know this place is lethal."

Marc scowled. "You want me to tell them?"

"Yes. If I do it, they'll think I'm trying to talk them into leaving and that will just make them want to stay even more. It has to come from someone they actually trust."

*Thud!* Blood splattered the inside of the thin glove this time, making all the men wince.

"How long are we staying?" Jeremy was aware of Samantha standing nearby, trying to listen. She'd already made her choice and it hadn't taken long.

"One more month, at most." Angela swung again. "Any longer and we'll stay forever."

## 4

"It's here early."

Samantha's mutter brought activities to a halt in the topside training tent that had warmed up. There were dozens of Eagles here now; they went silent together, giving Angela chills. She had remained, nursing her guilt and her knuckles while a few of the high level people tried to calm the camp. Safe Haven would go to sleep late tonight. Angela wanted to be down there comforting them, but it would have been

counterproductive, so she'd stayed to listen to the wind instead.

"The storm's almost here." Samantha slowly came out of the daze. "Less than two days."

Angela sighed as the mutters came. *Almost there.* "Tell Marc." He was one of the people below. He was sticking to his role admirably, especially considering his fury over Adrian disobeying her orders and his shock at her news of leaving. Deep down, he hadn't really thought she would do this.

"We have to tell the people outside." Samantha looked at Angela from the corner where her men had stashed her a short time ago.

"Kenn and Tonya will cover it on both shifts while they do the hourly messages."

Samantha stared, not understanding why she wasn't hurrying into action.

"*Are you* ready to get back into it, Sam?" Angela met her eye. "The time has come."

Samantha flashed to the choice she'd made when Angela asked her the first time. Since then, she'd made another huge mistake. Was this yet another in that growing list? Was she damning herself by aligning with Angela's plans?

"I understand." Angela said it kindly. "But you're either one of mine, or you're not. Please make the choice now."

The tent went silent as everyone waited for Samantha's answer.

Samantha slowly shook her head. "I'm Adrian's. I've never trusted you."

Angela smiled to cover the sting. "I understand that too. What would make you happy?"

“I need peace. You can’t give that to me, to any of us.”

“No. All I can do is try to keep you alive. Peace was never promised.”

“Adrian promised it.”

“He’s not here. He betrayed you.”

“No.” Samantha was finally able to accept the truth. “He sacrificed his future to take a chance on building a new world.”

“Explain that.” Angela let the open wound in her heart soak up the words.

“We would have been rounded up anyway. He gathered us, taught us, and then refused to hand us over. He tried to give us a fighting chance. If he hadn’t, we wouldn’t have the Eagles. He made us strong enough to carry out the plans he knew you would come up with. He saved us.”

“And?”

“And it doesn’t matter.” Samantha sighed as the next level of understanding hit. “They think he refused to give us to the government because of you.”

“Yes. His obsession has colored everything. When he crossed that line, he lost respect, trust. No one will ever give him the benefit of the doubt again.”

“Should they?” Samantha was now questioning her own motives and anger at Adrian. Had she been unfair to him? It suddenly felt like it.

“I’m much too biased to make that call.” Angela spotted Marc coming toward them. “There’s only one person here who could convince people that Adrian deserves a second chance and it won’t happen. Marc believes Adrian is as corrupt as they come. Nothing will ever convince him differently.”

“But Adrian created an army to fight the government.” Samantha finished her train of thought aloud. “He could have handed us over at any point and probably arranged it so only you and he survived. He didn’t have to handle any of it the way he did, but because of it, the results were our freedom and the chance to rebuild. Doesn’t Marc get that?”

Angela shook her head, troubled. “Marc only sees his own obsession. He won’t be satisfied until Adrian is dead.”

“But why? Over you?”

“No. Adrian fooled him, made him feel inexperienced. Marc won’t stand for that. He had faith in Adrian for a short while—long enough to create a life-long hatred when the truth came out. Marc doesn’t ever forgive that type of lesson.”

“I usually don’t either, but...”

“But you’ve been talking to David and because of your guilt, you’ve also been listening. He’s telling you that Adrian and Conner are special, that they’ve both suffered enough for their mistakes—like you have. He’s mentioning words like calm and the old days, swaying you. That’s not how true choices are made.”

Samantha flushed. Angela had just rattled off exactly what was happening. “I know.”

“But you want it to be like it was when Adrian was here and all was right with the apocalypse.”

Samantha flushed darker. “Yes. So do a lot of the others. They’re afraid to face Marc over it, but they’ve had time to consider the facts. Adrian refused to hand them over and he made certain they were strong enough to fight back. That’s not a traitor. That’s a patriot.”

“It’s not going to happen.” Angela kept her tone even as Marc joined them. He would get an ear full from everyone who’d overheard the conversation. “We can have one or the other inside our walls, not both. If we try, their rage and jealousy will destroy us all.” Angela smiled, placing a hand over Marc’s snowy glove as his defensive nature started to rise. “We’ve got the best of the two.”

Samantha grunted. “At some point, the camp might want a vote on it.”

“We’ll deal with it then.” Angela yawned. “Kenn’s about to do the hourly messages. You can go make sure he stresses the danger of the storm.”

“Thank you.” Samantha disappeared, taking her shadows along. Neil and Jeremy were constant companions since finding out about her illness.

“Things okay?” Marc was aware of the dirty looks being tossed his way.

“Hindsight can be a curse or a blessing,” Angela stood up. “She’s having both effects at the same time. She’s cooling off now, though. Things will get better for her.”

“Even though she wants Adrian cleared?” Marc’s ears were working overtime now, trying to spot possible assassins. With all the new people, the odds on that were high.

Angela nodded, not worried. Adrian would spend the rest of his life laboring for people who would probably never allow him back in. When she’d said he would pay, she hadn’t been lying.

Marc felt the need and carefully hugged her. “I love you.”

Angela snuggled into his embrace as best she could through their coats. “Right back at ya, beefcake.”

Marc's happy laughter floated across the camp, but the shield didn't come up.

Only Angela noticed. *Her secret misery was blocking it.*

## 5

"Snow team, this is base. Check in." There was a pause before Kenn's voice came again. "Base to Snow team. Do you copy?"

There was no response.

Quinn frowned, stomach a ball of nerves. "When's the last time we heard from them?"

"Yesterday." Kenn skimmed the daily reports. "Nothing unusual in the notes."

They were standing in the small cavern the builders had turned into Safe Haven's communications center. It was filled from wooden wall to wooden wall with radio equipment and wires.

"I'm going up there." Quinn turned toward the supply trucks. "Tell the boss, will ya?"

"You got it." Angela had them on lockdown. Kenn doubted the gate guards would open for anyone, even Marc, after today's fiasco. He returned to his radio calls, putting Quinn from his mind. "Snow team, this is base. Do you copy?"

## 6

"Come in Snow team!"

Half a mile above Safe Haven, Vlad grinned at the frustrated tone of the radioman. Safe Haven was about to discover they weren't the power here.

Vlad swept the sky, seeing how huge the coming storm was. He and his men had their artic tents ready inside the small cave behind them, with two hostages already stashed inside one of them. When the storm came, it would add a fresh layer of death that Vlad was now prepared to send down the mountain.

"The charges are set." Darian came through the snowy darkness in a thick Parka he'd been given upon his exit from the camp below. "I passed Blade on the way up. He said to tell you it's a go."

"Excellent." Vlad waved toward the small fire they'd made inside a tree stump. With a white tarp as an awning, the fire was protected and the heat was continuous as it burned through the stump. It was a lot easier than chopping wood. All it took was carving out a furrow down the center of a thick stump. "Warm up and tell me everything you saw in there."

Darian pulled off his new gloves, stuffing them into his pocket. "They have power, supplies, and an outfitted cave that we need for our people. Safe Haven thinks the winter will last twice as long as usual. If they're right, our town could be wiped out."

"Sounds like it's a good thing we came." Vlad waited for important details. Darian had been Deputy Mayor of their town and that's where his priorities remained.

"They have the place sealed from the top." Darian dropped down onto an icy boulder. "But there are ways through. One is from the cavern where they've got those damn ants living.

Another tunnel comes out about three miles beyond the mountain road, behind the camp. A smaller one comes almost straight up here. This is definitely where we can strike from.”

“And our inside man?” Vlad wiped snow from the Coleman stove.

“Isn’t going to wait for the time to be right. Expect action *soon*.”

“Figures.” Vlad wasn’t surprised. Jay wasn’t the hardened character his father had been. Still, it was better than nothing. If Jay could cause enough problems from the inside, it might create an opportunity for those waiting on the outside.

Darian rubbed his hands together near the fire. “Can we use that mob of refugees somehow?”

“I have plans.” Vlad ended the conversation. “You should get some rest. Tomorrow will be a long day of waiting out the storm. After that, none of us will sleep until we’re in that cave, enjoying those lives.”

Darren nodded. “Sounds perfect. I can’t wait to wipe that smug smile from her face with my fist.”

Inside the tent behind Vlad, two Eagles listened furiously. They’d been taken off guard during this morning’s chaos, too busy observing the shootout through their binoculars to realize trouble was sneaking up on them. Scott and Josh exchanged glances that said they needed to get free and show these people who they were dealing with.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

# Panther Piss



### 1

“Can you believe this?” Kevin stared through a crack in the boards. “Three feet!”

The storm had been a monster that brought them brutal temperatures and evil wind, but the tents in the large living room, combined with their efforts to seal up the house, had kept it tolerable. The problem was the snow. The hard packed white crap was now feet deep across the entire block. They couldn’t see any further than that for the glare. Both men hoped the view would improve once they were outdoors. If not, they would have to listen harder for people. Snow was excellent for muffling sound.

“Have you seen this?” Kevin was still trying to get a better view of the neighborhood.

Jeff grunted in response. He was preparing their meal. He was also trying to listen for trouble. The storm clearing should be a good thing, but he’d woken with a ball of concern in his gut and it had only grown. Despite all the snow, the animals were already gathering again. Jeff wasn’t certain Kevin had noticed that yet. “How much ammo do we have here?”

Kevin flipped into Eagle alert with the question and went to find out.

Sally, busy feeding her dogs, frowned. “I’ve got a few hundred rounds.”

“For that .45?” Jeff clarified. They’d given her the gun back only because of fearing another attack from nature.

“Yes... Also a few sticks of dynamite and some hand grenades.”

Jeff chuckled in surprise. “Nice.”

Sally didn’t want to feel anything, but Jeff’s praise sank into her anyway. When you pleased a descendant, the urge to do it again came on strong. Sally resisted, instead resuming her chores. She didn’t need to impress these men. She needed them to help her secure the house until the herds passed on. When the beasts were gone, the men had to go too.

“We will.”

Sally slapped her rag on the floor. “Stop that!”

Jeff shrugged. “I will if you will.”

“I can’t read your thoughts!”

“But you are wishing we were gone or dead. You stop that and I can stop stalking your mind for trouble.”

“I’m not the problem.” Sally turned toward the garage to clean in there. Jeff had insisted when they woke to the smell. “You are. You and all the descendants. Abominations!”

She disappeared into the garage, leaving Jeff to continue worrying. At some point, he and Kevin would have to handle her.

Kevin came back into the room “We have seven hundred rounds of hollow points for your sig. Also five hundred for my nine mil and a dozen boxes of bonded hunting rounds. The rest is in the house on the corner, where we stashed it.”

“Okay.” Jeff scanned the first floor of the house, pleased. They’d done a good job of sealing the home up, though they hadn’t been on the second floor yet. Jeff didn’t have a reason to go up there. Once they’d locked the door to the stairs and sealed around it, the drafts had mostly stopped. He and Kevin had cleared the attic upon arrival, but it was empty of anything useful. All it contained was an old claw foot bathtub and a few mirrors.

The propane heater kicked on, echoing loudly; the men tensed. They were running it sparingly, but the temperature outside was in the single digits. They’d needed to bring up the temperature inside overnight, and the Mr. Buddy had worked perfectly.

“It’s drawing attention.” Kevin had gone to the window to check. Jeff asking how many rounds they had was a reminder they were in the middle of an apocalypse.

Jeff flipped the heater off and did the same with the stove since the pancakes were done. “We need to bundle back up. The wind died down and blew our cover for the noise.”

Kevin went to get more gear, wondering if Safe Haven was in the cave yet. Were they ready for this weather? He and Jeff would do fine on their own. He had his doubts about the camp, especially after the radio broadcasts Kenn and Tonya had been putting out. It sounded like Safe Haven was being overwhelmed.

Jeff's thoughts were along the same lines. *Would us being there make a difference?*

The two men exchanged looks that asked the same questions, but neither of them spoke. Their wounds hadn't healed yet.

Sally came back into the main room, rubbing on hand sanitizer. "There are mice in the garage."

"Drawn to the heat." Jeff assumed it was also the smell. "We'll lock that door and seal it up until the animals need to use it." Jeff was unhappy to have Sally's two dogs here. Using the garage as an outhouse was disgusting. It was unsanitary and it stank. He wouldn't let it continue for long.

Sally ushered her dogs into the house so she could shut the garage door. The pair scrambled for purchase on the wood floor, sending fresh noise through the house.

Jeff and Kevin glared. Both of them were about to complain when yet another sound broke the stillness.

*Woooooooooo!*

Dog's ears snapped up. He knew that howl. *She's here! She's calling me!*

Dog went to the door and studied Jeff expectantly. *Let me out.*

"No. They don't know we're here. If we open the door, they'll attack us."

Dog understood the problem, but he didn't care. He wanted out.

Jeff knew better than to grab the wolf or try to touch him. He thought fast and offered a compromise. "I'll let you out of a door or window when there's nothing around."

Dog followed Jeff much like the two small dogs did, eagerly and without caution.

Jeff peered through the boards over the back door. The wolf could find his own way from there. Seeing nothing moving, he slowly slid the lock back and opened the door.

"Wait! My dogs will—"

The wolf rushed through the opening, making a deep furrow in the snow. Sally's two dogs followed behind him, yapping happily at being released. Icy wind slapped them all.

"Shit!" Kevin hurried after them, with Sally right behind. Jeff drew his gun, silently cursing himself, the dogs, and the woman.

Dog didn't care about the unfolding drama or the snow. He took off jumping wildly through the drifts and then leapt, clearing the fence to land lightly in the side yard. He sank to the bottom of the snow and immediately leapt again to reach the packed layers that were frozen to the sidewalk between the homes. Making big jumps, Dog hurried to where the howl had come from. *Let the humans fend for themselves for a while. I have things to do.*

Jeff and Kevin helped Sally retrieve the two snow covered dogs. Neither man spoke, but the mood was ugly. As they all came inside, sloshing wet and shivering from not having coats on, the smell of feces smothered them. They hadn't noticed it

while inside with it. Fresh air had allowed the men to smell the difference.

Jeff gagged, hearing Kevin do the same. Through the watering eyes and a twisting stomach, Jeff felt his patience snap. “Yeah, that’s it for me. I’m out of here. You comin’?”

Also fighting not to vomit, Kevin nodded. “I’ll have us packed in an hour!”

Sally stood still, processing the information. She was about to be alone. *That’s what I want, right? For it to be just me and the animals?*

Sally glanced toward the covered front window, seeing signs of the bear they’d fought. She wouldn’t have been able to handle that on her own. “Wait.”

Jeff already knew, but he wasn’t changing his mind. The gagging had stopped, but only because he was breathing through his mouth. “You can come if you leave the dogs. That’s why we’re going, remember?”

Sally scowled. “I can’t do that.”

“Don’t expect you to. I expect you to protect them even as you’re being eaten. Have fun.”

Kevin winced, but didn’t argue since Jeff was certainly right. The woman had been here for days and they still didn’t know anything about her, other than the fact that she put her dogs first in every way. They even ate before she did; she finished their scraps. She clearly had mental issues. It had been official for Kevin when she’d gone to the garage with her dogs to urinate, instead of using the bathroom setup that he and Jeff had constructed. If she wanted to live like an animal, that was her choice and since this was her house, it was fair that they were the ones to leave.

The men gathered their gear and equipment quickly. They'd made sure nothing was too permanent unless it would be left behind. They went about the chore happily, talking about where they might go next and how they would get through the snow. Kevin still thought their truck could make it, at least to a dealership where they could get something better.

Jeff didn't give his thoughts. He wasn't as optimistic about them making it out of the house to reach the truck that they'd been forced to store a few homes down. The garage here had been too small.

Jeff took a moment to scan the yard, uneasy at the delay in the action. He'd been certain the fight would come as soon as the weather cleared. Maybe they'd been quiet enough to go unnoticed by the predators that had plenty of fresh game, but it was unlikely. With Sally's dogs yipping, the wolf's whining, and the smells, Jeff was positive every animal in a two-mile radius now knew there were people nearby.

"Don't forget your vest." Jeff started on the cooking setup he'd enjoyed building. Connecting a tank to the old gas stove had allowed him to prepare some great meals here. All he'd had to do was replace the jets.

"Good idea." Kevin dug his vest from the kit that he hadn't touched, except to bring it inside wherever they sheltered.

Jeff tossed a box of ammunition onto the broken coffee table by Sally. She hadn't moved since they'd decided to go. "I'd leave more, but we can't spare it."

Sally was surprised to be leery at the thought of being alone again. She didn't like the men, especially not Jeff, but she'd gotten used to them in only a few days. It was odd for

her, considering that she suspected all people of being corrupt. She hadn't bonded with another human being in years.

"You sure?" Jeff read her reluctance. "Not all men are bad. Not all animals are good."

She hated the reminder that he could get into her head; it made the choice. "Yes. Please go."

"You got it." Jeff was annoyed. "There's meat in the backyard. Too much for us to carry. Don't let it go to waste."

Sally didn't respond, moving aside as Jeff came by with his arms full. He struggled to open the door and she sighed, advancing to assist him.

Jeff didn't thank the woman. Her arm was up, holding the door while surrounding him with yet more noxious fumes. Jeff quickly stomped through the drifts, not caring if he was attacked by an animal. Anything was worth getting fresh, crisp air into his lungs.

Kevin came out right behind him, inhaling deeply. "Yummy!"

Jeff snickered as he swept the few animals in sight. The wolves weren't paying any attention to them, but a small bear cub glowered from across the street. Jeff hoped momma wasn't around as they hurried through the drifts to the garage sheltering their wheels.

Kevin held things while Jeff fought to unlock the icy door and then went inside to lift the main bay. It took a couple of minutes that Kevin spent with his back to the building, studying his surroundings as he'd been taught to do. Eagle training was more than handy now. It was a lifesaver.

Jeff helped Kevin into the wide garage with the load and began packing the rear of the truck. He did it quickly, but he tried to be quiet.

“Bloody hell!”

Jeff climbed down and unslung his rifle. Kevin wasn’t running yet, so the threat might still be far enough away to pick off before a handgun was needed. He liked to be hopeful that way.

In the distance, the sky was a brilliant red, but it wasn’t from the sun. That dim ball of light was almost topping them, magnifying the glare effect of the snow. The eerie view to the east was from something else. With the shape of the clouds, it was hard to come to any other conclusion on the source.

“Nuclear?” Kevin was stunned. How was that possible? They had destroyed the government. Angela had promised they were done with that enemy for years.

“Looks like it.” Jeff went over to heft another bag into the truck. “Let’s get rolling.”

“West?” Kevin asked hesitantly. Jeff didn’t give out many details on their destinations.

“North. We’ll bag our cooler on the way.”

Memories of shooting from the passenger seat during Jeff’s insane driving spread a grin over Kevin’s lightly bearded face. That was a real challenge. He was already a better shooter than he had been upon leaving Safe Haven. “Deal.”

They hurried back to the house, still watching out for the various animals around them. They didn’t spot Dog anywhere, or the wolves that had attracted him with the howl.

Jeff doubted Dog would return. All the animals seemed to be heading north and he would be no different. They probably wouldn't run into him again at all. He had his freedom.

## 2

*I missed you!*

Dog was nose-to-nose with the female, breathing in her thick scent. Her bloody muzzle was the sweetest perfume; he licked the wound gently. The last hare she'd grabbed had scratched her.

The female allowed his comfort, trembling with joy. She'd thought he was dead. After being split up, Brute had killed the other members of their pack. When these new males had discovered them, they'd been too big for him to do the same.

Around them, the female's new pack, plus Brute, observed angrily as another male was added to the competition. These newer wolves were larger due to hunting the herds that were also traveling north. The Wind had forbidden it, but this new pack didn't care about orders. They were going north to kill man. On the way, they were hunting everything else for strength and practice.

Dog nuzzled her neck, hoping for a sign of her interest. He wasn't going to fight for her again if he wasn't going to get the prize in the end. *Do you still want me?*

*My mate!* Natalia exclaimed, snarling at the others.

Satisfied, Dog snapped at her to get back.

Natalia whined in warning as Brute charged through the melting snow.

Dog reacted too late to avoid the jaws clamping down on his neck. His thick fur saved him as he ducked, not allowing Brute's fangs to drive through.

Dog lunged at his rival, snarling wildly. "Mine!"

"Die!" Brute advanced.

Dog was tired of this threat. He slid low through the slush from their warm bodies and came up under the big wolf. He snapped to part the fur, and then dove in for the kill.

Brute tried to yelp and draw back, but Dog locked his jaws and started squeezing. Using his full strength, Dog bit through and felt blood burst over his teeth. Bones crunched next, and he tightened the grip, slinging his head to ensure death.

Around them, the other wolves let out howls that chilled the humans nearby.

Dog waited to be certain there was no life left before letting go. Brute dropped to the snow, blood melting through the drifts as he landed.

Dog regarded the rest of the eager wolves. "Go away!" He lunged forward, bloody teeth snapping.

Half of the pack fled, tails tucked.

Dog faced the other three with low growls and a bushed tail. "Leave us!"

The female joined him for the fight this time. She came in low, growling in warning that Dog was her chosen mate now. As the fight began, a loud whistle sounded, but the five wolves didn't pause in their battle.

Jeff and Kevin stared, forgetting about the glare, the wolves fighting, and the bear cubs edging closer.

“That’s a train!” Sally came to the window, gawking in surprise. She hadn’t viewed a train in almost a year.

“It’s heading south...”

Jeff understood Kevin’s concern. He tried to count the cars on the train and then realized it didn’t matter. One car or fifty, they had no way to know how many people were in each one. “Get out of sight.”

He and Kevin swiftly took cover, motioning Sally to get away from the window. When Jeff thought he was in a good position, he took out his binoculars and zoomed in on the train. As he did, it ended, only to be followed by a second.

He wasn’t able to spot any of the people on either of the long trains, but he did get a clear sense of menace that sent his mind straight to Safe Haven. It appeared their former camp had drawn more than just the government and the Mexicans.

Five minutes later, a fourth train finally finished passing them. Jeff hadn’t moved, mind spinning. They needed to go home, but they had no hope of beating the rails through this snow.

“What should we do?” Kevin was aware of the woman listening from the cracked door.

“We can be the other slice of bread,” Jeff murmured. The snow melting into his clothes wasn’t noticed as he plotted the future.

“What?”

“We’ll squeeze them in—follow and block.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Maybe.” Jeff continued to work on the plans. “We just need the right equipment. Let’s finish packing and roll. We can’t let them get too far ahead.”

“Can we run on the railroad tracks?”

“I plan to try. Come on. It’s time to slide out of this frozen cemetery.”

Kevin groaned, snickering. “Oh, man!”

As they pulled away, Sally came out into the yard to watch. They hadn’t tried to convince her again and she hadn’t changed her mind. As the truck tried to turn at the end of the snow covered block and skidded into the sidewalk, she hoped they didn’t make it in time. She didn’t wish for Jeff or Kevin to get hurt, only for them to be too late to prevent whatever fate was heading for Safe Haven on those trains. The people there were as bad as the government. They had to be eliminated before the entire world was covered in atrocities.

Sally returned to the pungent home and locked herself in, allowing the relief to come. She was alone, alive, and free. It was perfect.

## 4

Dog and the female took shelter for the night in the house next door. Dog’s leg was hurting after the fights that had broken off the cast. His mate was hurting too. Her injuries were minor, but blood was still leaking from her muzzle.

Finally alone with her, Dog was too tired to encourage her or to even communicate. He dropped down in the corner of the cold room, between her and the door they had nudged closed.

The female—Natalia—circled the spot next to him and then huddled against his haunches, shivering a bit from the stinging in her snout.

Dog whined lowly, eyes shutting.

When he opened them again, full night had fallen and Natalia had wiggled under his big body for warmth. His jaw was resting on her shoulder.

Dog took the next logical step. He mounted her.

## 5

Sally and her dogs had gone up to the attic. The number of animals in the yard was incredible. She was suddenly sorry she'd sent the men away, but she didn't belong in a camp of people—of any kind. She was too broken to be rehabilitated.

Sally's dogs slept in the bed with her, uncaring of the personal or environmental drama. They didn't hear the wind or the woman. Both of the dogs were half blind and half deaf. Sally had taken them in when no one else would, saving them from being euthanized. They were completely loyal to her and the Wind's orders weren't being received.

The rest of the animals heard the demands for the woman's death loud and clear. They gathered around the house, sniffing for an entry.

Dog also felt the order, but he and his mate were locked in the ages old position of love; neither of them responded.

Furious, the Wind called for the attack, including the two rebellious wolves as targets. Disobeying her commanded a terrible price.

## 6

“I feel bad for leaving her behind.”

Jeff sighed in the warm truck. So did he, but he refused to live that way. If he wanted to worry over his safety at night, he could have stayed in Safe Haven.

“Can we...”

Jeff grunted, turning the wheel to spin them wildly through the drifts as he rotated the truck on the wide street. He’d known as they left that he hadn’t seen the last of her yet.

Kevin was relieved. “Thanks, man. We’ll drop her somewhere, but it’s wrong to just leave her, you know?” Jeff didn’t agree, but he was tired of women dying, so the choice wasn’t a hard one.

They had only been gone for an hour, but the sun had already set. Night came quicker now, as if the earth didn’t want people to receive more light than it absolutely had to give.

“Did you get through on the radio?” Jeff sped up a bit.

“No. The storm must be over them right now.”

“Angela saw it all coming, I’m sure,” Jeff replied bitterly.

“Yeah.” Kevin still reached down for the mike. “Kevin to base. Come in, Safe Haven.”

There wasn’t even static.

“How long do you think it will take—”

“A couple of days, at most,” Jeff interrupted, tiring of the tension. “Tell me why you left. Was it because of Cynthia and Adrian?”

Kevin was surprised at the fast topic change. “Partly. The rest was feeling it all ending. Nothing was the same.”

“Yeah.”

“What about you? Crista’s death or Adrian?”

Jeff winced at the words Kevin hadn’t hesitated to speak. He had all the tact of a bull. “Both. Also because of my failures. I saw no reason to fix them if I was going to be unhappy there anyway.”

“And now?”

Jeff wiped at the windshield, disliking the old Ford. It had been the only thing left at the lot. “I’ll defend them. I still believe in the dreams. But I won’t stay. Once this is over, I’m out.”

“Same here.”

Jeff doubted that would be true, but he didn’t say so. After a month away, Jeff was betting Kevin would realize how civilized it was compared to the way they’d been living. For Jeff, their trek was perfect. For Kevin, it had been an adventure, but if Cynthia gave him the slightest welcome, Kevin would stay. The warmth of a willing woman was hard to resist after not having one for a while.

Jeff winced at his own thoughtless phrasing and forced his mind back to issues that were more important. “How can we get her to leave those damn dogs behind?”

“Help!”

Dog tried to ignore the woman’s screams, but she’d done a lot for him. He would likely be dead right now if not for Sally

and her love of animals. Wounds and stiff body protesting, Dog reluctantly stood up. "I have to go."

"Why?" Natalia yawned. She was perfectly content to remain in their nest.

"I have to help her."

"The human?" Natalia was shocked.

Dog knew she wouldn't like it, but he refused to lie. "I have a bond with humans. I won't ever hunt them."

"You traitor!" Natalia growled, rising.

Dog limped toward the door, hurting. "No, that's you. The Wind commands and you follow like the woman's pets."

The female remembered a time when she hadn't hated people, but the voices in her mind were insistent that the humans had to be eliminated to restore the balance. "We are of the natural world. People do not belong!"

"Maybe animals don't either." Dog thought of how he'd become a wolf. Natalia may have also been born that way, but he'd seen no signs so far that she remembered her previous life if she'd had one.

"I won't aid them."

Dog pawed at the door, letting in a rough draft. "Just don't attack them. And be here when I come back. I like the scent."

Natalia's tail wagged, ears perking up. "You like my scent?"

Dog grunted tiredly, wishing he could mount her again and then sleep for a week. "Enough to follow you north, but don't expect me to act like you. I have no grudge against people."

Dog hefted himself through the drifts, not hearing the screams of the woman now that he was outside. He waited to hear Natalia shove the door shut. He finally understood Marc's

intense feelings for Angela. The need to have a mate had also driven him hundreds of miles into a harsh land that had tried several times to kill him.

His bond with Marc lit up, bright and shining in his mind. Dog wondered if he could send a message so far, but he didn't try. He needed all the strength he had to save Sally. The sense of her death being near was impossible to miss, as was the scent of something big. She was being stalked by an animal that even the other wolves were letting go first. The tracks were clear in the snow.

Dog padded through the animals surrounding the cabin without drawing notice. He was simply one of many who had come for the fight. Despite the Wind's command for the two wolves to be killed, nature couldn't change the rules. The animals had already been given a target.

Dog edged to the door that was open, smelling something large, like a lion. He'd been near one of those a few times, and knew to be careful.

He tracked the scent into the kitchen area that was filled with animals he normally would have eaten. Dog followed the stairs to a door that he hadn't been able to get through earlier. He went up the final, narrow flight of steps to find danger already waiting for him.

Without a single noise, the huge cat lunged at him.

Jeff slid the truck onto the street, letting it go where it wanted until he felt the tires gain a bit of traction. Then he

steered them across the dark, frozen tundra that had once been a playground. A swing set was yanked up, crashing into them.

Jeff cackled madly. “Hold my beer and watch this!”

Kevin tried to grin as he hung on to the seatbelt, praying they didn’t die.

Jeff slid back into the street, bumping them off a small car to straighten the route. He gunned the engine to clear the hill in front of the house. “Hang on!” Jeff charged them through the front door of the house, where it was most vulnerable. The wood splintered easily, letting them go all the way in. Wood and debris fell, but the frame of the house held.

Jeff opened his door with a hard shove to move the rubble and corpses of the animals that had been in front of the house and inside it. He rushed up the stairs, confident of where Sally would be.

Kevin shut both doors so their escape was secure, then followed.

Jeff ran up the last stairs, rifle ready. They’d viewed Sally’s wild shadow through the top window, but Jeff hadn’t expected to find a wolf and a panther battling it out in the narrow space. The attic had been destroyed by a massive fight.

Sally, clutching her two snarling dogs, was on top of a cabinet in the far corner.

Jeff tried to get the panther in his sights, but there wasn’t enough room. The fight was moving too fast. He couldn’t rush up to fire or he would be knocked down in the melee, and who knew where the bullets might go then. He settled for trying to get to Sally without interfering in the fight. If he could get her down to the truck, maybe Dog could run after them and jump in the bed.

Dog had never had a fight like this. The panther was his match in speed and ruthlessness, but she was more than he could handle in strength. Her jaws tried to snap his neck repeatedly, long claws swiping away patches of skin and fur. He wouldn't be able to hold her for long.

Jeff skirted around the snarling, snapping animals, and ran to Sally. He jerked her down into his arms, not caring if she kept ahold of the mutts. He was actually hoping she wouldn't. The panther might eat them while the people escaped.

Sally cried out, dogs yelping, but she tried not to struggle as Jeff carried her partially over one shoulder. He was almost to the stairs when the fight rolled their way.

Standing at the top of the steps, Kevin was trying to figure out which dark mass to shoot when he was hit from behind by a furry form that knocked him to his knees. The heavy body leapt over him, and hit the floor. It immediately lunged again.

Jeff also jumped, leaping over Kevin to hit the stairs at full slide. He let them fall, using his coat for padding as they slid down to the truck.

Dog was at his limit as Natalia shoved between him and the panther. She managed to land a sharp bite to the panther's nose, something he hadn't been able to gain the advantage to do. He was forced to back off as Natalia bit down.

The big cat jerked away, slinging her aside.

Dog faced the angry panther again, aware of Jeff taking the woman downstairs. Natalia lay in the corner nearby, whimpering.

Dog leapt forward, furious.

The panther's fangs sank down into his shoulder as Dog's teeth broke through the tough skin of her jaw. Blood fell as they both let go for a better hold.

*Down!* Jeff used his mental gift as hard as he could to reach Dog. He'd come right back up with his rifle. "Get down!"

Dog and the panther ignored his minor nudge, both clamping down on flesh and bone.

Jeff knew the wolf was about to die. He also wasn't certain of making the shot. Left with no choice, he knelt down and tried to be as cool and calm as he'd always been before. Everything had changed for him when Crista had fallen.

Dog dropped to the floor as the panther's weight pushed on him. The last bite had been too much.

*Bang!*

Jeff fired the rifle again and then rushed forward to place his sig against the big cat's twitching head. His shot to the throat hadn't killed it cleanly. The panther's neck was bigger than his own.

With Sally safely inside the truck, Kevin returned to help Jeff.

"Grab his bitch!" Jeff scooped Dog into his arms. The wolf didn't even whine.

Jeff staggered as he stood up with the weight, seeing flying shapes outside the attic window.

The female wolf wasn't conscious either. Kevin didn't check her for injuries as he lifted her over one shoulder and jogged down to the truck.

"In the bed!" Jeff followed him down.

## 9

Jeff slid them down the icy street, hitting furry shapes along the way.

“Are you okay?” Jeff scanned Sally’s stiff form between them. Her dogs were in the floorboard, shivering and whining.

“Yes,” she answered stiffly. “Thank you.”

“Yep.” Jeff manhandled the truck toward the side street they’d used earlier. The roads had grown slicker, but he could use their ruts.

Kevin shifted around to open the narrow rear window and slid through it, avoiding the smell. He hung onto the side of the truck, trying to settle the wolves deeper into the gear so they wouldn’t be tossed out during Jeff’s wild driving. He and Billy were the Safe Haven wheelmen; they were a little crazy once an engine fired up.

Inside the cab, Jeff handed Sally a spotlight on a cord that was plugged into the truck’s lighter. “Keep this pointed at the road. Out in front, but not too high.”

Sally did as he instructed, wondering if Jeff knew he was bleeding in several places.

“Yeah, I noticed.” He grunted. “It’s what I get for being a Samaritan.”

Sally flushed, tilting the light to where he needed it. Without streetlights to aid them, the lamps on most vehicles weren’t strong enough for driving at night anymore, even in the snow. Civilization had contributed a lot more than people had realized, especially the big cities.

“Do you need stitches or anything? I can do that.”

“You’ll have to take care of Dog when we stop. And we forgot your bag, so you’ll have to use the supplies we have in our medical kits.”

“Okay. Do I...” Sally was afraid to say it in case he’d forgotten.

Jeff surveyed the shivering dogs, finally having a little heart about the crippling disabilities that would have earned them death in man’s old world or any other. “No. But we’ll have to work some things out.”

Sally was relieved. She tried to do a good job of holding the light. After the house being attacked, all she could feel was relief that Jeff had agreed to come back for her. She was certain it hadn’t been his idea.

Jeff saw that Kevin was hunkering down, using their bedrolls and a few of the emergency blankets from his kit for warmth. He was practically lying across both animals to keep them in the truck. Jeff hoped the female didn’t wake up yet. Dog’s mate was stocky and not the least bit friendly. She’d almost attacked Kevin instead of the panther when she came up the stairs.

Jeff settled the truck into their refreezing ruts on the road and carefully lit a smoke. His nerves were good, but he was about to broach a subject he suspected he would need patience for. *That*, he was always low on these days. “So, why do you hate descendants and all other forms of human life?”

Sally stiffened in the dark truck. “I don’t hate all forms of *human* life.”

Jeff heard the tone, but he didn’t let her off that easy. They had nothing but time to kill while he drove. Conversation

would help him stay awake. “I can read it from you if that’s easier. But I’d rather not.”

“Why?” Sally frowned sullenly. “You’ve been in my head since I showed up.”

“I like to mind my own business. When I can, I do.”

Sally crossed her arms, trying to find the words to explain her mentality. It was impossible.

“You were abused by one? Taken captive? Witnessed atrocities?”

Sally glared out the window. “All of those.”

Jeff slid into her thoughts, staying shallow so he could still navigate the treacherous road. Everything was icing over.

Sally flipped through an awful childhood, where animals were her solace. The images were terrible, like he’d expected. When she flashed to her marriage, Jeff eased off the gas to stare in disapproval. “Your father was a descendant. So are you.”

She cringed against the door. “I am not!”

“If your father was, so are you. You may not have an active gift, but the blood is the same.”

“My father was an abomination. I’m clean!”

Jeff didn’t respond. The quick flashes of her life said she had every reason to hate and deny her heritage. It was a surprise to him to discover yet another descendant surviving out in the wilderness. At moments like this, it was hard to deny Adrian’s words about fate bringing them all together. The urge to get home hit harder. Jeff shifted restlessly. “I don’t think you’ll like it at Safe Haven. Is there someplace else you want to go?”

Sally considered. “I’d like to stay with you for a while.”

Jeff eased on the gas, glad to discover she did have some common sense after all. “It’ll take a while for us to get there. You can let me know when you’re ready to be dropped off.”

“That’s fine.” She calmed down. She knew what she was because of her father; her isolation was a direct result. She wasn’t safe around people. She wouldn’t have gone to their camp, even if it hadn’t been full of descendants.

Jeff picked up the mike. “Jeff to base. Come in Safe Haven.”

Sally listened to him try to reach the big group that had been broadcasting regularly until yesterday. She felt his concern, but all she could feel was dread. She was now traveling south, without any of her gear. It was exactly opposite of how she’d wanted things to happen.

“I understand.” Jeff shrugged. “But life doesn’t go by our plans.”

Sally stared out the window, wondering what fate had in store for her now. She was the slightly unwilling guest of a descendant. They had two injured, wild wolves along for the ride and they were headed toward a viper’s den. *Lovely.* Exhaustion finally sank in. She rested her head against the seat to snore softly.

*Even falls out like an animal.* Jeff grimaced at the odors, letting the glass down a bit. If she was going to stay with them for a while as she’d requested, then both her and her pets would need to be scrubbed. This was the last time he would tolerate that smell.

Jeff scanned the truck bed through the mirror. Kevin was now under the tarps with the wolves, probably starting to get drowsy.

Jeff sighed, driving slower. He hoped they all slept until he got them to some place they could hole up until morning. Kevin had to rest now, because when they landed, Jeff knew he'd be out for at least six hours straight.

The wind slammed against the truck, rattling the passengers, but Jeff kept it on course, pointing them south. They were going back and it was scary.

*What if Safe Haven isn't home for me anymore? I don't have anything else.*

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

# Life or Death



### 1

“W here’s Quinn?”

Angela didn’t scan the small meeting for him as the others expected her to. She’d spoken with Quinn yesterday on matters of utmost importance. She had chosen him because no one would miss him until right now. All anyone was talking about was the weather, her bombshell, and the refugees.

“He’s on a different chore.” She motioned to Greg, who began unrolling a long map on the table in the topside training tent. “Greg will be his substitute for this.”

“What are we doing?” Kyle was positive it was related to the screaming masses outside their gate. The cries were loud

enough to be heard over the party Safe Haven was too anxious to enjoy.

“We’re going to lose our front door. When that happens, we’ll be swarmed. I want Special Forces to be the wall between them and our people.”

“Oh, thank God!” Jax grinned. “Waiting sucks.”

The other Eagles scowled at him.

Morgan coughed behind his hand. “Rookie!”

The other men in the chilly tent snickered.

Jax flushed. “Sorry, but we’ve been waiting for the call for days, right?”

Neil sighed.

Kyle grunted. Neither man had readjusted to having rookies. Jax and Quinn had been on Marc’s team, but they hadn’t made it through level three before Donner came. To the level six and seven men, who’d been through all the lessons so far, these two were green.

“He’ll learn, gentlemen,” Angela stated without amusement. “They both will—later. Right now, I need a choice on this mission. I consider it self-defense and I have to know that you do as well. Please vote.”

“We did that!”

This time, Kyle stood. “Shut up or get out.”

Jax opened his mouth again.

Neil punched him in it, since he was closer. “Vote!”

“Yes!” Jax glared up from the cold canvas floor, rubbing his jaw. “Kill them all.”

The vote was unanimous, as Angela had known it would be or she wouldn’t have called this meeting. A few days ago, when the guards had secretly decided, not everyone had been

on the same page. She'd told Kyle to keep working on it; he obviously had. Doing doubles over that screaming mob made it hard to ignore the fact that the refugees were a serious threat.

"This is where I need each of you to be." Angela pointed to spots on the map of Safe Haven's gate that Jennifer had drawn upon her request. "We are vulnerable on the side by our den, so dig in there if you have to. Use the little bunkers."

"Who else will be out there?" Neil heard someone outside coughing. It sounded like the guy they'd met walking up the main road, but the cough wouldn't have improved that much already.

"No one. I can't tell anyone else yet. Neither can you, even with your thoughts. Go get in place now, quietly. It won't be long." A minute later, Angela was alone in the cold training tent. She'd fended off the questions about what was coming, as she wasn't totally sure and wouldn't be until it was too late to provide them with orders. The echoes of rage and desperation from the gate were overwhelming even at hundreds of feet away, but Angela let it build. This was it. As soon as she made the call, there was no taking it back.

*I wish I could have told you everything, Marc, I'm sorry that I couldn't.*

Marc never would have approved these plans, but this would ensure that their people survived. Safe Haven had reached its limit. Angela slowly hit the button on her radio. "All topside guards are to leave their posts and take cover below immediately. The storm is getting too bad for people to remain up here. I repeat: Safe Haven is closed. All topside shifts are relieved of duty and ordered to bunker-in until the storm is over."

Angela slid on her thickest coat and balaclava, but it didn't hide the tears. *How many innocent people did I just sentence to die?*

## 2

Outside, a cheer went up from the mob as the guards began to vanish from their posts. Safe Haven's gate was going to be unprotected!

A jeering, determined group of men immediately seized the opportunity, gathering refugees as they strode through the storm toward the barrier between them and imagined safety. By the time they reached the fences, frantic refugees were coming from their tents and other zones. It formed an army of a hundred that kept adding warm, angry bodies.

Kyle stood on a nearby ledge, waiting for all their men to be clear. When the mob started climbing up the gate and fences, he slammed his palm onto the button, lighting it all up.

The electrified fence snapped and crackled in the snow, sending bodies flying. The smell of burning flesh wafted through the icy wind. Invaders bounced off the barrier like flies until someone realized what was happening and began screaming at the others.

Kyle kept hitting the button until the fence was completely clear, grateful for Marc's idea of the capacitor for these big bursts. They had a dual setup that provided a softer zap too, but this wasn't the time for second chances. Marc had saved them with these latest defenses.

### 3

“Blow it anyway.”

Jennifer looked up as the lights in the cave dimmed from the power Kyle was using on the fences. “Did you hear me? The ants are still in there.”

“I heard you,” Angela answered tonelessly as she dropped down behind the small desk that Marc had placed in here for her. The small room was a leadership command area, but she might not be the one who ended up using it. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes, *boss*.” Jennifer keyed the radio angrily. “Blow it, boys.”

A few seconds later, a huge rumble echoed through the cave, raining dust throughout the tunnels and making the lights flicker again. It brought cries and shouts of concern from their people.

“Why?” Jennifer turned on Angela as the rumbling and cries faded into mutters of concern. “The refugees attacked that cave and the ants followed their tunnel to get here. Now you’ve blown it up on our end and trapped them! They’ll be slaughtered. That’s *not* protection!”

“No, it’s not.” Angela marked the ants off her list. She looked up at the confused, angry teenager. “Did you think I was keeping them? That we’d have them as pets to replace the dogs that have turned on us?”

Jennifer shrugged uneasily. “Something like that, I guess.”

“They’re truly an abomination, Jenny. We can’t allow them to keep growing. If we do, at some point, humans will have to fight them.”

“But you told them we were friends, that we would protect them!”

“Yes. I lied.”

“What? How can you do that? How can you be so heartless?”

“How can you not understand how wrong it is for them to be so big, so smart?” Angela shot back. “Through poisons and evolution, the ants have been given the chance to rule the world—along with every other species that stalks the land!”

Jennifer was saved a reply by a second large boom echoing through the cave system. Angela sighed heavily at the grinding noises. Even if she hadn’t made the call, this would have happened anyway. When vengeance was the motive, the actions were usually unstoppable. *I capitalized on the event.*

Jennifer froze. “We had a charge set to blow the one tunnel. And we were careful about the placement so it didn’t trigger anything else. What was that?”

Angela stood up, hearing the distinctive sounds of panic. “Go find out.”

Jennifer didn’t hesitate.

Angela stayed still as the chaos increased and then moved away from her. She felt Marc sweep with his grid and center on her for a second in relief before sliding on to the next level. Any second now, she would get a—

The radio lit up. “Angela to the garden site. Medical issue.”

The garden site was on the fourth level, away from where the second explosion had come from.

Angela went without revealing how nervous she was to any of the guards or members hurrying around her. Anything

could go wrong from here and she couldn't get rid of the feeling that she'd overlooked something important.

## 4

"Cave in!" The radio blared repeatedly. "We're cut off!"

"Copy that," Marc's calming voice came. "We're gathering equipment to dig you out. Injuries?"

Angela listened to the radio chatter as she headed to the level that was closed for the party. Around her, camp members either stared at each other in concern or went to help Marc. Few of them noticed Angela in the far tunnel, heading for the stairs that led down. Everyone else was going up.

The sentry on the level—Wade—didn't stop her, but he did lift a brow to ask if things were okay.

Angela delivered a nod, then went down the final stairs into the gloomy under-cave they were still outfitting. Boxes and crates littered the rough ground, along with cords, lamps, and bags of soil. Angela was sorry to walk by the unopened supplies. There was a chance they would stay this way.

"Part of the stairway fell!" Kenn called over the radio. "We need the engineering crew!"

Static interlaced the transmission as Angela went further into the ground. A bit more and she would be out of range of the radios.

"We're on the way," Ozzie answered.

In the background, Angela could hear running men and knew Theo was also listening from the medical bay. He was probably cursing the injury that was keeping him from being there too. He might even try to get below now that the doctor

had casted his leg. Theo had refused the surgery and the morphine drip. He'd also told Candy not to visit him anymore, that he felt like he was leading her on when he didn't intend to get serious. Candy had left the medical bay in anger, but Angela hadn't scanned Candy's thoughts any further than that. She already had too many threads to keep track of alone.

Angela reached the garden site, not bothering to use the few lights they had rigged down here. She could see a single lantern glowing and knew that's where she was supposed to go. The rocky ground under her feet swayed for a moment. Angela realized Marc already had the power equipment running.

"Good." She stepped around a large gap in the ground to enter the vast cave they'd chosen for gardening and composting. "Right on time."

"Yes, you are," a female voice answered immediately. "Welcome to your last hours."

Two people came toward her from the shadows of the tunnel that led from the garden area and went further into the mountain.

"Hello, Tara. Jayson." Angela smiled coolly at the waiting pair, ignoring the gun. "Lovely afternoon for dying, isn't it?"

A bit surprised at her response, neither of them spoke.

Angela held her wrists out. "You'll want to bind me, right?"

Tara nudged Jay forward, not taking her attention from the woman she hated. "Do it!"

"I made other plans." He stepped forward, placing his gun to Angela's head.

“Stop!” Tara grabbed his arm. “Vlad’s waiting. I want her taken up the mountain.”

“Sorry, but you’re not the boss anymore.” Jay glared madly at Angela. He shrugged off Tara’s hand. “She killed my father. I’m going to kill her.”

Tara realized he wasn’t going to be swayed. She shrugged. As long as Angela died, it would be enough. Vlad wanted her for bait, but they could always lure Mitchel in with her body. “Fine. Use the suppressor so we have more time to get away. They might not hear the shot over all that equipment.”

“I did good, right?” Jay gushed, thinking of the training area on the first level, where people were hopefully dying. “Right?”

Tara nodded in annoyance. “It was perfect.”

Jay beamed at the praise, cocking the gun. “This is for my—”

“Ugggggggggggg!”

A guttural moan came from the other dark tunnel behind them, sending chills over everyone—including Angela. It didn’t sound human.

Jay spun around to face the unknown, but before the gun light could illuminate the source of the noise, something ran toward him.

“Hey, what is that?” Tara leapt out of the way as a thin shadow lunged from the dark tunnel and tackled Jay. She didn’t wait to discover what it was. Tara hurried over to Angela and jerked on her arm. “Come with me.”

Angela rose docilely as Tara’s gift shoved into her mind again.

Jay and his unknown attacker rolled on the ground, struggling and grunting as they fought for control of his gun. Jay's strength allowed him to shove the shadow off and pull the trigger as she leapt again.

*She?* Jay watched the woman fall to the rocks in shock.  
“Who the hell are you?!”

The noise of the shot drew instant notice from the nervous guard Angela had passed on her way here. Radios crackled with panic.

“All hands!” Wade shouted. “Shot fired on level four!”

“Who has the boss?” Marc demanded.

“No guard right now!” Greg radioed.

“Does anyone have eyes on the boss?”

“Angela, answer your radio!”

The calls continued as Jay marched over to Tara and jerked Angela away. “Where were you going?”

Starting to panic as the radio calls became clearer, Tara pinned Jay with angrily glowing orbs. “Stay here.”

Jay stilled, obviously trying to fight Tara's control, but she shoved down on him harshly. “Stay here. Tell them you threw her body into a hole. You didn't see me at all. I'm with the rest of the herd!”

Tara left him standing there with a dazed expression, pushing her gun into Angela's spine. Tara had been practicing her gifts on guards and the camp alike. She now had twice the range, even while controlling more than one person at a time. Jay's father would have been proud.

“Turn on that belt light and start hiking.” Tara shoved Angela again as she dominated her thoughts. “Make it a fast trot.”

Angela did, profile a copy of Jay's blank façade.

## 5

Marc dropped down the emergency rope to the fourth level, rushing toward the awful moans. His gift was strong, breaking through the rocks and stone, but Angela wasn't on it. The only way that was possible was if she were dead. Marc refused to accept that as he ran to where he'd last had her on his grid. She'd blinked off while he was rushing toward her. Marc shined his light, motioning for Kenn to get the lanterns lit.

He spotted a body and ran that way. "Angie?"

"Uggg!"

Marc was grateful to discover the fallen woman wasn't Angie, but he had no idea who she was. He knelt down. "Gunshot." Marc recognized the casing nearby. "One of ours. Get a guard on her. Take her to the medical bay."

He followed the signs of the fight backward as the men with him obeyed. He quickly found Angela's pocket alarm and followed her boot prints into the dark tunnel without hesitation.

Behind him, Kenn took charge. "Top two teams here now, go with him. Everyone else, get us secured. The new procedures we've been studying are what you should be doing. Zack has point."

The Eagles were glad to have something specific to do; the rattles of paper echoed as the unused plans were taken from their kits. There hadn't been time to practice securing the cave. The disorganized mess would keep all of them busy.

The camp had panicked, but the guards were happy to find out that meant getting weapons and hunkering down in the living quarters. The camp hadn't been told what to do this time. It was nice to know the sheep no longer deserved that title. Safe Haven had learned hard lessons.

"Hope we're not about to get another one." Kenn led a group of Eagles to secure their stock of weapons. Much like when Angela had been taken by Donner, Kenn had a bad feeling.

Marc shined his light, following three sets of footprints. He recognized one in relief. Angela was walking on her own, proving she was alive.

"I killed her."

Marc froze.

Ahead of him, Jayson was standing in the center of the dank, widening tunnel with a flashlight in his hand. Marc hadn't noticed him until Jayson flipped it on. He still didn't have the man on his mental grid even though they were only standing a few feet apart.

"I threw her body down a hole."

Thanks to the angle of Jayson's light, Marc could see the drop off behind the man and the lack of tracks continuing around it.

"She didn't suffer long."

Marc didn't pick up the dazed tone. All he heard were the words.

When he snapped, the men behind him didn't interfere. Jay deserved whatever Marc handed out.

Marc slid his gun under Jay's throat, not noticing the man wasn't fighting back. "You *will* suffer."

Marc fired, trimming Jay's ear.

Marc also didn't notice the man's screams or the loud report of the gunshot in the cavern. Angela's body tumbling through the void and crunching on the rocks below was repeating in his mind. The gap behind Jay was over a hundred feet deep.

Allan and Brandon exchanged uneasy looks as Marc fired again, trimming another body part. They understood and agreed with his judgement, but the need to grieve for Angela was hitting them in thick waves that pulled sympathy instead of hatred.

*Get some rope,* Allan told Brandon in hand code. He was sure they would be sent down to retrieve the body.

Hatred came as Jayson began to cry uncontrollably.

"Please don't! Please."

"Did she beg you for mercy?!" Marc fired again.

As Jayson's screams rang out repeatedly, reality sank in. Angela was dead. They had lost their very gifted leader.

## 6

"Who is that?" Theo moved closer as a team came into the medical bay carrying a bleeding female. He recognized the sound of her moans. He'd been listening to that noise in the cave for weeks, and blaming it on a ghost. He was relieved to discover it had been a person.

"Marc found her at the scene." Donald cuffed the woman to the cot as the doctor hurried over to examine her.

“What scene?” Theo stared at the woman in concern. There was only one person not accounted for right now, as far as he could tell from listening to his radio.

“Angela’s missing. This woman might know what happened.”

Theo studied the filthy female, unable to discern her race, true hair color, or anything else. It was hard to believe that she was the person Jennifer had shown him mentally. This woman was covered in blood and dust, and a thick layer of grime that would take more than soap to remove. She also had a gunshot wound in her arm. The doctor was trying to stem the flow of blood and be certain the slug had gone through, but the woman wouldn’t be still. Her hands flew up and down, making her cuffs clink loudly.

“Quit that!” the doctor snapped tiredly, trying to unbutton her shirt to get to the injury. He’d been treating refugees all day.

“Uggg Ug!”

Theo’s mouth dropped open as he studied her. “That’s a code!”

“Sign language!” Zack had also escorted the woman here, hoping she would tell them where Angela was. “Does anyone know it well enough to translate?”

“I do.” Mandy came over to and knelt down by the woman. The pregnant college girl flashed a hand gesture... Everyone felt the wounded woman’s joy at being understood.

Mandy tried to keep up as the woman gestured frantically. “The angry lady took her...into the cave...and left the angry man...to take the blame.”

“What angry woman?”

Mandy signed Zack's question.

When the deaf female answered, Mandy cursed. "Son of a..." She signed again while everyone waited in fear and frustrated impatience.

The ghost female shook her head.

"She says the woman with the little girl who hums all the time took Angela. They were alone."

Chills went through the cold canvas again. There was only one child who hummed in Safe Haven so much that every adult was tired of hearing it.

"Missy. Tara!"

"Get on the radio! Find Tara!"

## 7

"I found her in the mess, at one of the tables," Shawn carried Missy through the flap that Hilda held open. "She's been darted. I can barely feel her breathing!"

The doctor hurried to the new patient, with Hilda and Peggy on his heels. Shawn stayed with them, holding the little girl's hand in comfort.

"Has anyone told Marc?" Kenn had stopped by to verify things were good here before he went to his next stops—the front and rear gates.

Everyone exchanged horrified glances.

Theo paled. "We were too busy trying to figure out what happened."

"I'll go." Donald headed for the exit.

Kenn knelt down in front of the little girl who was having trouble keeping her lids open even though the doctor was using smelling salts. “Missy?”

“Huh?”

“Missy, can you tell us where your mommy is?”

“Uh...”

“Missy!” Kenn snapped, sorry when she flinched. “Where did your mother go?”

Missy cringed from the tone, causing Shawn to glare at Kenn.

Kenn ignored him, leaning in. “Where is your mommy?”

Missy focused blearily. “Tara is not my mommy!”

Kenn and the others gaped in shock as Missy began to cry.

“She killed my mommy. She’s the major’s wife.”

“Major Donner?” Kenn gasped, reeling.

Missy nodded, falling back under the drugs. She managed to slide onto a cot before her eyes shut. “She’s very mad at my friend Angie.”

Panic filled the tent as people ran to find Marc.

## 8

Unable to get through the din, Adrian listened to the radio calls with fury and fear fighting for room in his guts. Very little information was coming out, and because of the bubble and his banishment, Adrian couldn’t pick up any details that might allow him to help. There were no guards on the gate to pull thoughts from and the screaming refugees were still there to keep him from going over to yell across. He hadn’t seen Kenn or Cynthia yet and there was no way Marc would answer him

right now, even if he could reach the man. There was only one other thing he could try.

Adrian concentrated, searching for the door that he and Angela had opened together. It had remained after their connection was broken, but it had been locked each time he'd tried to access it. *Please. She's in danger. I know it.*

There wasn't a reply, but Adrian could feel someone or something on the other side, listening to him.

*I'll make whatever deal you want. Just tell me where she is!*

*Death comes to us all*, a slobbering voice whispered through the door. *She is no different.*

Adrian shuddered. *Please!*

*No.* The voice laughed cruelly. *But only because you have nothing I want!*

The door refused to budge as he pounded on it. Adrian spun toward the gate in fury. Before he could reach the ledge and start clearing a path, he felt a dangerously cold draft go over him. It lingered, surrounding him with the sweet scent of vanilla. A second later, his radio crackled.

“All teams to the fourth level!”

Adrian knew instantly that was the wrong call. He glanced upward, toward the snowy peak where he had seen Quinn a few hours ago. This felt familiar... *My notebook! It's my plan!*

It all snapped into place. Adrian took off running for the path Quinn had used, mentally shouting for Marc to go up, not down.

“Do it now!”

“She’s almost here. Be quiet.”

Shivering, Angela heard the voices and realized they’d already arrived at Vlad’s campsite. The hike up the mountain had been grueling because of the pace. She and Tara were both out of breath, but the gun in her back had remained constant.

“I heard something.”

“It’s me!” Tara shoved Angela into the light from the small fire Vlad had going in the entrance of his small cave. “With the prize.”

“She’s not the prize!” Vlad spat, but without anger. Angela would bring him Adrian. All he had to do was make her scream. “You have her under control?”

“Of course. Easy as pie.” Tara finally lowered her weapon. She’d taken it from Wade. Angela had gone right by him without noticing he was absent his firearm. *Some leader.* She’d removed all of Angela’s defenses.

Vlad grabbed Angela’s unresisting arm and dragged her to the entrance. He took her out into the icy storm, pointing toward Safe Haven. The view was amazing. “Watch this!” Vlad hit the button on a small box he’d taken from his pocket. For almost a minute, nothing happened.

Angela’s eyes watered, exposed skin stinging from the cold.

“There it goes!” Vlad clapped happily.

The explosion was small—so small that barely any sound of it traveled up to them through the storm, but the sight of it was mesmerizing. Right below their ledge, part of the mountain was sliding off.

Vlad watched Angela instead of the destruction as the layers of snow and ice were blown free. The avalanche would bury Safe Haven. He waited eagerly for her screams.

Angela waited, praying she timed it correctly. As the avalanche gained strength, picking up more and more of the snow and rock it was sliding by, it went faster. Adrian's notebook had told her how to do this, but the actual moment was always different. As the wall of icy death passed the halfway mark that she'd had Quinn light with a campfire, Angela screamed. "Now!"

Seconds later, the wall of snow shifted, blown off Vlad's path by the explosive charges Quinn had set. The avalanche thundered down a new route, straight for the stunned refugees who were staring up at the mountain in a daze of fear and fury. Around the gate, Eagles ran for their cave, shouting warnings.

"Thank you." Angela smiled in relief as the snow crashed through the gate, but left the rest of her camp untouched. It buried most of the refugees as they tried to flee. "Thank you."

Vlad screamed. "No!"

"Kill her!" Tara realized Angela had only pretended to be under her control. She knew what came next.

Enraged, Vlad spun toward Angela. "Did you see this coming too?"

Before Angela could bring up her shield, he punched her in the stomach.

## 10

Adrian ran faster through the wind and snow, feeling Angela's pain. Now that she was outside Safe Haven's

perimeter, he had no limits again; her agony was awful. He didn't know what had happened, but he increased his speed again as the sense of urgency smothered him. Whatever it was, she needed help and he wasn't there. Had she tried to enact his plan alone? Where was Marc? Where were the Eagles?

Adrian spotted Quinn's frozen boot impressions in the snow, not glancing down at the devastation. His own campsite was partially covered in tons of dirty snow and rock, but the soldiers had been in their hammocks when he left. He assumed they were out of reach, but it wouldn't have mattered to him even if they were in danger.

Adrian ignored the cold as he shoved himself forward and up the last rise to reach the ledge above his camp. He saw a melted area where Quinn had spent some time, noting the wires and debris, and then kept going. Whatever was happening was close to him, but not near enough as gunshots rang out.

*I'm coming!* He used their old line, hoping for an answer.  
*Hang on!*

*Do you have her?* Marc demanded in his thoughts.

*No,* Adrian realized Marc was also out of the perimeter to be able to monitor him. *Where are you?*

*Coming from the cave they went through. They left me a decoy. Where are you?*

*A few minutes from the top.*

*Meet you in the middle.*

Adrian allowed his reserve strength to be used as he went even faster through the miserable weather and the pains in his chest. He was closer than Marc. He might be able to help somehow if he could just get there!

## 11

“Down!” Quinn fired from his place behind the snowy boulders that lined the site. He’d chosen it for snow removal because of the cramped quarters. He was now cursing himself for it. The driving wind had reduced visibility. He was trying to hit the enemy while missing their captive people. He could only hope that luck was with him as he fired again.

Scott and Josh stayed down in the open tent, trying to untie each other while their captors were busy fighting with Quinn and Angela. Between groans, she was sending balls of fire and curses in languages they’d never heard before. Her orbs were crimson. The noises she was making were scary. It sounded like she’d let the witch out. Blade and Darian were already dead, burnt from Angela’s amazing fury.

Angela groaned as her stomach clamped down again, harder than before, but there was no time as Vlad charged again. The witch lunged forward to meet him, breathing flames that melted his shield and then shot into his eyes.

Angela wanted his lifeforce. She wanted to enjoy every second of it, but penetrating agony slammed into her belly and the witch retreated.

Vlad dropped to the ground, screaming wildly as his mentally captive men fled down the nearest snowy path. He couldn’t hold them now and neither could Tara, who was behind a big boulder by the cliff’s slick edge. She’d darted there when Quinn attacked. Angela had been hampered by her cramping body and missed Tara on the first shot.

“Come out here!”

Tara stayed down at the shriek, realizing the huge mistake she'd made in assuming Angela was under control. Even in the midst of a miscarriage, Angela's power was far beyond her own.

The loose lurker everyone had worried about ran toward the small cave entrance to escape Angela's wrath. Her flames shot over his shoulder and caught on his hair. Slapping at the growing heat, he tripped, sliding, and went screaming down the side of the mountain as a human torch.

Angela focused on the last target, able to feel the child inside her dying. There was nothing she could do now except extract justice. Angela dropped to her knees as she struggled to bring forward more power through the pain radiating in sharp, tear-bringing cramps.

Waiting for that, Tara stood up, firing. "For my husband!"

Angela ducked in time to take the bullet through the upper arm instead of the chest. Blood sprayed the snow as she cried out.

Tara laughed cruelly. "How's that feel?!" Tara hurried forward. She kept her gun trained on Angela as Quinn also rushed forward. "Get lost!"

Quinn followed his training instead. He took the shot.

Tara fell backwards from the impact, shocked and dazed. Her shield had caught the slug, but she hadn't expected him to fire at all.

It gave Quinn and Angela a few seconds they wouldn't have had otherwise. Angela used hers to gather the last bit of power she had, along with all her horrible fury at her mistakes. Quinn used his to recall how many bullets he had left. *One.*

Boot steps crunched through the snow, hurrying toward them in angry determination. Quinn wanted to see who it was, but he couldn't take his attention from Tara as she scrambled to her feet. He wasn't able to get through her shield, but Angela could.

Quinn saw Tara's finger tighten on the trigger. He lunged, dropping the gun.

Tara fired, hitting Quinn in the metal medical box he preferred to carry. It spun him to the ground, where he slammed into the snowy stone with a dull thud.

Angela forced herself to her feet, feeling warm wetness slide down her thighs in gooey clumps. The chill of the wind sank in, making her shiver, but she held her chin up as Tara placed the gun against her cold skin.

"I'm going after your other kid next!" Tara leaned near enough to make sure she was spattered in blood upon pulling the trigger. She wanted a souvenir. "I'll suck him dry."

Angela shut her eyes, terrified to hear herself ask if she even wanted to survive now.

*Have we had enough? the witch mocked. Pain too great?*

Angela nodded, tears rolling down her frozen cheeks. "It hurts."

Tara thought Angela was speaking to her and laughed. "Good!"

*Then let go and join the darkness, the witch advised. You wouldn't survive the future anyway. Marc and Adrian need a strong woman.*

*I'm taking her with me...for my baby.*

*Why bother? Let Marc have the justice.*

"I deserve it!" Angela screamed.

“Oh, yeah!” Tara agreed happily. “Here we go.”

*Safe Haven dies with you, the witch shouted. Fight for your life!*

*Fate can make this choice too, Angela responded wearily. I'm done deciding who lives and who dies—including me.*

Adrian emerged through the snow and rock. “Angie?”

His voice was a light in the darkness, but there was no time. He didn’t slow down. Adrian leapt as Tara fired again.

Thanks to the impact of his body, the bullet went off course and plunged into Angela’s other arm, drawing a fresh scream. Tara had been aiming for her heart.

Adrian rolled clear and hit his feet, staying in front of the lunatic who began shouting. He already knew he couldn’t draw in time to shoot her.

“Move! She has to die!”

Adrian didn’t answer, but his shield came up, making it impossible for Tara to reach Angela until she had dealt with him. Because she wasn’t firing, Adrian suspected she was low on ammunition.

Angela’s groans and moans brought cruel happiness into Tara’s reddening profile. “I love that sound!”

Vlad stopped screaming suddenly, but neither of them looked. If Adrian moved the wrong way the next time Tara fired, Angela would be hit again. Adrian assumed she was too injured to bring up her own shield.

Tara cackled madly at his concern, retreating to the cliff’s edge to be out of his lunging range. “Mexican standoff!”

Adrian didn’t understand why the old joke was so funny to her, but he felt the moment of truth arrive as her face lost

all trace of human emotion. Her arm slowly raised, eyes going blank.

Adrian tensed, preparing to jump. He would take her off the cliff.

“Yourself!” Angela grunted furiously from the ground.  
“Shoot...yourself!”

Tara’s eyes widened as her own arm began to shake.

Adrian watched in proud horror as Angela forced the woman to put the barrel of the gun in her mouth.

Angela strained, feeling something in her abdomen give.  
“Die!”

Tara pulled the trigger.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

# Carved in Stone



### 1

“**A**ngie!” Marc rushed forward, followed by the two teams of men who quickly realized the only threat left was from Angela’s injuries and the weather. Some of the men took up guard posts, while others went to Quinn.

“He’s alive!”

“Get him to the cave!”

Three of the guards quickly took Quinn down the open path, trying not to drop him.

“Two more survivors!” Billy waved for help as he found Scott and Josh, who were still gagged and tied. Their fingers were nearly frozen from working on the knots. Their knives and guns had been removed upon capture.

Adrian gestured the Eagles to take their men down the mountain.

No one argued. It was obvious Adrian had saved Angela's life, though none of them was certain she would keep that gift. With all the blood around her, it definitely didn't look good for the baby.

Finished binding both her arms, Adrian stepped aside.

Marc dropped to his knees at her side, ignoring everything else. "Angie?"

Angela groaned, crying as a fresh gush of liquid heat soaked her lap. "I miscalculated the time. I thought...I had it...all covered!"

Marc wanted to hold her, to rush her down the cliff, but he was also scared to move her. She was covered in blood.

"I was arrogant; fate took the baby!" She clutched her gut.

Marc jumped up and grabbed Adrian's arm. "Help her!"

Staring at the gruesome scene, Adrian jerked out of Marc's grip. "I can't."

"Help her! Do it now!"

"I can't! It's too late and it's your fault!"

"What?!"

"This is your fault, always making her hide what she is. You caused this!"

"You're insane!"

"She has to hide her plans from you! You can't accept her for what she is—a leader who has now sacrificed everything for her people! I never would have done this to her! Your insistence on the bars being up drove her to keep secrets. I should have been here with her for this!"

More blood pooled around Angela's legs. Adrian jerked a hand toward the path he'd come up. "Go get shit ready. I'll bring her in."

"Don't you touch her! I'll carry her down!"

"You have to get things ready!"

"You do it!"

"I can't. I'm banished, remember? I'll be shot on sight—another of your bullshit attempts to get rid of someone she loves. Jealous bastard!" Adrian bent down and slid gentle hands under Angela's limp body. She had passed out while they argued and Marc hadn't even noticed. "Come here, baby. I've got you now."

Adrian stood up.

Marc winced as blood dripped.

"Get moving! She needs help!"

Billy and the other Eagles, along with the two freed captives, surrounded Adrian, expressing more disapproval than Marc was used to. Left with no choice, Marc spun toward the path and took off running. None of the Eagles could clear Adrian for entry. Only he could, thanks to his own rules.

Adrian had no time for the support of the men he'd once bonded with daily. He cradled Angela, face against hers as he breathed what little energy he had left into her. "I'm so sorry."

Billy got them moving, trying to clear an easier path for Adrian to manage. Scott and Josh helped navigate, supporting her legs when needed, as the rest of the honor guard tried not to notice the trail of blood they were leaving. Together, the somber males slowly brought their leader's body through the storm and down the mountain.

At the bottom of the hill, gunfire rang out in loud waves that said the chaos wasn't completely over. Kyle and the rest of the Special Forces men were still defending the gate from the refugees who had survived the avalanche. People were coming from the cave to help; the battle continued to ring across the mountain as the storm raged around them.

A few minutes into their treacherous hike, Marc's Colts also began thundering as he vented his anger on the few remaining refugees.

The escorts didn't speak to Adrian, busy examining his accusation. Had Marc caused this somehow? What were they missing?

Adrian didn't try to convince them he was the hero this time. Besides being exhausted, he hadn't said those things to Marc to make the man feel bad. He'd spewed the truth in a moment of rage. He and Angela would have been a perfect team because he could accept the awful choices she had to make. Marc was too good for her-literally.

## 2

Marc watched Adrian lovingly place Angie's unconscious form onto the gurney the medical team had waiting inside the shattered gate. They rushed her past the bodies in the snow and into the drafty tent where some of the doctor's equipment was still set up. People ran back and forth at his calls for supplies that he didn't have here, shouting updates and rumors alike. After proclaiming Angela near death, the word that Adrian was back came next.

Marc suffered it all in silence, using hand signals to direct the Eagles. With so many people topside to wait for Angela, they needed a perimeter. He got Kenn on it, hating the sympathy he read for Adrian in the Marine's expression. He also hated all the curious and concerned camp members viewing his humiliation, but he didn't send them below.

Adrian followed the gurney through the snow. At the flap to the medical tent, when Zack would have stopped him, Scott and Josh stepped tiredly between them. After not being able to assist Angela, both the men were at their limits on patience.

"What's he doing here?" Zack demanded angrily. "He should be shot!"

"He kept her from being executed," Scott informed his superior coldly. "This is what he deserves."

Zack scowled at the bruised man, focusing on Marc. When Marc didn't reply, Zack reluctantly stepped aside to let Adrian enter.

Doctor Reynold stared at the bloody woman in shock. "Angela?"

Josh slapped the doctor on the shoulder, making him flinch. "Get to it!"

Hilda and Peggy came to help, along with Millie and Mandy. Adrian stayed out of the way, studying everyone else in the large drafty tent. He wouldn't be sent away from Angela yet unless someone wanted to die. He had enough energy left to take a lifeforce if he needed to, though he expected it to be Marc, not an Eagle. "She'll have a notebook for this." Adrian jerked a hand toward the flap, not caring who heard the information. That wasn't his job to cover anymore. "Someone go search her mattress."

When the guards looked at Marc, he spun angrily toward their tent, silently cursing. He didn't know if Adrian was right. That was a huge problem.

*Is he? Marc demanded of his demon. Is that what caused this?*

The demon refused to answer.

Marc found a notebook under her pillow, along with a single sheet of paper that he read with a breaking heart.

*I'm sorry. If you're reading this, I wasn't able to come back and destroy it. I know there's a chance I'll get hurt, but I'll do anything to protect our future. You know that. The choices I've had to make were awful. If my plan works, the refugees will be dead and Safe Haven can stay here a few more weeks. I've bought us some time, but it won't last. You have to get these people south, Marc. That's my last wish.*

*If you're asking yourself what you could have done to prevent me getting hurt, believe me when I say that you couldn't have. I didn't tell you. That isn't your fault. I'm sorry I couldn't, but you're one of the few pure souls left and I won't corrupt you with this pit of damnation that I've willingly signed up for. I love you because you're good. Please, whatever happens to me, don't change that about yourself. Charlie needs you to be strong.*

*In my bug-out vehicle, there are more notebooks. I've left plans, instructions, and notes on what you'll need to lead in my place. I'm passing you command with this letter. Take our people south and keep as many of them alive as you can. I'm with you in spirit, if not in person. I've always loved you. Even death won't change that.*

*Angie*

Marc wiped away tears, grateful she hadn't died, but able to imagine the pain he would be feeling as he read this if she had. Her words were proof. If she had told him, he would have stopped her. She couldn't trust him to support her choices like the Eagles did, or like Adrian would have. Marc faced the truth. Adrian might be right.

*Next time, you'll do better, the demon tried to soothe. You've protected her from herself all your lives. It takes time to change.*

Marc thought that was also true, but it didn't ease the sense that the wall between him and Angela wasn't from Adrian or her leadership, as he'd thought for a while now. It wasn't that she was female and it wasn't because she was smaller or that he honestly feared for her life. The problem might not be with her at all. *I've never been the type to follow blindly. I never will be. I'll always try to protect her from the consequences... So, she'll always hide her plans from me until it's too late for my interference.*

Marc dropped his head, hating Adrian even more than he already had, but this time, it was because Adrian's sleazy nature would allow him to accept whatever she chose, where his own honor wouldn't.

Marc opened the notebook, wondering how much of it she wanted released to the public. After a few seconds of skimming, he angrily slapped it shut and took it to the medical bay. It was addressed to Adrian.

Adrian took the notebook without looking at Marc, sure the man was on the edge of snapping. If the situation had been reversed, Adrian didn't think he would be able to be in the same room with his men. He certainly hadn't been able to face them after his banishment. It gave Adrian a good idea of what Marc would do next. "Don't. You should stay. She'll want you here."

Marc didn't answer.

Adrian didn't repeat it. He preferred that Marc took off for a while, but Angela's needs were always going to come first with him now.

Marc gestured toward the woman Theo and Mandy were still interrogating. "What's the story with her?"

Theo frowned at Marc's curtness. "In a minute."

Marc sighed as the feeling of disrespect and anger hit. The Eagles were thinking about what Adrian had said.

Marc went to Angie, nearly growling when the doctor started to protest. He took her hand, lighting up the connection between them. *Angie?*

Angela was in a dark place, alone. The rocky peaks surrounded her with jagged tears, making it impossible for her to reach Marc's voice. Too tired and desolate to fight, Angela sank further into the cold void.

Marc placed her hand on her freshly gowned lap. "Someone bring her clothes. She hates these."

"No, the gown is..." The doctor stopped as Adrian glared.

"She'll also want a bath of some type, and for Charlie to be here when she wakes up. He'll distract her." Marc hated the bandages, the blood splattered across her hair and skin. The doctor was still stitching the first side of the wound in her arm

where the bullet had gone through. It was the only one still bleeding. She wasn't going to die, but the same feeling from the rest area was sinking into Marc's heart. "I'd like to see what happened."

Adrian stepped closer. "I was only there for a minute before you were. I don't have much."

Marc linked them, flinching at the first sight of Angie in the snowstorm, bleeding, with Tara pointing the gun at her. Angie wasn't fighting back.

"No, she wasn't." Adrian sighed. "I'm not sure that isn't the case now either. The gunshots are minor compared to the miscarriage."

Marc finished examining the memory, and then went over it a second time, picking out Vlad's death as he crawled too close to Angela's claws. He also noted Angela's coat. She only used that one when she planned to be outdoors for a long period. Another brick slammed into the wall. She'd planned it all out and hadn't told him anything or even acted differently to give him any clues. She had left the note, put on her coat, and calmly walked off to what might be her death—for the people who were currently viewing him as if he should have known and helped her.

Marc looked at the doctor. "She shouldn't be alone at all until we know her state of mind."

"You shouldn't go!" Adrian insisted.

Marc left the tent.

Adrian grunted in tired annoyance. He took a chair from the stack along the wall. "Can someone check on the soldiers from my camp?"

Zack gestured for Allan to do it, shocked.

“Okay, someone please tell me what happened.” Daryl sat up in his cot, arm in a sling. “And make it quick before anything else explodes, caves in, crashes through us, or slides down the mountain.”

## 4

Marc joined Kyle near the gates that were buried in tons of dirty snow and rock. The Special Forces teams were currently trekking through the drifts in pairs, handling survivors. Kyle was supervising and keeping track of the cave entrance to be certain no one snuck in as a member. They’d had enough of it happening.

Kyle already knew Angela’s condition, thanks to the Safe Haven grapevine. He clapped Marc on the shoulder in commiseration, but didn’t speak. He’d also heard about Adrian’s accusations, but he didn’t put faith in that. Angela would set them all straight when she recovered. Kyle had faith that she would honor the banishment.

Kyle motioned three members to stand outside the entrance, glad the storm had passed them during the shootout. The camp members had come from the cave to help secure the area, without being called. It was wonderful. “Make sure no one goes in there unless you know them. No more spies or assassins.”

The three men were eager to be sure of that as well. They rushed off with their rifles slung over thickly-coated shoulders. They’d learned a lot during their time here. Most of these people had. *Because of Adrian too.* Kyle forced himself to acknowledge it. *He trained us. Now, we’re training others.*

*The system works.* That was as far as Kyle forced himself to go. Forgiving Adrian wasn't possible, but tolerating him for the good of the camp might be.

Kyle waved at two more camp members trotting through the drifts toward them. "Go to the rear gate. No one gets in or out unless they're ours. I'll send more hands as I get them."

Marc was confident Kyle had it under control out here. He headed for the cave, aware of Shawn trailing him. After being suspended for a week like Samantha, Shawn had been quiet, careful, and useful. Now that it was confirmed Tara had kidnapped the boss, Shawn had no idea how to redeem himself. Marc didn't blame him for any of it. Tara's power to control people was part of why Angela had allowed her to stay here so long, Marc assumed. He was still hoping Theo would get some details from the deaf woman.

Marc went level-by-level, checking and calming people who had heard the first rumor of Angela being taken, but not of her rescue. He fended off questions about Adrian by not replying. He didn't have the patience.

He reached the first cave-in area, where Jayson had placed enough charges to bring down this side of the cave. If he'd been more knowledgeable about where to put the C-4, he might have succeeded. As it was, ten Eagles had been injured. None of the wounds were serious, but it was still infuriating that they couldn't have peace anywhere they settled.

Marc was glad to discover the injured had all been removed. The area was taped, and had two guards standing a nervous watch as they fended off wandering camp members. He went to the next level, where the party had become a vigil

for Angela. People rushed over to him for news, surrounding Marc with kindness and sympathy.

It took a while to get through the crowd who wanted to express their well wishes, but Marc gave them his full attention, needing the distraction. He only had two stops left and then he had to return to the medical bay.

Marc made his way down to the fourth level, where the real drama had begun. He went over the scene again, slower this time. He easily discovered the tunnel the deaf woman had been using as a den, but he found no weapons or signs she had aided Jayson and Tara. Theo clearly believed her story. Marc chose to accept it as well, once he got the details. If everything fit, she would be welcomed into their fold as a hero.

Marc retraced his steps into the cave, not upset to view the mess he'd made. Once Tara's mental hold was gone, Jayson had crumbled. Marc assumed she'd gotten out of range, but he didn't understand why Angela had allowed herself to be taken. Had Tara really been able to overpower Angela mentally? Marc was hoping that was the case. It would explain why Angie hadn't been fighting at all when Adrian arrived. Marc heard steps, recognizing them as Kenn's heavy clomp.

"The storm picked up. We'd like to roll in the camp."

"Good idea." Marc knelt down to check Jayson's bloody clothes for papers or items he could glean details from. "Make it a full roll in—all the way to the cave."

Kenn left quickly, not needing the scene to be burnt into his brain any more than it already was.

Marc felt Shawn still lingering and waved him forward. "I want to walk it and blow it at the other end. Gather what I need?"

“Right away!” Shawn hurried off. He was happy to be helpful at all.

Marc grunted, still digging through the pockets of the coat. It was in shreds, making it harder than he’d expected to pull the items out.

Marc opened the nicked papers with a chill, remembering Angela’s words about protecting their future. Jayson had a picture of his father—Big Jack—standing in front of a small town courthouse with a large group of men Marc thought Adrian would probably recognize. The looted doors declared it after the war, but Marc counted roughly a hundred people scattered throughout the town, which meant there was a lot more he couldn’t see. These people had bigger numbers, more descendants, and Safe Haven was their prime target. Jayson had confirmed that as he bled out.

Marc took the picture, leaving the gory mess. This cave would be sealed up at both ends, after he’d collected every bit of information it contained.

## 5

“We’re all sealed up,” Zack told Adrian stiffly. When Adrian had begun issuing orders, most of the men here had gone along with it because the things he wanted were for Angela’s good. If he overstepped in any way, they would throw him out.

“Did anyone get her the clothes? She won’t like being dressed in this when she wakes. She’ll try to change it herself. With a gunshot in each arm.”

“I just finished stitching those!” The doctor scowled. “I’m not doing it again while she’s awake.”

“Jennifer went for those.” Now that his duty with Neil’s team was over, Greg was once again Angela’s right hand and guard. “I also sent for Charlie.”

“Good. Marc will want a sentry in here with me at all times. You should assign someone now.”

Greg motioned Jax forward. “We covered that.”

Adrian nodded at Jax, remembering when the man had joined his army. Jax had been a quick-tempered hothead. Now, he radiated patient strength.

Jax didn’t return the gesture, glowering. He was pissed that Adrian was here. His loyalty to Marc was why he’d volunteered to take the first watch over their former traitor.

Adrian swept the large tent; glad they’d closed the other wings as he’d told them to after the other patients were taken below. Theo and the deaf woman had gone right after Daryl had been released.

“Where is Marc?” Jax scanned the canvas. He’d expected Marc to stay with Angela. It had been a surprise to find Adrian here instead.

“Making sure the cave is safe before we take her down there.” Adrian pointed at a corner that was coming loose in the wind. “Set something heavy on that. When Marc gives the all clear, we’ll get her into your new medical bay.”

“I’ll have it ready.” The doctor zipped up his heavy parka. He waited for the flap to be opened and rushed toward the busy cave entrance, glad to be away from the tense men.

Zack zipped them up, shivering. The temperature was plummeting, and the winds were once again beating against

everything. It wasn't comforting, but at least the gunfire and screams had stopped. Some days, it seemed like that was the only sound they were allowed to hear.

"What are we going to do about him?" Billy asked hesitantly. Kyle had insisted on having top-level men in here, along with Adrian's guard. "Unless the camp votes, he can't go down there with us."

Half of the men here were holding a grudge over Adrian's betrayal. The other half were willing to forgive and forget because Adrian had rescued their leader. None of them spoke, unsure of the procedure for this since it hadn't happened before.

"I don't think it's fair to call a vote before they learn the whole story." Billy wanted Adrian gone, but he was grateful that Angela was alive. "Or us, for that matter. *We* don't even know what happened."

"I agree with that." Zack looked around. "Hands?"

All of them raised except for Jax.

Zack glared at Adrian. "Don't leave this tent until one of us says you can."

"I'll be right here," Adrian retorted sarcastically. "Until Marc calls all clear and then I'm carrying her to the medical bay in that cave. I suggest you get the full story soon."

Everyone frowned.

Adrian dropped into the chair by Angela. "When she wakes up, she'll want me."

Jax sneered. "How do you know?!"

"Because she told me so as she passed out!" Adrian was fed up with their concerns and grudges. "You want me gone? Do what Marc can't and put a bullet in my brain!"

Challenged, Jax stepped forward, hand going to his gun.  
“Get...out!” Angela rasped.

Her order was met with cries of relief. The command was ignored as all the Eagles rushed toward her, forgetting about Adrian.

Angela felt nothing, not even the IV she assumed the doctor had inserted. Her entire body was numb.

*He sedated you and gave you a painkiller.* Adrian had been pushed aside, but he was in her mind, like the old days. The bubble had collapsed when Angela left the perimeter, but no one had noticed that yet.

Angela weakly scanned the profiles around her, expression unreadable except for the endless sadness. “Marc is in command of Safe Haven. You guys do what you’re told.”

Fake chuckles came.

Angela waited stonily, needing time alone with Adrian.

Adrian jerked a hand. “She wants you guys gone.”

Angela stared at Adrian, waiting as the Eagles angrily left. All except Jax, who Angela knew was Adrian’s guard, and Greg, who waited just outside the flap.

Angela shut her eyes. “I’m still not safe.”

Both males moved closer.

“I’ll stay with you.” Adrian patted her hand. “Marc will handle the camp.”

Angela felt the sadness waiting for her, but the darkness was more inviting. “You know what I need. Make it happen.”

Adrian did know, but he doubted Marc would be able to give it to her, even after all this. “I’ll try, baby. My word on it.”

Angela floated into the abyss gratefully, hand going slack from the fist she'd clenched.

Adrian gestured toward his guard. "Let Marc know she woke up. I'm not going anywhere."

Jax did as he was told, not worried the former leader would disappear. It was obvious Adrian was going to be even harder to get rid of now.

## 6

"Marc and Shawn are back." Greg entered the medical bay. "Get ready for her."

They were inside the cave, with all the other patients mostly settled for the night, including the woman Theo was staying close to. His casted leg and pain wasn't keeping him immobile. The woman was currently behind a curtain, sponging off some of her grime.

The camp was finally calm enough to start going to their bunks, but many people were remaining in the center of the living quarters, waiting for news on Angela. The doctor had refused to make an official diagnosis yet. He'd shuddered at a mention of giving the address over the radio.

"We are all clear," Marc's voice echoed over the multiple speakers. "We are locked down for the night and the *Ghost* has point. Sleep well."

Marc's call sent calm through the camp, allowing another group of concerned citizens to go to bed. As the minutes passed, the areas slowly emptied of people.

Marc appeared in the entrance to the medical bay, scanning the patients. Daryl had been released with Cynthia at

his side, but everyone else was still here, observing in concern. Except for Missy, who was still sleeping. The doctor had said she would be fine once the drugs wore off. “All set?”

“I want her here in the middle.” The doctor pointed, tone arrogant.

Marc swept the rocky, dim cavern they’d tried hard to make sterile and pointed to the rear corner. “She goes over there, so *you’re* between her and the door.”

The doctor flushed as the other medical personnel went to prep the spot.

“Should we...” Greg hesitated, then pushed on reluctantly. “Should we tell them about Adrian?”

Marc moved aside for a pair of Eagles who had obviously been sent to ensure it was clear. “No one will bother him yet.”

Greg wasn’t so positive. He went to provide an escort, thinking Marc should have gone. What Greg didn’t understand, was why Marc wasn’t bringing her down. What the hell had happened up on that cliff? Inside, Greg felt a little resentful toward Quinn, who was still unconscious. If Quinn had been with his new team, where he belonged, Greg would have been with Angela.

Outside the cave, the snowflakes grew thicker and the wind beat down on the mountain as if it were trying to crumble it. The people below barely noticed. Except for the occasional cold draft, they couldn’t even hear the wind. The only noise inside the cave, once below the first level, was the same creaking and groaning of the stone that they’d already been slowly adjusting to. All the fans and generators were providing a cushion of static noise.

Marc waited silently with everyone else, gut a tight ball. It was impossible to describe the emotions he was holding in check. Angela disappearing, being shot, losing the baby—it had all happened so fast! He had no idea how he was supposed to help her through this. *But Adrian would.*

Angela would need help, but Marc had his own grief and regrets. He still wasn't certain who was responsible, but until he was, he had to stay back and keep digging. Some of it might be cleared up when Theo finally got the full story.

Marc felt Angela scan the cave, but she didn't linger on him. She was scared and searching for danger. She didn't trust any of them now.

*Not fair!* he cried silently, but didn't push it at her. She'd lost the baby. She'd almost been killed—again—and he'd barely known she was missing before it was all over. Her caution was understandable.

*So is his.* Marc could feel Adrian's forceful scan going through each crack and crevice. He had been sent away and she'd still been hurt. For Marc, that part of all this was humiliating. It kept him from ejecting the bastard from their sanctuary. *I screwed up somehow.*

"I think I have most of the story now." Theo hobbled from the partitioned cot on his new cane.

Hilda hurried forward to put an arm around his waist so he didn't fall. The sweat on Theo's forehead said the pain pills weren't strong enough for what he was currently putting himself through by dragging his dead leg around so soon.

"Wait for Angie," Marc ordered tonelessly.

Theo sank down into a chair gratefully, glad of a few minutes to catch his breath and organize his thoughts. The

entire story had been a shock for him, as had the attraction he now felt for Debra. Despite Jennifer's prediction, Theo hadn't believed it would be instant, but after getting half hard even while she stank, he was convinced. Debra was his foretold mate. She'd saved the boss, so she would be welcomed by the camp and the Eagles once the story got around. All he had to do was accept that his bachelor days were over. And then convince her of it, of course. He didn't expect that to be an easy feat. She'd been alone for a long time. Even now, he could feel her nervousness at all the people between her and an escape tunnel.

Silence fell from the few people still waiting for word outside the medical bay and then Adrian appeared, carrying Angela carefully through the wide opening. He lifted a brow at Marc, who pointed.

Adrian waited for the doctor to finish with the sheet, then gently placed Angela on the cot.

"Is this the best you've got?" He glared at the doctor as he straightened. "This is your leader. Have some respect!"

Marc didn't say anything. Adrian would make sure Angela was treated the way she deserved.

Before the doctor could protest, Adrian glanced at Marc again. "What do you want?"

"Handle it like I would," Marc answered without betraying his boiling keg.

"Thank you."

"You're not the least bit welcome!" Marc hated it that Adrian was getting the time with her, even as he used the man to avoid this ugly chore.

Adrian lowered his eyes, only caring that he was inside Safe Haven. He knew it might only be for a day or two, long enough for the storm to finish clearing, but he was savoring every second. The cave was littered with lines and cords that went to repeaters, antennas, and narrow pipes that ran the length of every room, distributing water or venting air. It was amazing for less than three weeks.

Marc didn't begrudge the former leader his awe of what they'd accomplished. It was the inevitable bonding with Angela that Marc resented.

"I have a list." Adrian wasn't sure how far he could push the small authority he now had.

"Your guards will handle it." Greg motioned to Jax and Shawn, who had volunteered when he returned. "Come daylight, Neil and Jennifer will relieve them."

"Perfect," Adrian praised without meaning to. Before Greg could spew the thoughts that came to mind, Adrian got busy. "She needs a better bed, sheets without dust on them, a female assistant to help her wash..."

Adrian went on for a long moment, where Theo waited for the attention to swing his way. He was as ready as he could be.

"Get it over with," Angela croaked groggily. "I'll try to keep up."

The Eagles started to rush over to her side.

Adrian glowered at them. "Get back!"

"She's been stalking Angela since she got here," Theo spoke up before a fight could happen. "Tara, I mean."

People settled down for his story instead of the violence, and Theo continued. "The woman, our cave ghost, is Debra. She's been hiding here since before the war. She was a

runaway. When we came, she stayed in the bottom tunnels. She knows them well. It let her remain hidden, but she's deaf. She couldn't hear herself moaning. She didn't even know we'd heard her. She thought Missy was the only one who had spotted her following Angela."

Theo's words held the room spellbound as everyone picked out the details that mattered most to each of them. For Marc, it was personal. For the Eagles it was their honor, as in what had they missed. For Adrian, it was awe at how Angela had handled everything.

"Debra saw Angela when she came down to assign rooms. She knew Angela was the boss. She spotted Tara following Angela whenever they were down here together. She said Tara used her powers to keep her guards unaware. She was almost able to hurt Angela several times, but she was always interrupted by something. Debra was too scared to come out and tell anyone, so she followed Angela around too, to be certain Tara couldn't get another chance. That's when Tara finally signed up for the Eagles. Debra thinks she wanted access to a gun, like Jayson got for helping us that day at the gate."

Adrian frowned. "Jayson?"

"Devine," Angela clarified, still a layer below full alertness. "Son."

"Jay?"

"Yes." Theo scowled deeply. "He joined us under the name Jayson. He's the man who was with Kenn. You saved him."

Adrian winced. "I'm sorry. I'd never met the son."

“His gift is like his father’s and Tara’s—his mother.” Theo grimaced as pain shot through his hip. For being paralyzed, it sure hurt a lot. “Jayson forced people to gather things, to sign his gun permit, to allow him access to the areas that even Eagles don’t go into without permission. He’s even been in the communication cubby. He took cover there during one of the tremors. He and Tara were supposed to take Angela up to Vlad, but Jayson changed his mind and wanted to kill her on the spot. Debra attacked Jayson and he shot her. Tara used her gift on him, to make him take the blame.”

“Her own son?” Shawn was horrified that he’d slept with someone so evil, that he’d allowed himself to be blinded by her.

“Yes. She was evil. Tara grabbed Missy right after the war and forced the girl to pretend she was her daughter while they infiltrated surviving groups.” Theo glanced at Marc. “Debra said Angela wasn’t under Tara’s power when they went into the bottom tunnel together. Tara just thought she was. That’s all Debra has. It took a while to sign it all out.”

The only one who could tell them the rest of it was Angela. Attention turned her way, not positive she was able to. She was barely even conscious.

“Unless Marc has something, the rest can wait.” Adrian took a seat on the paneled floor by her cot.

Angela’s lids closed in relief.

Marc left the room without glancing at Angela. She didn’t want to do this now and that was enough for him. He had most of the information he needed. Tara and Jayson had tried to kill her repeatedly, and he’d been blissfully unaware. It was hard to swallow.

The Eagles slowly cleared the room, casting confused, leery glances at Adrian. His guards called for the things Angela needed, but they didn't leave.

Adrian didn't care. Angela was alive, he was at her side, and the herd was safe for the moment. The rest was trivial in comparison. He leaned against the rough stone as the room finished clearing. Soon, it was only the medical team remaining and they stayed busy with all the injuries that had come in.

Adrian looked down, loathing her defeated, sickly pallor. He could feel her trying to remain awake. "Just sleep for a while, baby. Sleep."

Angela took the advice gratefully. She would rather feel nothing at all than face what was waiting. She shut her eyes, fingers reaching out.

Adrian clasped her hand joyfully, lending his warmth, his hope. He didn't speak the meaningless words that she wasn't ready to hear. He just held her hand; they both gradually fell asleep.

## 7

The next time Adrian opened his eyes, Charlie was sitting across from him in the dim, quiet cavern, glaring hatefully.

Adrian sighed, relishing the feel of Angela's warm fingers curled around his. "Not now, okay? Wait until it won't wake her up."

Charlie nodded curtly. His mom being hurt again was an open wound. He hadn't spoken to her in weeks. Finding

Adrian here had been a shock. Being told his dad was okay with it had been another.

“I wouldn’t say he’s okay with it.”

“Good!” Charlie started to rant, and then caught himself like he’d been trying hard to do at all times. He snapped his mouth shut, glaring.

“Very good,” Adrian praised, goading.

Charlie didn’t rise to the bait, making Adrian grin. “I mean it. You’ve done a lot of growing up since joining Safe Haven.”

The good feeling of respect from Adrian was still just as powerful, but Charlie managed to keep his expression the same by sheer will. He didn’t want Adrian’s respect. He wanted the man gone.

Adrian swept Angela, no longer required to hide his adoration. She was the same—pale and still—and he scanned the bay, wondering where his guards were.

“I gave them a break.”

Adrian approved of the boy tracking his thoughts, but didn’t say so. He wasn’t here to make friends.

“Why are you here?” Charlie asked without some of the hatred that he’d meant to put in his tone. It was clear Adrian loved his mom.

“She’ll need me to help her through this.” Adrian sighed. “When she wants it, I’ll leave. My word.”

“Your word—”

“Means shit. Yeah, I know,” Adrian finished bitterly. “Do us all a favor and grow up some more. Think of your mom.”

Charlie pointed to the bed and gear that had been brought in. “I was. It’s ready for her.”

Adrian immediately got up.

Charlie helped him transfer Angela's limp body to the softer, thicker bed, thinking he wasn't certain he even remembered what it felt like to sleep on a real mattress.

"Me either." Adrian tried to break the tension as they covered her up and moved the other cot over. "I dream about using air valves to blow things up."

"Lung power," Charlie responded against his will.

Adrian chuckled lightly. "Indeed."

"I heard you helped Peggy. Doug wanted me to thank you." Charlie gave more information reluctantly. "He's busy helping guard the living area right now. My dad wants monitors on all entrances."

"It's a good idea. Tell Doug it wasn't my doing. Peggy insisted."

"Conner helped Samantha? Because Neil and Jeremy want to talk to you about it."

"Again, she insisted."

"You'll talk with them?"

"Tomorrow, if they still want it."

"Why wouldn't they? Conner cured her."

"It isn't about Conner. They want to make sure I understand I haven't been forgiven, that I'm still banished. It can wait."

"That's what my dad told them. There are a few people who want to yell at you."

"I'll let them. Tomorrow, Tonight, I deserve the first good night's sleep I've had in a month."

"Because you're finally inside our gates?"

Adrian crawled into the cot they'd moved Angela from, inhaling deeply of her scent. "No."

Charlie figured it out, frowning, but he didn't scold Adrian further. He was feeling extremely guilty about the way he'd been treating his mom when she'd had so much going on. He hadn't known people were still trying to kill her. Tracy had told him to cut Angela some slack, but he hadn't been able to because of his anger. Mad at her or not, she was his mom and Safe Haven's leader. He should have been able to keep her from getting hurt.

"Wow." Adrian was impressed. "You *have* grown up."

Charlie suddenly felt drained of anger. "I'm trying. It sucks."

"That it does, my former friend. That it does,"

Charlie winced at the title, not correcting him. The anger at Adrian was still there, but sympathy had also taken up a place against his will. The man was head over heels for his mom, but she only had eyes for his dad. That had to be rough.

"Thank you." Adrian grunted coolly. "I'm gonna cry any minute now."

Charlie scowled, understanding Adrian was trying to maintain a distance between himself and everyone except Angela. "Fine."

"It's better this way, boy." Adrian let his eyes close as his hand reached out to make contact with Angela. "I'd disappoint you again and neither of us can take that. Worship your dad. He's the saint. I'm the bad guy your mom scared you with as a child."

Charlie now had his doubts, but the anger still sent him to the bay door that was propped open. "I'm done. Get in here with him."

Adrian chuckled as Jax and Shawn came in, looking as bad tempered as Charlie had as he left. It was amazingly easy to get under the skin of young people.

“I’ve missed that sound.”

Angela had woken while they moved her, but she was in no condition to deal with her rebellious son. In fact, his presence reminded her of what she’d lost. She was glad Adrian had angered him enough to get him to leave.

“I knew you needed more time. It was intentional.”

“Like everything else,” she confirmed without malice.

Her lashes fluttered, but Adrian quickly put a hand over hers. “Don’t. Not yet.”

Angela wanted to be strong, but the misery waiting was easy to put off. “You’ll stay?”

“You know it,” he answered immediately, sitting up as his guards scowled. “What can I do for you?”

Angela slowly held up her fingers. Her arms were too bound to try moving them. “Hold me? I’m alone in here.”

Adrian didn’t try to stop his tears as he carefully moved her over and climbed into the bed to hold her. She didn’t cry or speak. Adrian rubbed her dirty hair, wishing she would go back to sleep. She wasn’t ready for this yet.

Angela finally let her head fall against his chest. His scent drifted to her nose and she felt nothing. Numb might be her existence now. She wouldn’t be certain until she faced the waiting pain. Once the tears and self-recriminations stopped, she might curl into herself and wither away. *At least I have that to look forward to*, she thought, meaning it. The agony from this would follow her forever, worse than the first

miscarriage had. That tragedy hadn't been her fault. This one was.

Angela's tears began to soak into Adrian's shirt. He stroked her hair, crooning nonsense that he knew wasn't going to help. There was nothing else you could do for someone who had lost something so dear. All he could do was hold her and try to make sure she didn't sink into oblivion without a fight.

## 8

Once Angela stopped crying and fell asleep, Adrian slowly dislodged himself and got up. The last thing he needed was for—

Adrian sighed, spotting Marc leaning against the tunnel wall, watching with glowing red eyes.

Marc didn't speak. He wasn't positive that he could. The sight of them in a bed together was one he would never forget.

Shawn and Jax were behind Marc, not wanting to be in the line of fire if the man decided to snap. They'd both seen the mess in the tunnel below.

"She was upset." Adrian didn't move. "You can still see the tears."

Marc had been here for almost the entire scene. He didn't respond.

Adrian finally dropped down onto his cot and stretched out. "It could have been anyone. She didn't know the difference."

"When I return," Marc began, voice full of alpha that he was barely controlling. "I'll either accept things the way she needs them or I'll kill you and be done with it. If I go the way

I feel right now, she won't be able to stop me. I'll pick you off the first time you leave her side."

"I respect you for warning me." Adrian knew not to get his hopes up. "But I don't want your side and I don't want to be *with* her anymore. Not in the way you mean. I'm here to serve. You fuck her. I'll love her."

Marc growled, coming forward.

It woke Angela. "Marc?"

Marc stopped. He wanted to go to her, but the hours of Adrian's words ringing in his mind were too much to handle. He wasn't sure how he felt about everything yet. "There was a call. I need to make a run."

"From Jeff and Kevin?"

Angela sounded alert enough to make Adrian glare at her for faking sleep to listen to them. He should have known she would wake the instant he moved. After what she'd just been through, it should have surprised him if she hadn't.

"Yes." Marc stayed where he was. "They saw a line of trains coming. You were right."

"You'll use the notebook?" Her heart was breaking all over again at his remote responses. It should be Marc helping her, not Adrian.

"Yes. It's perfect." Marc spun away. "But you already knew that. You know everything."

Angela's sobs stopped Marc; he slowly turned around. "Did you know you were trading our baby for Safe Haven?"

"Hey!" Adrian shoved to his feet. "Don't do this!"

Angela froze, smothered in grief and shock. Marc thought she'd known the baby would die. He thought she was cold enough to do that.

“You’re not,” Adrian told her. He swung back toward Marc. “Tell her you don’t think that!”

“I don’t know what to think,” Marc answered honestly.

“She wouldn’t do that.” Adrian glared. “Deep down, you know it. She wanted the baby more than she wants you!”

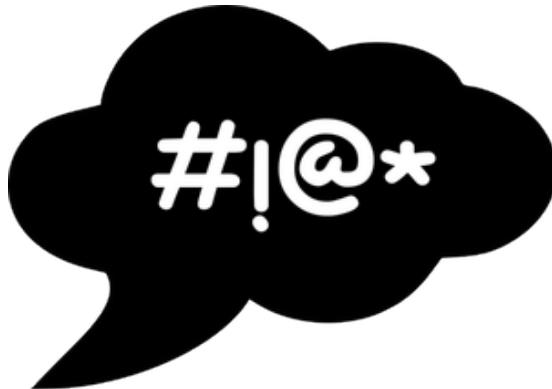
“What about you?” Marc’s red eyes glowed. “Did she want it more than you? Because this will get you let back in. Maybe she chose you and Safe Haven over our child.”

Angela tried to talk through her sobs, but the words wouldn’t form. Instead of continuing to try, she let the coldness rush over her limbs and stopped fighting the pain. “I wish you had let me die.”

The words haunted Marc all the way through the cave and out into the cold dawn where he tried to be certain he was right to feel such anger toward her. He had all the notebooks in his kit. He planned to read them and run it through his mind as he dealt with the last of Tara’s people. If he could believe Angela hadn’t knowingly sacrificed their daughter, he would try to sort through the rest of it. If he still thought she was guilty when this run was finished, they would be done. She could go to her bastard traitor and find happiness while he mourned the life they could have had together. Eventually, he would kill them both and be hung. Some things were indeed carved in stone.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

# Close



1

“He shouldn’t be here!”

“He saved her life. Again!”

“That doesn’t give him a pass.”

“I agree. He can’t be trusted.”

“Marc let him stay.”

“He was already in the bed with her! One of his guards told me!”

“So? Neil and Jeremy have that set up, as do a few others.”

“It’s wrong!”

“It would solve the drama problem we have, in case you hadn’t thought about it. We can use both men.”

“We don’t need anything from that traitor.”

All three of the loud men glowered at Adrian as he came through the acoustical tunnel and moved toward the mess line, even the one who had been defending him. He was followed by two sullen guards who had just switched shifts for the morning. Neil and Jennifer were both unhappy to have Adrian in their sight and not be able to shoot him. They both knew what Marc and Angela needed.

Adrian got into the mess line; too busy admiring the setup to care about the mutters and whispers or the pointing fingers of surprised members. Angela needed a tray and he needed to be out of the room while Hilda, Peggy, and the doctor performed an exam. They'd mentioned words like scraping and DNC, and he'd gotten out of there, glad that Angela had told him to. He would have stayed if she needed him, but Samantha had shown up and taken Angela's hand in support.

Li Sing's face pinched up when Adrian told him he was there for Angela's tray.

"I did not hear the routine had changed. Only I give her tray or men on my list." The little man glared. "You no more on my list!"

"Li." Adrian only needed to say the man's name for the spell to break.

"Fine." Li shoved the plate at him. "You better not hurt her this time. Li put kuso in your pie."

Adrian was startled into a chuckle, thinking of a movie that had employed that type of warfare.

Li smacked a mug of tea onto the thick counter that he was still marveling over. It had been nine long months since he'd had a true surface to serve people from. "Go away. You bad for business." The cook jerked a hand toward the exit.

Li couldn't allow people to think he was sympathetic, but Adrian knew the man was. He'd always had Li's loyalty for treating him and his family as equals. In Adrian's heart, they were. Being a descendant gave people a disadvantage, as far as he was concerned. People were forever blaming you, thinking you could control fate.

Adrian went back the way he'd come, being careful not to trigger any of the angrier people who had stopped eating to glower or mutter in shock. He had expected to have to fight his way through some of the camp, but he now had the feeling that those persons were waiting for a chance alone with him so they could spew and swing uncensored.

"I need to make a brief stop," Adrian informed his sentries.

Assuming he meant the bathroom, the two Eagles didn't protest.

Adrian followed the signs to the medical bay, but stopped before he reached it. He set Angela's food on a small rock outcrop and rapped on the billboard by the entrance to the next cavern. He read the names of the men on duty for this level while he waited.

Kenn came out, frowning when he saw who it was.  
"What?"

"Any news on my men?" Adrian saw the ingenious high-powered communications center that was using a cell tower battery.

Kenn shook his head, tone uninviting. "We haven't sent a team yet. The winds got bad again. Even Marc is still waiting to leave."

Adrian had thought Marc was already gone and he nodded his thanks. He was positive that being around the communications area wouldn't be accepted.

"Hey, have you heard from Kindle?" Kenn asked suddenly. "Some of the camp's been asking."

"They're halfway to their destination," Adrian answered. "Conner sent me a message last night."

Kenn didn't say more and neither did Adrian, but their expressions spoke volumes. Adrian had missed Kenn being there for him. Kenn was still stinging over the betrayal.

Adrian retrieved Angela's tray, hoping enough time had passed for her exam to be over.

Samantha came through the tunnel ahead of him, approving when she saw his hands were full. "Good. Now get in there and pull your weight or we'll toss your ass out as soon as Marc leaves."

Adrian let it slide. He had disappointed and hurt a lot of people. He deserved every insult or threat they felt like throwing. "I will."

Samantha gave a hard glare, but Adrian was already by her and didn't witness it. Samantha stuck out her tongue for lack of a better, legal alternative.

Neil and Jennifer both grinned. They knew exactly how she felt.

Adrian noticed the somber mood as soon as he set the tray and cup by her. Angela was asleep again, but the tears on her cheeks were still glistening. "What is it?"

Peggy still couldn't speak to Adrian; she stormed from the medical bay. Hilda followed her, muttering. Even the doctor couldn't bring himself to say it again.

Adrian turned to Theo, whose cot was nearby.

Theo sighed heavily, staring at Angela's pale profile. "Vlad punched her. It did a lot of damage. She can't get pregnant again."

Adrian's stomach dropped. She had to feel like the world ended again.

"It gets worse." Theo hoped Angela would sleep for a while. Her sobs had been awful to hear. "She's bleeding, on the inside. She needs surgery."

Adrian understood Samantha's hidden meaning now and grunted. "Leave us."

The doctor didn't need to be told twice. The others thought Adrian would be able to help her, but the doctor didn't care at this point. He'd been up for almost 36-hours. He had to sleep.

Theo closed the divider, letting himself relax. Adrian was a bastard, but he loved Angela. If there were anything that could be done, he and Marc would handle it.

*I need you.*

Marc appeared in the dim cavern a minute later. He obviously hadn't been far. His expression was grim, telling Adrian he suspected Angela's condition.

Marc read it from Adrian's mind, grunting his agreement as he took the place on the opposite side of her bed. Her pale face and all the bandages sent fresh waves of guilt through Marc. He should have been here when she got the news. "She needs to stay out for a while." Marc was still reading Adrian's thoughts. Upset and confused, Marc loathed Angela's misery. He hadn't realized how badly she was injured.

"Would it have mattered?" Adrian tried to pull energy he didn't have yet.

“I don’t know.” Marc gently took Angela’s hand in his, aware that he was being cold, but unable to help it. The guilt was crushing. He didn’t know any other way to handle it.

Adrian strained, trying to open the doors to zones that were forbidden. “If you can’t accept it, let her go. Don’t make her feel worse with your doubts and silent accusations.”

“I don’t just blame her.” Marc shoved into Adrian’s mind to help pry open the forbidden door that held Adrian’s captured lifeforces. It contained too many to count, Marc was certain. “I blame *you* for bringing her into this.”

Used to Marc’s hatred, Adrian didn’t respond to the jab. “She’s an amazing woman. Get over yourself and be here for her.”

Marc yanked on the door angrily in response and it swung open, mentally knocking him to the ground as power swarmed out.

Adrian directed the stream toward Angela, taking her other hand. Her body lit up with brilliant colors of every shade as the men concentrated.

The souls screamed as they were forced into a new holding cell to be used as their host deemed fit. Marc winced, while Adrian rejoiced at their use. Very few of the captured essences had been innocent. He’d only chosen to use one that was for Peggy so she would understand the horrible favor she’d begged of him.

Adrian let go first, slumping to his knees. His heart thumped wildly in his chest, squeezing. He couldn’t do that again, for any reason, or it would all be over for him.

Marc sighed as the last of the force rushed through him and into Angela. He staggered backwards and dropped into the

nearest chair, watching Adrian clutch his chest. “You gonna die now?”

“Maybe.” Adrian forced out words through the odd thumping, the tightening muscles that made it hard to breathe. “You?”

“Good as gold,” Marc retorted, not wanting to feel any sympathy for his rival.

“Yeah, that’s you.” Adrian tried to control his ragged breathing as the pain receded. “Last fucking boy scout.”

Marc grinned. The lights were still swarming over and throughout Angela. His smile faded. *How do we go on from this?*

“Put her first.”

“I’ve always done that!” Marc snapped, but it held no heat. He was too tired.

“No. You’ve tolerated, followed orders, and killed for her. That’s not the same.”

“I’ve given everything I have. Everything she demanded. It’s never been enough.”

Adrian had a hundred insults he could have tossed. Instead, he chose sarcasm. “Yes, I’m sure it’s rough, being her soul mate, the only man she ever loved. Hard life.” Adrian leaned his head on the mattress as Marc prepared to fire back. “Maybe you’re right. You’re not man enough for her. You can’t keep up and she knows it for certain now.”

Marc lunged from the chair and left the cavern before they were brawling over Angela’s body.

Adrian didn’t move. He wasn’t confident that he could.

“You shouldn’t push so hard.”

Adrian’s hand found hers, clasping it loosely. “I’m sorry.”

“The bleeding stopped. I can feel it.”

Adrian didn’t ask about the other repairs, content that she would survive. Even dark magic could only do so much. There was a limit to everything.

Angela allowed the darkness to reclaim her, comforted that Marc had been here at all. *I need him so much!*

Adrian caught that thought, but he didn’t have the energy to send it to the man. He drifted off still slumped on the rocky floor with his head on the mattress.

## 2

“I need a complete update.” Marc had waited a few hours, then brought leadership topside for this meeting to be sure they had privacy. The lower level men and rookies were currently flexing their muscle below, but carefully. No one wanted to lose that authority so soon. “She left me her notebooks, so I already know, but you’re going to tell me anyway. No more secrets!”

Relief went through the drafty tent; the two dozen men and women got out their own books.

Marc was a bit surprised by the reaction. They all had something to contribute. How had he missed so much? *I thought I was doing well.* “We’ll go from back to front.” Marc took out a fresh notebook.

The tent flap opened, admitting Adrian. He quickly zipped it up as the meeting exploded in shouts.

“Get lost!”

“Shoot him!”

“You’re not leadership!”

Adrian held out a brown envelope, effectively silencing the noise, but not the hatred. “She sent me. I didn’t want to come.”

“Good!” Zack was furious all over again. “We don’t want you here!”

“Your boss does,” Adrian replied tiredly. “Tell her.”

Adrian’s lack of fight stopped Zack’s next words. He snatched the dreaded envelope that had caused everyone else to fall silent.

When Zack brought it up, Marc quickly ripped it open. He wanted this over. “He’s going to take notes. He won’t speak unless spoken to.” Marc let the paper fall to the cold table, sitting down as the rest of leadership protested. Adrian’s freshly rotated guards being outside the flap, in the cold, made them all even angrier.

“Send them down.” Kenn waved. “Someone from this meeting will escort him.”

Adrian nodded in approval.

“Not me, you asshole!” Kenn snapped as he noticed the response. “I don’t want anything to do with you.”

Adrian lowered his head and took a seat in the far corner as Kyle told the two men to take a break. He made sure Marc would have a hard time seeing him through the small crowd. He wasn’t trying to hide. He was trying to be considerate.

*If you were considerate, you’d blow your brains out in front of MY army!*

“I told her this was a bad idea,” Adrian stated stiffly, flushing. “She insisted. I’ll gladly go, right now. Just say the word.”

Marc shut his eyes, fighting for control of the tiger. He was almost at his limit for all of this. “Doctor, you first.”

“Finally! I do require sleep, you know.” The man stood up, reading from his book. “We have nine patients. I examined all of them myself. They’ll survive. Some of the wounds are serious and they’ll need recovery time, but even Angela’s prognosis is now positive.”

The doctor wasn’t being as hateful toward Angela as usual. He looked at Marc.

Marc shook his head. He didn’t want more details than that. “Is there anything you need down there? A list of things, maybe?”

“I’m still putting that together. It’s been a busy few days in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Marc’s tone grew colder. “You can go.”

The doctor stood up. “As soon as I tell you one thing, ‘Mr. I’m the leader’ now. If you leave without seeing her first, I’ll call for a leadership vote. The way people are feeling right now, *anyone* could be elected.”

The doctor stormed out of the chilly tent as attention swung to Adrian.

“He’s optimistic,” Adrian muttered. “I’d be hung long before the vote.”

“Yes, you would.” Marc moved on. “Jennifer?”

“Our team, along with *the help*, has been clearing a path out of these mountains. We’ve also done some scavenging. The crates are in Angela’s private semi.”

“How far have you gotten?” Marc noted the route on the map Angela had included in the notebook.

“Five miles.”

*Seven*, Adrian sent silently.

Jennifer glared at Adrian. “Make that seven miles. *The help* kept working during the beginning of the storm.”

“Don’t do that!” Marc shouted. “No more secrets!”

“I have information,” Adrian responded calmly. “I have no idea how you want me to do this.”

Marc violently scratched the next item off his list. “Seven miles. Anything you need to tell me or need from me?”

“I’d like to second the doctor’s parting request,” Jennifer tried to joke. “Don’t go without talking to her. She needs you so much more than she does some *outsider*.”

Marc controlled his rage. “Duly noted.”

Jennifer gave Kyle a warm look as she left. She flashed Adrian a glare of hatred. Jennifer still felt he should have been executed for his betrayal. Escorting him around like a privileged rat was enough to make her blood boil.

Marc skipped Cynthia, who was only here to take notes for her next edition. The newspaper was already extremely popular because of her accusing tones. It said she was on the inside and still watching out for them. People liked that. “Zack?”

Zack cleared his throat. “The front gate is an entire loss. We have guards posted again now that the storm has let up, and the snipers are doubled. I think we should keep telling everyone we’re closed to refugees until we get the gate repaired—at least a week.”

“Anything I need to know? Anything you need to get it done?”

“I think we have everything we need, except for plans. The engineering crew is working on it. Ozzie has that information.

I do need to tell you that the camp is unhappy you let Adrian in here without a vote. You'll need to give them something on that to finish calming them down. Otherwise, people are relieved the avalanche took the bad guys this time instead of us."

"Let me know if that changes. You're going to take over topside point now?"

"Yes."

Marc marked it off his list. "I'll stop by in a bit."

Zack left.

Marc looked at Dexter. "How are things below?"

Daryl had been assigned to point in the caves. Dexter had been doing a good job as his right hand.

"Running smoothly, considering all the action. We have the Keeper in the brig down there, with double patrols, and two guards are following our traitor. No crime reports during the chaos and all members are accounted for."

"Consumption numbers yet?" Marc was reading from Angela's notes now.

"In the next couple days. She said we have to send out the food crews the second the storm clears."

"You've talked to her?" Neil hadn't known Angela was awake. Sam hadn't mentioned it.

"She told me before she was taken. We assigned people." Dexter shrugged. "They'll need a day to prepare."

"We'll handle it." Marc grunted. "Anything else?"

Dexter didn't want to get involved in more drama, but he had certain loyalties to maintain, like everyone else here. "When is he leaving?"

Marc placed his hands palm down on the table, pinning Dexter with a harsh glower. “Do you think I want him here?”

Dexter shook his head.

“Do you think I’ll have him gone as fast as I can?”

“Yeah, sorry. I had to ask.”

“No, you didn’t. Daryl’s jealousy over Cynthia is unfounded. He hasn’t glanced *her* way in months. Tell him I said that.”

Dexter flushed, leaving the cold tent.

“Who’s next?”

Greg stood up. “I’m sorry.”

“She wasn’t assigned a shadow down there.” Marc waved it off. “She sent you out to protect the gate. You’re not in trouble.”

“Well, I feel like it! I’m so sorry.”

“I can’t absolve you from something you haven’t done,” Marc stated as kindly as he could. “Go see what she wants you doing now. I don’t have any notes on it.”

Greg’s exit was quick and quiet as the few remaining people waited for Marc to pick the next update.

“Oswald?”

Ozzie stood up, expression hurt. “What did I do to you?”

Marc grinned. “Not a damn thing, I’m happy to say. Fill me in.”

Ozzie laughed. “Cool, man. Okay. We got, like, a huge amount of damage, but not in structural places. Give us a week and we’ll have it all running again. The idiot had no idea what he was doing.”

“Good thing,” Neil muttered.

“As for the gate, we do have enough supplies, but Angela told me last week to come up with a better design and like, Jennifer helped. We drew this.” He held out a paper.

Marc gestured for him to keep it. “I have a copy here. It’s good—nice and tight. Two weeks for this one, right?”

“Yes. We’ll try our hardest to have it finished in ten days, but two weeks guarantees we will.”

“She isn’t going to close the gates for two weeks.” Kenn waved toward the buried zones. “You saw her, still taking in people even after the attacks.”

“They’re *our* people, grunt.” Adrian was unable to remain silent. “If you were out there, you’d want in too.”

“You have no authority here!” Kyle glared at Adrian. “Don’t speak unless spoken to.”

“I’ll make the design choice today,” Marc interrupted the coming argument. “Anything else? You guys need anything?”

Ozzie shrugged. “Just time, man.”

The former surfer left the tent, forgetting to zip it behind him.

Kyle glared at Adrian.

Adrian got up and zipped it with a face like stone. Angela had known he would be treated this way. She’d told him he owed it to these men to face them, and so he was, but it wasn’t easy.

“You’re up.” Marc looked at Kenn.

Kenn winced at the wording. Angela’s voice echoed in his head, reminding he’d sworn to never cross her. “She had me deliver messages, keep track of plans, and encourage people to stay quiet. Cynthia and I handled it for her during her shifts. She used Kindle sometimes during the evenings.”

Marc's profile darkened. "Kendle was part of this?"

"She carried messages, supplies. She hated it."

Marc believed that. Even though it had caused trouble, Kendle would still have loathed taking orders from Angela. The boss had been paying Kendle back after all.

"The radio is mostly quiet," Kenn continued. "We're waiting for orders there. Until then, we've gone to ground."

Marc motioned Kenn to leave. He couldn't stand to hear either of those voices right now.

"Aren't you going to ask if I need anything?" Kenn demanded. "Because I served my time and I'm legal again!"

Marc glowered at Kenn, sending the thought none of them needed to hear to know. *You shouldn't be.*

Kenn flushed and spun for the flap. "I hope you don't go down and talk to her before you go. That'll seal it up for her and then we won't have to put up with your shit anymore. She's the power here. It's certainly not you!"

The words filled the tent with awkward silence as Kenn left.

Adrian zipped them up this time without the glare.

Marc read the last few notes, and then looked at Cynthia. "You should go now. Anything I need to know?"

The reporter had already been gathering her papers. "I want to go with you."

"For yourself or for the paper?"

"Both." She didn't elaborate.

"I'll let you know." Marc marked it off his list. Of course, he would let her come along. She was carrying a child that Angela had deemed too evil to be born. Cynthia had more rage than he did and they both had a perfect target for it.

“I agree with Kenn, by the way.” Cynthia went to the flap. “Angela was much nicer before you two became a legal couple. You’re not good for her. Let her go so we can all have peace again.” Leaving them shocked, Cynthia exited, zipping the flap.

“What the hell?” Neil spun around to face Marc. “This whole camp has flipped!”

“Stop,” Adrian advised. “He’s hanging onto his control by a thread. Finish this so he can do what he needs to.”

Neil glanced up to find Marc’s eyes burning with a hot fire that even sex couldn’t extinguish. Neil had never seen his friend so furious.

“Do either of you need to tell me anything?” Marc was able to force out past the fury. He agreed with Neil. Everyone had gone insane.

Neil stood up quickly, swallowing his rant. “The trains have stopped. We assume the storm slowed them down.”

“How far away?”

“Two days at the speed they were going, but they could reach the station right down the mountain in a few hours if they roll faster. Train is a point A to point B type of travel.”

“Anything else?”

“Not from me.” Neil headed for the flap.

“Stay?”

“Sure.” Neil obediently sat back down, expression curious.

Marc looked at Kyle.

“We killed roughly three dozen refugees that survived the avalanche. The bodies were put outside the gate, but the ants didn’t come out of their cave for them. At last sighting, the

majority of the colony was wiped out in the tunnel collapse. We're considering them threats again."

"They are." It had been a big surprise when Angela had adopted them, but he now realized that too had been a ruse. Angela had used the big animals to keep smaller predators away from them, and once here, she'd used them to dispose of corpses and scare the first waves of refugees to buy time. She'd planned it all.

"Not everything." Adrian refused to let it go when Marc's thoughts went to the baby. "She wouldn't have made *that* choice."

Marc stood up, ignoring Adrian. "I'm taking two teams with me to handle the rest of Tara's people. I can pick or you two can volunteer."

Neil and Kyle exchanged grins.

"We were hoping you'd say that." Kyle started to turn to those pages in his book. "We've been working on some ideas since we found out."

"I'll listen to them on the way." Marc checked his watch. "I'd like to go soon. How long?"

Neil and Kyle compared. "An hour or two?"

"I'll meet you at the rear gate. Her notes said you two have been in charge of loading what's in her private semi. I'd like to know the inventory."

"Presents," Adrian stated when neither of the Eagles could answer. They'd been told not to look and they hadn't. "Gifts for her people for the Christmas she isn't sure we'll get to enjoy. She has hope for everyone." Adrian knew the meeting was over for him with those words and left without being told. Angela had taken over his place and done a better job than

he'd predicted. The men in that tent owed her more than they would ever admit.

Adrian stopped as he noticed Zack running toward the canvas shelter he'd just left. He stayed by the flap as Zack went to Marc, certain Angela would want to know whatever it was that had Zack so excited.

"We have company at the rear gate," Zack wheezed out. He'd run all the way through the cold and snow. "Indians. Natoli."

Marc and Kyle exchanged dismayed looks. If Natoli had returned so soon, it only meant one thing.

"The Mexicans." Neil stared in horror. "Cesar and Sebastian's people!"

"I hate to add bad news." Jeremy came into the tent behind Zack. "But I have movement on the radar and it's not the trains. There's a swarm of heat coming from the northeast. I have no idea what it is, but it'll be here in a few days at the rate its traveling."

"Seth and Becky are back with a truck of crates and bags," Tonya's voice came over the radio.

Marc held up the notebook for the men to view, heart thumping as the prediction he'd read fifteen minutes ago was proven.

*It comes in threes, but with Seth, is salvation. Get to those crates.*

All of them fled toward the rear of the snow covered camp. Except Adrian.

*Do you need me?* Marc asked for the final time.

For a long moment, there was only her pain.

*Do you still feel the same?*

Marc didn't know what he felt. It was too much to process all at once.

*I didn't trade the baby. I didn't know.*

Marc winced, wanting to believe her. He felt Angela's misery increase, hurting emotions reaching out for comfort that he couldn't give.

*Fine! As long as you believe that, no. I don't need you.*

Marc now had his excuse to walk through the gate without facing her. He knew it to be the coward's way, even without all the opinions he'd heard on the subject, but those people had no idea how this felt. He hadn't respected Angela's evil side. After the battle with the government, he should have, but in the back of his mind, it was still the witch and Adrian controlling things.

Marc spotted Adrian going toward the destroyed front gate, a kit over his shoulder, and then the sound of clapping and cheering came. Angela had sent him away, back to his banishment. *Does that matter to me?*

Marc studied the fully loaded vehicles and the snowplow they hoped would clear the road. Two dozen men glowered at him as he came their way. "I need a minute. Save the fuel."

Engines were happily shut off as Marc put his gear inside the lead truck and headed for the cave. Adrian being evicted from her side worried him. He'd felt okay about leaving her alone because he'd assumed Adrian would be there.

The cold air he'd been treated with vanished as Marc came back into the cave, going to the medical bay. He passed Charlie and Tracy, arm-in-arm and smiling.

"Wise choice." Tracy let Charlie lead her to the living quarters, happy with the days in the cave due to the storm. She'd had a little time to think things through and she was feeling better now. Not good and certainly not safe, but better was a step in the right direction.

"...for that filthy whore? You're kidding, right?"

Candy's voice echoed throughout this level of the cave.

Marc hurried in, growling.

Candy backed up against the rocky wall as Marc marched over to her. "Sorry!"

Marc waved her out, and then everyone else. The bay was crowded with people who wanted to speak with the boss now that she was mostly out of danger. Marc didn't look at her until they were alone.

Angela was still numb. It was terrifying to be this cold and have no one to lean on. She'd sent Adrian away and faked calmness for those who visited, but inside, she was icy. Marc thought she'd traded their daughter. She'd lost the baby and her mate. Her head dropped as tears slipped out. Even while crying, she felt nothing but cold.

The medical team that wasn't needed also exited the area, leaving the couple alone.

Marc sat down in the chair by her bed, studying her bandages and bruises, the frostbitten fingers and cheeks. She was forever being hurt for these people or for one of her goals. He would never be okay with that, but this time, her choices had cost them a child.

“Yes.” Angela tried to stop crying in front of him. She didn’t want him to think she was on a guilt trip. She forced herself to swallow the pain and be strong. He didn’t deserve this. She did.

Marc couldn’t deny the truth as he read her thoughts, her agony at overlooking the small details that would have told her she’d calculated the time wrong. What he didn’t find, was regret for not telling him.

“I have one question.”

“Shoot.” Angela knew what it was. If he asked, then everything would change.

“*Would* you have traded our daughter for our country? Or Charlie?”

Her heart broke. He honestly thought she was brutal enough now to trade kids off as if they didn’t mean anything to her. Nothing would ever be the same between them again.

“Angie?”

Angela knew he expected her to say that one child was a small price to pay for the future of their country, but it hadn’t been one life and she loved her children. *How can he not know that?* “No. That’s why she was taken. Fate knows if I ever have to make that choice, they’ll come first. My kids will always be a target. I’ve sentenced them to this.”

Marc felt his anger finally fading. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

Angela didn’t answer.

“Why did you do all this alone? Was it because of me?”

“Yes. It would have been a betrayal of my promise to you. I couldn’t ask him to help.”

“There were Eagles...and me.”

“Not like us.” Fresh tears ran unchecked over her cheeks.  
“Even Jennifer was affected by Tara’s gifts.”

“But not Adrian?”

“I couldn’t be found with Adrian at the scene of a slaughter!” Angela tried to explain, feeling her coldness grow as Marc interrogated her without showing any compassion for her wounds—mental or physical. “Neither you, nor the camp would have forgiven that.”

“We still won’t forgive him! He’s a traitor.”

“I’m going to bring him back in,” Angela told him tonelessly. “You’ll need to accept it.”

“Even when we work this out, I still won’t share you!”

Angela slowly lifted her head, revealing a face that Marc had never seen. She was beyond bleak or desolate.

“I’m corrupt.” She shuddered. “I’ll have what I want now, including the traitor. Be certain you can accept me all the way when you get back. My days of respecting *your* limits are over!”

Marc recognized the hatred staring at him. She thought Adrian was right.

“Right and wrong no longer mean anything to me, Marc. Only survival does.” Angela turned away as the tears suddenly dried up and exhaustion swarmed. “There isn’t a line I won’t cross now.”

“I can’t support it, if it’s not right.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t bother.” Her head swiveled toward him, revealing that endless sorrow again. “That’s what you’re thinking about anyway, right?”

Marc slowly nodded. “For a little while.”

Angela laughed bitterly. “Good.”

“What?”

“Good! I can’t have another child. I lost my baby and all you can think of is how you weren’t included on things or what it all means for you down the road! Adrian told me a childhood obsession isn’t love, but I refused to believe him. It turns out he was right.” Her harsh laughter quickly switched to thick tears.

Marc realized his own feelings should have at least been put on hold until he knew her prognosis. He hadn’t even waited for the doctor to finish checking her over before he began handing out coldness.

Angela glanced down at the thumb she would probably lose the tip of due to frostbite. “I’m going to recover. I’ll lead most of these people from our homeland and settle them in some foreign place. I’ll do my duty to the dream until I’m dead. That’s my line. You need to figure out yours because everything changed.”

“For us or for the camp?” Marc was now getting nervous. She sounded like she was ending things. He’d thought space was a good idea, but the pain said it wasn’t what he honestly wanted.

“Both.” Angela hit the button on the morphine drip as pain sank deep into her abdomen. “You’re either with me or you’re not. When you get back, I’ll need an answer on that.”

Marc stood up, heart thumping. “I can give it to you now.”

Angela nodded, tears coursing again as she braced for his exit. “Go ahead.”

Marc slowly took off his Eagle jacket and placed it over her exposed feet. He took his gun belt off and placed it on the small utility table. “I’m resigning from your army.”

“Resignation accepted,” Angela choked out. She hadn’t predicted any of this. They were both running on pure emotions.

Marc sighed heavily, not needing to listen to his demon or his brain. There was only one thing he could do here.

Marc carefully climbed into the bed with her, wrapping her up gently when her tears became harsh sobs of regret. Corrupt or not, he would always want her.

As she calmed enough to hear him, Marc leaned his head against hers. “I’m not giving you up that easy, you cruel bitch!”

Angela couldn’t pick between crying or laughing and chose to do both, face buried against his chest.

“Obsession or love, it doesn’t matter, does it?” Marc asked quietly a few minutes later.

Angela shook her head, voice muffled. “Not to me. I’ve always wanted you too, in any way I can have you. That won’t ever change.”

Marc held her as she drifted off, the morphine making the choice for her. He was still as upset as he had been, but now, he also felt like he could sort it out while he was gone. She was worth the effort. Adrian was right about that. She was amazing. She was also incredibly cruel. *But is he right about the rest of it? If he is, how do I change that part of me without becoming corrupt?*

*You can’t, his demon stated, enjoying the physical contact. You have to be the knight in shining armor who continues to slay the dragons. Without your light, she’ll fall and take everyone down with her.*

*Why?*

*Because fate is a fickle bitch who delights in tormenting humanity. That also, will never change.*

*And Adrian?*

*Will get what he deserves. This was his plan. Do you think she'll let him off after the death of her child? He'll pay more at her hands than you can ever dream.*

*Guess I'd better be around for that,* Marc decided, shifting slightly but not getting up. He'd missed her in his arms over the last weeks.

*Her heart is a bitter void that will lead these people through the second half of the journey. Stay close. She has enemies everywhere.*

Marc tightened his hold on her instinctively. Mad or not, there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to keep her safe. After all she'd been through, he didn't think he could stand to witness her hurt even one more time.

*Then don't leave her alone too long,* the demon stated ominously. *Fate has already flipped a new wildcard and she's terrified of it. She can't handle this alone anymore.*

"She won't be alone." Marc leaned back to view her profile. Even in sleep, the tears were still oozing out. "We'll help her. That's what Safe Haven does for people. It knocks them down as low as they can go and rebuilds them. I think it was her turn, like the Keeper said."

In the brig above them, Chauncey laughed silently. *Your day will come, Marcus Brady. And so will your son's. I can't wait to record it.*

**End of Book 6**  
**What would you like to do now?**



[The next book in this series](#)

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## Deleted Scenes

It took hours to get things arranged according to Angela's new layout, but by mealtime, Safe Haven was up and running, and many people were already noticing the difference. Three bathroom stations, two parking areas, and the garden near the livestock made things easier, but each area now having water and supply trucks would also reduce time spent on chores. People assumed it was for conservation of energy and it was. Angela wanted her people to pick up a little weight, while it might be possible. Once inside those caves, they would ration everything, down to the very last seed.

No one noticed there was no space slotted for games like football and baseball. Angela had counted on the evening meal to help with that. Who wanted to run around and shed calories after a giant steak? Tomorrow, everyone would be too busy and tired for games.

By nightfall, the bright center fire was surrounded by the usual group and the mess was crowded with laughter and relief. They were home, at least for a while.

On a cliff much smaller and more isolated than he had planned on, Adrian observed his peaceful camp without the clear view he'd first had. Marc was erecting the walls around Safe Haven, sweating and joking with the other men as if he'd been born for it. Adrian wanted him dead.

The banished leader spun toward his tent, ignoring David's shadow and Conner's concerned questions. Everyone

would have to fend for themselves for a bit longer. He had plans to finish.

Conner got up and made their fire. At some point, Adrian would come out fighting, right?

David studied the father and son, awed to be with the infamous Adrian, but also disappointed as well. He had clearly missed out on the best of the Mitchel family ride.

## **Deleted Scene #2**

“Can you help me?”

Kyle rolled over to ask what she needed help with and found Jennifer holding her top up so he could reach her bra clasp.

Kyle swallowed nervously as his big fingers slid over her ribs and gently unhooked the soft material. Kyle sucked in air as his vision blurred. He’d forgotten that he needed oxygen.

“Will you rub right where it meets? I can’t reach it to do that.”

Kyle knew what she was doing. They’d made camp in the lobby of the lodge, wanting daylight to explore a cabin, and Autumn was with Whitney. Jennifer had sworn she was tired and suggested a nap together and now here they were, about to get...intimate.

Kyle realized she planned to push the issue and groaned.

Jennifer waited until Kyle sat down to pick up a stack of gear and then dove at him.

He fell backwards onto the air mattress and had no time to brace as she slid her body up his in full, delicious contact.

Jennifer didn’t stop when she got to his waist. She leaned down and pushed her lips to his, nervous and excited at her own bravery.

Kyle wouldn’t have pushed her away in that moment for any reason. He kissed her like he’d always wanted to. He tasted her, sliding his arms around her waist.

Jennifer reveled in her success. She shoved the fear down when his hand slipped to the small of her back and pressed their hips together. His hardness was a steel rod against her thigh. She followed through with her plan. She bucked against him.

“Oh, yeah,” he moaned against her cheek. “Whatever you want, baby!”

Emboldened, Jennifer adjusted their position until hard and heat were lined up. When she bucked, they moaned together, exactly like in his dream.

Damn.

*I'm dreaming again.* Kyle snapped awake.

Jennifer was facing him on the bed, curiosity and nervousness on her face.

Kyle flushed. “Mornin’”

Jennifer slowly reached out and cupped his neck, tugging.

Kyle surrendered without a fight, wanting her.

Jennifer mashed their lips together, trying not to freeze or panic, and felt his hands come up to tangle in her unbound hair.

Drawing on her courage, she took his hand and wrapped it around hers. Then she put it on the bulge she'd been fascinated by while he dreamed.

Kyle bucked as she touched him, lost in sharp, involuntary spasms of pleasure.

He obviously liked it; Jennifer molded her hand to him and waited.

Kyle struggled to think and breathe. When he figured out what she wanted, he groaned. “I gotta stop now. I—”

Jennifer kissed him, letting her lips remain parted.

Kyle was lost. He hadn't had his tongue in her mouth yet and he wasn't passing up this opportunity.

Jennifer felt the tension grow and then he took over, moving her hand in short, hard jerks that ripped guttural groans from his lips that she caught with her own. His pleasure wasn't scary like she'd expected, but it was a turn-on. Her body was throbbing in time to his.

Kyle stopped as the line between frustration and pain was reached. She knew what had to happen next. Her hand went to the button of his jeans and popped it.

Kyle's hand covered hers, stopping the fingers on his zipper. "I'm not ready yet."

Jennifer ignored him and tugged the zipper down. She pressed her lips to his again as her hand curled around him. Kyle's hips rose in time to her strokes.

Jennifer knocked him out quickly, as she always had when Cesar wanted a hand job, but with Kyle, she wasn't scared of anything coming next. He would be perfectly happy with this.

Jennifer increased the pace, listening to his tortured breathing and sexy groans telling her how sweet she was, how he liked her being sweet. It made her nipples harden against his chest.

His free hand slid up her hip and brushed her breast. Timing it, Jennifer switched into those brutally vicious, short jerks.

Kyle groaned loudly as his climax came.

Jennifer rode the waves, almost wishing it wasn't over yet. She'd enjoyed doing this for him.

Kyle was gasping and groaning, unable to believe how fast he'd lost control of the situation.

Jennifer rested on his chest, listening to his wildly thumping heart. Before, she'd cowered by her pole. Now, she snuggled against Kyle's chest and felt the world become right again as he hugged her and whispered how much he loved her. She fell into a light doze quickly, leaving Kyle to question if he was actually awake.

The uncomfortable position of his arm convinced Kyle that it had happened and he vowed to be stronger. She wasn't ready for this, wasn't old enough, and he couldn't let it happen again. If he did, he would crave it every time they were alone together and she deserved to be treated better than that. Full of guilt he had no room for, Kyle drifted into an uneasy slumber.

## Deleted Scenes #3

Marc spotted Hilda striding briskly toward the supply trucks and hid a grin. She'd been trying to get a moment alone with Billy for the last few days. Marc had been in earshot when Daryl warned the driver what was coming. Billy had remained mysteriously absent since then. He did have duty on the trucks that Hilda was nearly at, but not until dawn when his reward week of easy labor started. Hilda was about to be disappointed again.

Marc yawned. He'd be happy when they had a third person trained to handle these overnight shifts. He and Angie covered things the entire time they were awake; they needed a good third to give them both a break here and there. Adrian was the only other person who could do it right now, but Marc knew the camp wouldn't go for it even if he and Angela would. That meant long shifts apart until Zack was stronger, Kyle was less distracted, or another trustworthy person with leadership skills joined them.

Marc gravitated toward the darkest part of the topside—the supply area—and saw Billy escort Hilda into one of the unused trucks.

Marc grinned in surprise. "That liar!"

Billy had insisted he wasn't going to service anyone anymore. Marc considered interrupting them for the fun of it, but chose not to. Hilda's quick walk had been from more than the cold. She needed a release and Billy was obviously willing.  
*I'll tease them later.*

# **Eagle Teams**

## **Former Eagle Teams**

**Kyle:** Chris, Daryl, Shawn, Billy, Morgan, Crone, Denny, Theo, Angela

**Neil:** Jeremy, Greg, Wade, Ben, Daniel, Jake, Tim, Steven

**Zack:** Allan, Donald, Lee, Frank, Ozzie, Brandon, Simon, Pete

**Seth:** Jeff, Rusty, Jack, Ryan, Bruce, Tommy, Joey, Robert

**Kevin:** Ray, Dexter, Logan, Alex, Francis, Scott, Josh, Whitney

**Marc:** Quinn, Shane, Jax, Logan, Paul, Bobby, Howard, Dwayne, George

**Angela:** Jennifer, Samantha, Cynthia, Leslie, Rebecca, Tracy, Tonya, Candy, Crista

**Rookie:** Tyler, Nathan, Cody, Stanley, Olivia, Pam, Lawrence, Gary, Andrew

# New Eagle Teams

## Eagle Special Forces

**Team #1:** Kyle, Daryl, Shawn, Morgan, Billy, Shane, Jax

**Team #2:** Neil, Jeremy, Greg, Tommy, Wade, Ben, Quinn

## Level Eagle Teams

**Level 6:** Zack, Seth, Allan, Donald, Brandon, Jake, Logan, Whitney

**Level 5:** Theo, Simon, Tim, Ozzie, Francis, Candy, Gary

**Level 3:** Marc, Ray, Josh, Dexter, Bobby, Howard, Scott, Tyler

**Level 1, Team #1:** Angela, Jennifer, Samantha, Cynthia, Kindle, Rebecca, Tracy

**Level 1, Team #2:** Cody, Nathan, Stanley, Olivia, Pam, Lawrence, Andrew

**Rookie Team #1:** Kenn, Joseph, Charlie, Sheila, Conner, Courtney, Julia, Randal

**Rookie Team #2:** Jonny, Kim, Ian, Eddie, Rod, Molly, Harry, Michael

# Book 7



## Shattered Dreams

“F ire in the hole!”

Marc waited for the rumble, sure a few others were doing the same. After three days of Adrian blocking and blowing roads to their den, the notification didn’t garner attention from the Eagles. In fact, it was mostly ignored. People in this mountain had more problems than a former leader hanging around.

Marc had told the camp what was coming. He’d also assigned Samantha and a few others to monitor the situation. The result was a twitchy council who needed reassurances from their boss, but none were coming. Angela wasn’t in any

condition to comfort others. All she did was cry when she was awake, so the doctors were sedating her. Even when Marc was with her, the tears were constant. That man wasn't certain how much more of it he could handle. He wanted *his* Angie back, even if she was a cruel, self-centered bitch.

They'd talked a little more and he understood why she'd made the choices she had, but it didn't stop the anger or the guilt. If she had told him what she planned, he would have helped, not interfered. She had no right to exclude him that way and then blame him for what went wrong. At the same time, if he had been able to follow her plans in the past, instead of always second-guessing her choices, then maybe she would have confided in him. The gulf between them could now hold entire towns.

The camp also ignored the rumbling from the new explosions. Marc had informed everyone they would be hearing those noises regularly while Adrian sealed up the mountain. Angela had sent him out to handle that chore alone in the dying snowstorm, with dazed, angry refugees and betrayed ants roaming everywhere. Marc wasn't sure if she was trying to kill Adrian, though he was rooting for it. He did hope she let the traitor get the roads and paths blocked first.

There were too many threats in range for Marc's liking, and then there were the three items that Seth and Becky had brought back: iodine, water purification tablets, and military-grade dosimeters. He didn't want to know what horror would cause them to use the personal patches. He had his hands full with the current problems. It was infuriating to Marc that yet another group wouldn't let them have peace. He wanted to challenge them all, but nothing would get him to counter

Angela's plans and plots right now. She'd only given a few orders since being carried down the bloody mountain, but Marc was making sure they were followed—against his own wishes. He didn't want to bunker-in. He wanted to rush out and meet Vlad's populace with his fury. Safe Haven had fought for ten months to keep it together. They had sacrificed and suffered enough. *When do we get a break?*

According to previous words from their seer, no break was coming until they reached true safety. People now assumed that was Pitcairn Island. Kindle had no idea how popular she would be when she returned. Some of the Eagles worried that she might keep going on her own, but Marc didn't. Kindle was terrified of being on the ocean again, alone and helpless. She wanted to go, but the method of transport was going to keep her with them.

Marc wondered how she would react when she found the cruise ship. There was no way she would deal well with that. Marc was glad they would be pulling other boats that would need a skeleton crew. It would allow Kindle a different type of ship for the journey that Theo had calculated would take over a month. Instead of traversing the country again, or worse, dipping into foreign coasts as they tried to slide through on their way to Pitcairn Island, they were going to sail all the way around South America. They planned to stay in the open ocean until it was time to ride the deadly currents around the tip and be spit out near their destination—if they survived. Marc was forever impressed with Angela's courage and ambition. He also thought she was nuts.

Marc leaned under the hot water. After everything the world had gone through, it was a wonder all the survivors weren't lunatics.

The radio on the rocky shower ledge crackled with Billy's excited voice. "Ants are clear from all levels above three."

The ants, angry about being betrayed and needing a new home, were now digging into Safe Haven. They were finding cracks and crevices, but worse, old shafts that had been covered by years of debris. There were a lot more tunnels down here than anyone had realized. As the ants came through and the newest branch-off was discovered, the security risks were being plugged or collapsed. Theo's team was doing that carefully from the inside, while Adrian did the rest from outside. Marc hoped it went well. He would be glad when it was finished. If this cave system started to fall in, there was no way he would be able to get everyone out alive.

"We're clear of ants, all levels!" Morgan called cheerfully.

The Eagles had obviously had another battle with the large insects. That rush of happy adrenaline came from surviving, from being successful in a mission. Marc knew it well. He still craved it some days, but the apocalypse had already given him plenty of action and there would be more. There was no danger of his skills becoming rusty.

Already scrubbed, Marc lingered, enjoying the intense steam of a scalding shower. He still hadn't gotten used to having the wonderful convenience again. His showers, unless Angie was along, had been quick to save water and let him get on to the next duty or challenge. Now, they were sheltering in place for a month. He could take all the time he wanted.

The bottom floor shower was empty around him, with a set of guards who had snapped to when he came in and still hadn't relaxed. Knowing their attention was on their job allowed Marc to sink down on the seat beneath the ledge that held his guns and radio. He adjusted the water so it was a hot trickle on his shoulders, then leaned against the wall and shut his eyes. Kenn and Zack, with Kyle and Jennifer over them, were policing the top level of their cave.

Neil's team was covering the second floor, with Daryl and Cynthia supervising two rookie teams on level three. Ray and most of Marc's old team were down here on level four. Things were being handled like Angela had instructed. Marc suddenly wished she was here with him so he could hold her in this cloud of peaceful air and promise her things would get better, that the doctor was wrong.

Her injuries were healing quicker than the doctor was comfortable with, but even he was following instructions to document descendant medical facts to share with the other personnel. There were only a few differences, but they were huge. Future generations would need that information. To conceal his nervousness, the doctor was now traveling in a pack of students, using them to bolster his courage. Marc approved of the coping technique and the training. He'd thought the doctor would have to be run out of Safe Haven because of his attitude, but Angela's injury had revealed the doctor's attachment to her despite their love-hate relationship. He was giving her excellent care, according to Hilda and Peggy, who were always nearby.

The radio echoed again, this time with Tonya's calm tone. "Power has been reestablished in the gaming area. You may resume your free time there."

They were still repairing Jayson's treachery. They were also fixing minor issues that would have come up anyway. Marc was satisfied with their shelter. If not for the other problems Angela had predicted, he would never consent to leave. These mountains had been perfect.

Marc wondered how much time they had before the next crisis hit, but quickly shoved the thought away. This was his downtime to contemplate and restore his faith. Later, there would be runs and guns, and then deals and steals. The snowstorm had finally let up, allowing them to send men out again for food and water, and some basic gear. The lower level Eagles would make that run while Marc took Angela out of the mountain. The storm had slowed the train people, but they were arriving now. He expected to hear from them within the next few hours. She had to be moved. She wasn't safe in camp.

Marc turned off the water and tugged his towel down. Draping it over his lap, he remained in the steam, enjoying the sensation. He hadn't been in a sauna for a long time. The stone walls and floor in here made this a similar experience. It reminded him of the days he'd stolen for himself over the years. He had liked going to a ski lodge where no one knew him, or an isolated park, if he felt like roughing it.

Life after war was much like how he had existed before the bombs, except that the stress levels were always through the roof and the supplies weren't sent out all neatly packed and ready for his use. He'd held a theory that an apocalypse would make things easier in some ways, but he'd been wrong. The

old world of convenience was gone, but it surprised Marc to still be mourning it. He knew some of the camp was also feeling that way. It was hard not to, especially with running water and electricity in the caves, but knowing they were leaving again had brought on this retrospective mindset.

None of these people were eager to go. Even those who believed this place to be cursed were enjoying the TV room, the game cubby, the hot showers, and the activity floor. Despite the chaos that had taken place, Safe Haven was calm and relatively happy right now. Angela had lived, Vlad was gone, and there were no more refugees screaming at their gate. If not for overcrowding and her predictions, things would be perfect.

Marc winced as the image of her bloody body on the mountain ran through his mind. *Maybe not perfect.*

She'd told him he was in charge. The camp already assumed he was, but she'd known it had to be official. Their witnesses, the doctor and students, had approved. They knew his leadership would be enough to get them through until she recuperated, but it bothered Marc to hear the rest of that thought. *We hope.* Agree with her methods or not, everyone knew Angela was the best person for the job of keeping them alive.

It made Marc need to do better, grow stronger. He had believed things were covered before the chaos wiped away his delusions. This time he wouldn't make that mistake. He was double and triple checking his plans and decisions, trying to glimpse further ahead like she and Adrian were able to do. He didn't know if his shortsightedness could be unlearned, but he was determined to try. He was also determined that he

wouldn't be corrupted the way their former leaders had been. He hated to include Angie in with that, but the proof was undeniable. She'd known the avalanche was coming and let it happen to kill hundreds of desperate refugees, and she'd taken lifeforces. It didn't hurt him to be with someone who could do those things, but it was killing him to know that she'd fallen. She'd been full of light, despite awful childhood events and worse things as an adult, and he knew she was torn apart over it. *His* Angie had always been good. For that to change meant she wasn't at peace with herself anymore. She would need help through this.

"But not from me," he muttered, anger and pain rising. There was no way he could be unbiased. Intentional or not, her choices had cost him a child.

Tears that no one would ever witness slid down Marc's cheeks. His dreams of a happy family with Angie shattered and ran over his cheeks in torrents. He had no idea how they would go on from this.

"Rock is secure. I'm in for the night."

Adrian's message over the radio reminded Marc that he'd been in here long enough to draw attention. He quickly wiped away the evidence and began drying off. It would be a long night, but hopefully also a quiet one. Marc had a tight rein on his emotions now, but it wouldn't take very much to send him into the Marine and no one wanted that while Adrian was locked in the mountain with them. Everything would collapse during the fight, including Safe Haven.

“I need to talk to her.”

Shawn glared at Jennifer, not caring that the mess was crowded or that Kyle was a few feet away. “I won’t let you guys interrogate her again. She’s just a little kid.”

“Stop saying that!” Missy complained loudly, making Shawn wince.

Jennifer took a minute to evaluate the situation before responding, a bit stung that Shawn would think she was a threat. If anything, she was a defender of the kids here. He should know that, but the coldness he was being treated to was making him defensive. Jennifer was sympathetic, but she also agreed with his punishment. It would keep the other Eagles on their toes about letting relationships distract them from their jobs.

Shawn felt the weight of Jennifer’s study, but he didn’t dig the hole any deeper. A lot of the guys had come by to talk to Missy, not caring that they would scare her or bring up bad memories. Shawn didn’t want to be bonded with the child, but he was. Everyone would just have to accept it.

“They might, in time.” Jennifer joined them at the table. Missy didn’t stop coloring the giant pumpkin on the page.

The child’s skill with the crayons was impressive. Jennifer spent a moment admiring the outlining, the shading and blending the girl had done. All the hues of orange were represented. *Does that mean something?* Jennifer was trying to hone the instincts and skills that made Angela so effective.

Shawn dropped his chin as a group of Special Forces men strode by to their usual table in the rear of the wide area. They didn’t glance at him.

Missy looked at Jennifer, orbs glowing red. “I’m going to make them stop doing that. I don’t like it.”

Sighing, Jennifer whistled to get Greg’s attention. It drew everyone.

Jennifer cleared her throat. “She says it’s enough. He’s being punished by camp rules, but if you don’t stop being mean to...her man,” Jennifer choked out, “she’ll pay you back.”

Missy’s red orbs were a warning and a threat.

Morgan spoke to the child, still ignoring Shawn. “This is what he deserves, what we’d all deserve if we had done what he did. If you protect him from it, he’ll never be one of us again.”

Missy didn’t like that either, but her irises faded into soft brown confusion. “Why?”

“A man admits when he’s wrong and accepts the consequences,” Shawn stated firmly. “Leave them be.”

Missy’s lips thinned into a line of anger. “Fine.”

Jennifer, and others, hid smirks at how much she sounded like an adult female.

Shawn sighed. “Don’t be mad. It’ll fade in time.”

“They’ll let you back in?”

Shawn shrugged. “If I earn it, yes, but I’m not sure that’s what I want any more anyway.”

“You’re letting this drive you out?” Jennifer was surprised. His bond with the little girl was stronger than she’d judged.

Missy snorted. “He’s worried over his strength and intelligence. It has nothing to do with me.”

Shawn couldn't take any more humiliation right then. "I'll be back when you're done." Shawn marched angrily to the coffee line where the people there fell silent in condemnation.

Missy regarded Jennifer in desperation. "He can't quit! I lose him if he quits."

Jennifer was a bit stunned at the emotion in the child's words, despite knowing descendants were advanced beyond their physical years. She dug into Missy's mind, scared she was being hurt.

Missy let the woman explore her mind. She had nothing to hide.

Relieved that her first notion about Shawn wasn't true, Jennifer leaned forward so they wouldn't be overheard. "I'll help you. Will you help me?"

Missy grinned. "That's easy."

"What do you mean?"

"Helping you is easy. You only need two things, and you already have them both."

*Autumn and Kyle.*

Missy beamed. "They feel the same way."

Warmed, Jennifer placed a hand on the little girl's thin wrist. "I'd like to view everything that happened, everything you saw and overheard. May I? I'll stay with you through the pain."

Missy had paled, peering around nervously. "Here?"

Jennifer nodded. "We all need to know what happened. It will give this camp some of the peace that Tara stole from us."

Missy slowly put the crayon down. "Okay..." She put her free hand under the table and shut her eyes.

Jennifer relayed the images and conversations that were important, storing the rest to give to Marc or Angela. Few people would ever know the fine details of Missy's abuse. That privacy, small though it was, would help the girl adapt. "Tara and Donner were sent here by the government. He attacked directly. She was supposed to become one of us and wait for Jack and the descendants on the train to arrive. Missy convinced Jack that he wouldn't survive unless he split up from his protection. She convinced him that *they* were the targets of death."

Around them, Shawn and many camp members moved closer. They wanted to hear the details. Shawn wanted Missy to be giving the information willingly.

"She knew if he came to Safe Haven, Angela and the others here would be able to kill him and Tara for what they've done..." Jennifer forced herself to continue, heart breaking. "For killing her real mom."

Murmurs ran through the mess which was now quiet enough to let Jennifer's voice carry to the sentry on the entrance to the mess—Zack. Pity for the girl hit him in hard waves.

"Jack's men, some of them, were passive descendants—meaning their gifts are dormant so they aren't picked up on mental grids. They are called Invisibles."

Across the tables, Kenn kept his profile blank. *That's what I am. I'm an Invisible.*

"Safe Haven was always a target, even back as far as the bowling alley. The government has had satellites tracking this camp since January."

“Was Donner or Tara working with Adrian?” Jennifer demanded before anyone else could. “Did he help Tara get into Safe Haven?”

“Who is Adrian?” Missy asked innocently.

Jennifer frowned, catching the girl’s manipulation. “The man who was boss of Safe Haven then.”

Missy stared blankly.

Jennifer knew the child was lying, but she was about to get to the information they needed the most and let it go. Later she would ponder why the girl felt a lie was best there. “Keep going.”

“Jack and Tara were supposed to wait for the trains.” Missy frowned. “Jack couldn’t. Jayson almost did, but he got scared. Safe Haven’s light was eating at him, trying to sway him to be good. He triggered the trap too soon and Tara had no choice but to get on board right then or be exposed anyway.”

“Tara didn’t want to do it?”

“Oh, she wanted it, just not right then. She wanted to wait for her sister on the train.”

“Go on,” Jennifer encouraged over the muttering.

“Tara used her gift to confuse the few who might have figured things out. She took energy without permission from everyone who guarded her, except for Tracy. She was scared of the Ghost. She wouldn’t mess with him or his family while she waited. She only had one target.”

Charlie, pausing while escorting Tracy to dinner, was glad to hear it even though he was furious that Tara had been able to use others.

Missy showed Jennifer the images. “She tried to kill Angela. A lot. See?”

Jennifer absorbed the mental pictures in horror. “She got the job at the mess so she could poison Angela.”

Li Sing scowled. “Evil woman quit when told her no, only I serve the chain of command. I taste each dish too.”

Li received calls of approval and respect from the crowd.

Jennifer kept going, getting angrier. “Tara tried to give Jack signals when he came, but the code was too similar to what Adrian had taught the Eagles so she couldn’t give him any information that mattered. She...” Jennifer’s head snapped around to Missy. “She tried to sabotage the cave. Theo interrupted her before she could.”

“Did anyone know all of this was going on?” Doug demanded from the next table. “Did she have help?”

Almost everyone immediately thought of or looked at Shawn.

Jennifer was still exploring the girl’s memories. “I don’t think so. Jayson and Tara had done this before, in Canada. They went in pretending to be refugees, like they did here. Angela knew what was coming and stopped it. Canada wasn’t as lucky. They burned alive in their bunker.”

“So Angela did know?” Marc was at the entrance. He’d come in a moment before, drawn by the waves of anger and disappointment.

“Yes. She stopped Missy from telling us the truth that first day we picked them up.”

“Why?”

Jennifer would have answered, but Missy stopped her. “That’s not for us to say.”

Jennifer sighed. “As much as I understand, kid, not this time. Tell him. He has the right to know.”

Missy focused on Marc with sympathy and sadness. “You were going to die in that fight. She didn’t want you there.”

“She saved you.” Jennifer grunted in anger. “She didn’t know Vlad would punch her in the gut.”

“No one could have known that.” Missy shrugged. “Even my details aren’t that fine.”

Jennifer understood what the girl was trying to do, but she didn’t concur. Marc deserved to know the truth. Angela had gone up that mountain alone to save him. The price had been their child.

“And why do I have to know that?!” Marc spat, furious. “Why does it matter?”

Jennifer glared at him. “Because you can’t help her if you don’t understand how much she loves you. She went up there to die for you if it was needed. She didn’t know the baby was going to be his target. You have to help her. You’re the only one who can.”

Marc knew that to be a lie. He spun from the mess, mind chaotic again. He hated this shit. When did it end?

Jennifer looked at Missy. “Ready to finish it?”

“Yes.” Missy sighed, sounding so old and tired that people moved away from her table. “I’ve had enough of secrets.”

Shawn, pulled by her unhappiness, went to the now empty mess line and began making her a cup of hot chocolate.

“Tell us the rest.” Jennifer allowed her gift to come forward. “Tell the truth and be accepted into this camp in the ways that Tara never could be.”

Missy shuddered. “They’re coming. Tara’s killers are coming.” Allowed to say it now, Missy’s fear bubbled over. “They’ll kill you all! They’re coming! They’re coming!”

Shawn was there to pull the girl into his arms, hoping to forestall her screams. When she got wound up, it got ugly.

Missy curled against Shawn, shaking. Her pitch lowered to an uneasy whisper. “They’re almost here. They want my friend Angie.”

Shawn comforted the child, glaring at those closest. She’d only been out of the medical bay for one full day.

It was clear that he wouldn’t let the conversation continue, but it didn’t need to. The truth was out.

Before it could cause more chaos, Jennifer looked at Kyle. “The boss has it covered.”

“You’re sure?” he replied on cue, thinking he was lucky and cursed to have a mate who was so smart. She could outdistance him so easily.

“Yes. I trust her with my life.”

Kyle smiled at her. “So do I. What can we do to help?”

Jennifer stood up. “Keep this camp together, follow the rules, help the new arrivals...survive. That’s all she wants for us.”

Kyle smiled again as Jennifer came to him and slid under his big arm, forcing him to embrace her publicly.

Eased, some of the camp went back to eating, while others went to spread the word about what they’d all learned. None of them were terrified despite Missy’s chilling warning. They’d been reminded of Angela’s wisdom and her goals—their survival. There was no need to panic as long as she was still looking out for them.

“Is she?” Kyle used a quick hug to disguise the question.

“Yes.” Jennifer didn’t elaborate. What she’d picked up from their leader’s mind was so bad that it was almost unforgivable. It was also perfect and Jennifer wasn’t going to risk anyone interfering, not even Kyle.

### 3

“Good morning, Safe Haven,” Kenn called over the radio, eager to have the daily address finished so he could prepare for the list of work Marc had assigned. “I have two short announcements for you. The first is we have extra clothing in the shelter rooms now. You can take three full outfits, plus blankets and sheets. Isn’t it great to have to make your bed again?” Kenn waited a moment for any chuckles to die out before continuing. “The last notice is a reminder that gardens are mandatory for every family and couple. Stop by the garden area to pick up a small dome with your choice of fruit or vegetable. As you know, the small domes have venting holes and can be opened and closed to retain warmth. Please remember to sit them under the grow lights that are being installed along the shelves. We need to do our share, especially since we all like to eat our share.” Kenn waited again, judging the mood, before adding, “That’s it for now, folks. Have a Safe Haven day!”

Listening from the small research room she’d convinced Angela to add before they entered the cave, Tonya rolled her eyes. Some days Kenn was great on the air and then there were days like this, when it was obvious that he didn’t want to be doing it.

Tonya smiled politely at the man who appeared in the doorway. John Green was shy, but fast with his fists when in the cage. “Was the doctor in?”

“Yeah.” Green gestured, tone bitter. “He said no.”

“He said what?”

“No.” Green waited for the explosion.

“Why?”

Green lowered his voice. “The doctor refuses to turn this camp into a bunch of potheads.”

Tonya’s rage lit up her entire face. “Did he even read the research that I sent?”

“No.”

Tonya snatched the folder from his hand. “Get somebody on my post for a little while, will you?”

She stomped out before Green could answer. He sat down in her chair without resentment. Being a level two was easier than being a level one, and it was definitely better than being a rookie. He didn’t mind running messages and working duty slots. That was easy. Dealing with fiery redheads who didn’t know when to quit? That was hard.

Passing fans and various detectors, Tonya stormed through the damp, chilly cave. She didn’t whine about the lack of warmth. She also didn’t grumble about the dim lights or the bugs slithering along dank walls that never seemed to dry up. She had bigger complaints. The research she’d been doing was conclusive enough to be tested, and someone was going to do it or she was going to raise enough hell to bring these stone walls down.

Everyone who saw her got out of the way. Tonya didn’t have descendant powers, but she had a nasty temper and a

quick punch. That was usually enough for most people. Add in the fact that the only time she acted this way was if there was a serious problem and the result was instant alertness in every area that she passed through. Guards snapped to attention and began sweeping for trouble.

Tonya shoved her way through the medical tunnel, where half of the doctor's little assistants were busy running back and forth. She jerked the curtain open into the main area, not caring who was in there or what was going on. "I want to talk to you!"

The doctor didn't glance up from the blood pressure dial he was monitoring. "Get out of here."

Furious that the man refused to follow orders, Tonya marched over to the table. She shoved Millie out of the way, using the camp name for the doctor's students. "Move aside, duck!"

She leaned over Angela's unconscious form, trying to ignore how awful the woman looked. "She gave you an order before all of this happened. She told you to follow John's plan for the cancer treatments. How dare you disobey her when she's not able to enforce the rules!"

The doctor unfastened the cuff and recorded the numbers on the chart.

His refusal to even discuss the matter infuriated Tonya further, but unlike in the past, she was able to handle it in a way that got her point across. "She's hearing everything that's happening, doctor. You may not understand how it works with her, but I do. When she wakes up, the first thing she's gonna ask is how the treatments are going. If you don't have an answer, you might be tossed out."

The doctor snorted. “I’m much too valuable to be pitched out like a common refugee.”

All around the room, little ducks pursed their lips in disapproval.

“We’ll see what the boss thinks when she wakes up!”

“That may be.” The doctor wasn’t scared of the bobbed redhead. “But for now, get the hell out of here.”

Tonya had little choice but to do as ordered. She exited the cave, muttering under her breath.

Millie came to the doctor. “She’s right. Angela will be very upset.”

The doctor stared down at Angela’s pale, bruised features. “She’s not the leader here anymore. She doesn’t make the rules.”

“We have a fight on level one! I repeat, fight on level one!”

Tonya didn’t answer the call, but she did hurry that way. There were too many others doing the same for her to be able to get through on the radio. With Marc out of camp on a food run to get Safe Haven stocked up before the next winter storm hit, things were tense.

As she reached the stairs, Tonya nodded to the Eagle on duty and hurried up to the next level. It would take her a minute to get there, but she had no doubt that her authority would be able to calm things down with the rookies—especially if it was who she suspected. Angela’s order to have the soldiers integrated as Eagles wasn’t going over well.

Tonya rounded the corner and found a small crowd already trying to get to the stairs for level one. A hard hand grabbed her as she stumbled, keeping her from falling.

“Thanks,” Tonya told the ugly-dressed male as she hurried on her way. *Was he wearing a gunnysack?*

Tonya hurried up the stairs and shoved herself in the middle of the struggling Eagles and soldiers.

Behind her, the ugly-dressed man continued on his way. Philip had been a social service worker before the war. He moved down the stairs without drawing attention from the guards. He had been brought into Safe Haven not long after they had reached the mountains. He had been cleared and vetted by the leadership, though not Angela herself. The teenager, Jennifer, had given him his pass with a warning that whatever he was hiding behind his wall would have to eventually come out for him to become an Eagle.

Philip ignored the other bored sentry on duty at the bottom of the stairs and walked toward the medical bay. The walls in his mind had been up for many reasons. He'd been surprised when Jennifer hadn't dug deeper, but also relieved. It had allowed him to spend the last five weeks blending in and working hard, just to have these two minutes.

Philip slid aside as the doctor and all of his little ducks, as they were being called by the camp, came out of the medical bay and waddled toward the testing lab on the floor below them. The only one in the bay was Hilda and she would be sleeping in the chair next to Angela, the way she had been for the last three afternoons. Philip had made note of the schedule.

Fanatical attention centered on the unconscious woman in the cot at the far end of the room. Next to her, Hilda was dozing in a chair with her cheek against a stone ledge that held medical supplies. Philip moved closer without making any

noise. He wasn't here on behalf of the government. He hadn't come for revenge or payment. He wanted power.

Angela didn't stir as Philip placed his hands around her throat. Neither did Hilda.

*It worked in Firestarter. It worked in Firestarter.*

Angela came awake to that reasoning, struggling against the hazy darkness of drugs and pain. She opened her mouth, gasping for air and realized death had come for her yet again.

Angela stopped fighting.

In a hurry to grab what he had forgotten, the doctor almost didn't understand what was going on as he entered the medical bay. The sight of the stranger's hands wrapped around his patient's neck was an immediate shock. The doctor had never witnessed violence before the war; he still hadn't adjusted to how much of it happened inside Safe Haven's gates.

Hilda, woken by the sound of the doctor's footsteps, jumped up to shove the man off Angela.

Without pausing, Philip lunged forward and slammed his head into Hilda's chin, knocking her out.

Her big body slid to the floor.

Philip continued to strangle Angela, eyes locked onto hers.  
*It worked in Firestarter. It worked in Firestarter.*

The doctor rushed forward, grabbing a fire extinguisher from the wall. He slammed it into the man's skull as hard as he could, not thinking, just reacting.

Phillip dropped heavily. He slumped across Angela's legs, blood trickling from his nose.

Angela drew in air sullenly as the doctor came over, staring in horror at what he had done.

The doctor realized Angela had been awake the entire time, that she had been allowing it. “Why?”

“I could have been at peace.” She shut her eyes as fresh tears began to roll down.

Drawn against his will, the doctor reached out and brushed one of them away. “Please stop. I can’t stand it when you cry. It hurts me.”

It made her cry harder.

“What’s going on here?!”

Eagles rushed into the medical bay, forcing the doctor to step back and explain what had happened.

Angela pretended she hadn’t woken at all.



[Shattered Dreams](#)  
Book Seven

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